

How to Keep Your Workout from Hurting You

By Jae Gruenke, GCFP



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PART SIX: HOW YOUR BREATH CAN TRANSFORM YOUR STRETCHING

In the last Intelligent Exercise newsletter, we started to look at the role of breathing in exercise by fleshing out the relationship between breathing and relaxation. That was the beginning of the fifth in a series of seven whole-body exercise guidelines I've been gradually compiling and sending out to you. This newsletter will pick up where the last left off, with recommendations on how you can work with your breath to transform stretching into a practice that not only relaxes and restores your body, but also enriches your experience of yourself.

Stretching

Yoga, stretching's flexibility-promoting cousin, always incorporates instruction on breathing. If you've ever taken a yoga class appropriate to your condition, you've experienced how powerfully conscious breathing and movement combine to increase flexibility, relaxation, and well being. But conscious breathing doesn't have to stay in the yoga studio; it can have a potent effect on any stretching regimen.

The main task in stretching is to lengthen a musculature shortened either by strenuous effort or by a daily movement repertoire much smaller than your accessible range. It's also to encounter yourself in such a way that you can acknowledge and release tension that doesn't benefit you. Acknowledgement is key; stretching requires movements different from your usual so you can feel parts of yourself normally hidden from your experience.

Surplus tension is seldom experienced explicitly as tight muscles. You more often feel a diffuse sense of restriction and stiffness, and only through a lot of experience with how stretching makes you feel can you develop an instinct for how to balance out your routine movements with restorative lengthening of your tissues. And, forgive the pun, you can only accumulate that experience if you fully *experience* your stretches as you do them.

Conscious breathing is a powerful tool for doing this. You can begin to explore its effects by using it to guide the timing of each stretch. Static stretches (that is, stretches that you hold for awhile) need to be held for at least 20 seconds to lengthen muscle and for at least 90 seconds to stretch the fibrous sheaths of connective tissue that surround your muscles (which I highly recommend doing). You could watch the clock the whole time, but then your experience will be primarily of the tick, tick of the second hand, while your own physical sensations remain in the background. Mechanical process

yield mechanical results, so if you involve your awareness with the ratcheting of the second hand instead of your own experience, you'll get about as much out of stretching as the Tin Man would.

I advise my clients to count the number of breaths they take in 90 seconds, and then to hold each stretch for roughly that number of breaths. This will attune you to your breathing, which is the broadest, most open avenue to self-experience. When you foreground your breathing in your awareness, each breath is saturated with information about how you feel, and you'll find that you naturally make the small adjustments that turn a dutiful stretch into a soothing and even delicious respite. You'll be able to quiet your thinking and become absorbed in your experience, and your stretching sessions will take on the stress-relieving and mind-clearing properties of meditation.

You can benefit even more by manipulating the image you have of your breathing. If you imagine each breath passing through the muscles you intend to stretch, then you will even more finely and instinctively tune your movement to the needs of your body, discovering places ready to release tension that you might otherwise have missed. Your system will respond to the image in your mind (setting aside the physical impossibility of breathing through your quadriceps) by reducing tension in the muscles and allowing them to lengthen. And you can replace the pulling, pushing, painful feelings people sometimes think are necessary in stretching with a gradual release that you *receive* rather than *demand*. Good, effective stretching isn't a tug of war with your muscles – it's a structured encouragement for release, nourishment, lubrication, and orderly knitting of muscle and connective tissue. (For more about this, I recommend tracking down the excellent article *What Science Can Teach Us About Flexibility*, by Fernando Pages Ruiz, which appeared in the March/April 2000 issue of *Yoga Journal*.)

Because several *Feldenkrais*® practitioners have recently joined this email list, I feel obliged to clarify my view on the purpose of stretching. It has many benefits, as I suggested above, but it has less potential to change your movement habits than is widely believed. It's like mowing the lawn – it doesn't keep your yard from growing long again, but it will thicken the grass and improve its health. Stretch for balance, nourishment and pleasure. But if you have chronic pain, injury, or movement habits you want to change, seek out movement education for real help, as stretching will be at best a band-aid. My experience and that of my clients shows that stretching feels absolutely transcendent when enriched by the self-knowledge and improved coordination you get from doing *Feldenkrais*® lessons or other movement education.

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