



# **Volunteer Leader Training Guide**

## **Yoga Basics: Breathing, Movement and Guided Relaxation**

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### **Background Information**

Yoga has been practiced for thousands of years. Many styles of yoga are practiced in the United States, but all share in common a focus on breathing, yoga postures and guided relaxation or meditation. This lesson addresses three key components of yoga: breathing, movement (yoga postures or poses) and guided relaxation.

### **Target Audience**

- EHC leaders and members
- Adult audiences

### **Objectives**

- Participants will increase knowledge of benefits of practicing yoga.
- Participants will increase understanding of key yoga components: breathing, poses and guided relaxation.

### **Handouts**

- Activity 1: True or False Quiz
- Handout 1: Breathing Exercises
- Handout 2: Sample Yoga Poses
- Handout 3: Relaxation Activities

### **Suggestions for Teaching**

- Review the lesson guide and handouts.
- Practice the activities you plan to teach from Handouts 1, 2 and 3.
- Make copies of the handouts and activities.

## Introduction

Are you curious about yoga? It is much more than a form of exercise. Practicing yoga can provide physical and mental health benefits. Many styles of yoga are practiced in the United States. This lesson addresses three key components of yoga: breathing, movement (yoga postures or poses) and guided relaxation.

### **Activity 1: True or False Quiz**

Read each statement from Activity 1 aloud. Ask participants to respond verbally whether each statement is true or false.

**Activity 1 Answers:** All the statements are false.

Yoga has been practiced in the United States for more than one hundred years and entered the mainstream in the 1960s. However, misperceptions about yoga still exist, many of which are included in Activity 1. Yoga offers many physical and mental health benefits. If you are new to yoga, the combination of breathing and movement may seem awkward at first. Some people find it difficult to settle into guided relaxation and quiet their thoughts. Don't give up! The health benefits of yoga are worth giving the practice several tries.

## Benefits of Yoga

Numerous studies have shown mental and physical health benefits from yoga. Practicing yoga may:

- Reduce arthritis symptoms
- Improve strength, balance and flexibility
- Improve pain management
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduce depression
- Relieve anxiety
- Improve sleep
- Reduce perceived stress

Yoga is increasingly being used in cardiac rehabilitation programs and has shown promise in reducing cardiovascular disease risk factors. Some studies suggest practicing yoga may reduce hot flashes in menopausal women.

## Breathing

Attention to breath is an important part of yoga. Studies show attention to breath, even without performing yoga poses, can improve stress management. While we usually breathe without thinking about it, breath can be consciously controlled. Some simple exercises can help you connect with your breath and tap into the calming effects of breathing intentionally.

## Are You a Chest or Belly Breather?

Breathing is more than just simply moving air in and out of the body. Whether you know it or not, you probably have a personal breathing style. Is your breathing fast or slow? Do you breathe into your chest or deep into your belly?

**Try this:** To find out if you are chest or belly breathing, place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach. When you breathe in, which raises more – your chest or your stomach? If your chest raises more, you are “chest” breathing. If your stomach raises more, you are “belly” breathing.

What do the terms **chest** and **belly breathing** mean? The term **chest breathing** simply means that, when you inhale, your lungs can't expand to their full capacity because you are mainly using your chest muscles to create space. Although chest breathing isn't incorrect or bad for you, it isn't the most efficient way to breathe. Despite its name, belly breathing, which is considered more efficient, doesn't mean you breathe oxygen into your stomach. When belly breathing, you consciously use your diaphragm to compress your abdominal organs and create more space for your lungs to expand, which means they can take in more oxygen. The diaphragm is the large sheet of muscle separating your chest and abdominal cavities.

You can train your body to belly breathe. Practice by sitting comfortably or lying flat on your back. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Take 15 to 20 slow, deep breaths. As you inhale, expand your abdomen. As you exhale, contract your abdomen but keep your chest as still as possible. Your hands will detect motion of your chest and abdomen. Pause for a few seconds between each inhale and exhale.

**Note:** Refer participants to **Handout 1: Breathing Exercises**. Lead participants through one or two exercises.

## Basic Yoga Poses

Hundreds of yoga poses exist. The selected poses in **Handout 2: Sample Yoga Poses** are just a sample. They are easy to do in a group meeting if there is a little room to spread out. All the poses are standing or seated. Choose a few to try out with your group. Hold each pose for several breaths. Encourage participants to work within their physical abilities. A core concept of yoga is to respect your body. Be mindful of how your body feels when practicing yoga. Stop doing any pose that feels painful.

**Note:** Refer participants to **Handout 2: Sample Yoga Poses**. Lead participants through a few poses.

**Note:** For a complete routine using a chair, refer participants to *YOU-fit: Yoga for EveryBODY* (FSFCS71 and Poster MP545).

## Guided Relaxation

Guided relaxation, or guided imagery, is a form of relaxation that focuses on your breath and visualizing calm and peaceful images to release tension and stress in the body. Paying attention to breath is one of the most basic ways to “tune in” to the connection between our mind and body. Guided relaxation doesn’t necessarily involve meditation, but it can. Guided relaxation and meditation are related, but they are not exactly the same.

### Benefits of Guided Relaxation

Guided relaxation exercises, alone or as part of a yoga practice, can positively impact your overall health. It can improve ability to cope with stress and emotions by incorporating your sense of sound (hearing), touch, sight, smell and even taste.

Entering a state of deep relaxation can increase or improve:

- Sleep
- Self-confidence
- Self-control
- Immune function
- Breathing/respiratory function

Deep relaxation can decrease or lower:

- Blood pressure
- Depression
- Stress
- Muscle pain
- Tension
- Anxiety
- Anger

**Note:** Refer participants to **Handout 3: Relaxation Activities**. Choose one or more to use in your session. Read the activity aloud, using a calming voice and slow pace. Pause often, allowing participants time and quiet to bring awareness to their breath and body.

## Conclusion

This session covered three components of yoga. Each can be practiced on their own or in combination, depending on your personal goals.

## Additional Resources

- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Bantam Books.
- UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center for free guided meditations and mindfulness resources – <http://marc.ucla.edu/>

- For information on Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction – <http://www.mindfullivingprograms.com/>
- Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society – <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/>

## **References**

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