You Can Do It Guidebook Series presents

Reducing Stress at Your Desk
Keeping Calm and Collected
When Chaos Reigns

Desk Yoga

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Relaxation, Who Needs It?

Welcome to *(Silly) Desk Yoga*, the latest way to soothe jangled nerves, loosen up stressed muscles, or simply energize yourself after long hours—at your desk, in your car or at home. These simple yoga stretches, exercises and tips offer you an opportunity to make your work more productive and stress-free, your body healthier and your mind revitalized.

*Silly Desk Yoga* is to be used when you’re by yourself—at home or your desk during a conference call, teleseminar or webinar—or you’re trapped somewhere like a traffic jam. In many situations, there is little you can do but sit there, so why not refresh yourself?

You might feel a little odd doing exercises called *Silly Desk Yoga*. I suppose they could just as easily be called *Nutty Yoga*. (Nope, too many people might blame to allergies for not doing them.) Or, *Stupid Yoga*. (Right, everyone wants to feel stupid.) Ditto with Goofy, Foolish, Weird and Strange. It’s not that your desk is silly and doing yoga. You are doing a form of yoga *meant* to make you feel silly. After all, lightening up is rarely a bad thing.

It seems like everyone complains that they are stressed out and wishes they had more time to recover from the pressures of work and home responsibilities. When asked, “Have you tried any relaxation techniques?” Inevitably they’ll answer, “Oh, yeah, a couple of years ago when I was on vacation, but now I just don’t have the time.” Or, “That’s just not me—I don’t have that kind of patience.”

I know all about not having time. I am a champion over-booked, over-committed and over-stressed control freak. And it all came strikingly clear to me the morning I woke up with a pressure in my chest and the inability to catch my breath. The more I tried to calm myself down, the worse my symptoms got.

My husband kept asking, “What’s wrong? Should I call 9-1-1?” All the while, the trauma nurse in me went through the checklist. Shortness of breath? Chest pain? Left arm numbness? Indigestion? Lightheaded? Yes, yes, yes, YES!
Eeegads, I was diagnosing my own heart attack. My thought was, “I’m way too young for this!” – right before I passed out.

I woke up to four burly firemen in my bedroom strapping me to a gurney. (I’d had dreams . . . but not quite like this. I digress.) Even as they negotiated our stairwell, I barked orders, “Watch the handrail, easy on the new paint, tip me this way.” Control freak.

As one rookie paramedic attempted to start an IV line in my arm, I said, “No, not that vein, use this one.” Another attached the heart monitor and I twisted around, practically upside down, to check the EKG tracing, “Normal sinus rhythm, run another lead!” Control freak.

We finally arrived at the ER; after what was probably the most irritating ambulance ride of the attendants’ career. This being the exact ER I’d worked years before I became a full-time professional speaker and road warrior.

After hours of tests, and thanks to modern pharmacology, my pain had subsided. The doctor came in with that look on his face. You know, the look that says, “I need to deliver bad news and I’m not looking forward to it.”

The doctor leaned against the end of my bed and said, “I believe you have had a massive . . . panic attack.”

“Whaaaaaat?????? That’s not possible. I loathe people with panic attacks.” You see, to me this means they don’t have control! And if it’s one thing I have, it’s control! Or so I thought.

The Beginning of Letting Go

Before you go thinking that I miraculously converted myself from the Control Freak into the Countess of Calm, let me assure you that old habits are hard to break. Just because I was scared half to death with a trip to the ER and stern warnings to relax from my family, friends and physicians, doesn’t mean I let go of control easily.

Making the changes I needed to be a recovering control freak have been challenging and time consuming. I believe that these changes have saved my sanity, my marriage and, perhaps, my life.
A very important component of my transformation has been accomplished with learning how to relax with simple yoga techniques. I’ve put together this collection of exercises and tips so you can have a jump start on your relaxation. You don’t have to buy into a complete makeover of your psyche or commit to hours at the gym or yoga studio. All you need is the desire to loosen the tightness in your neck, back and shoulders or to avoid having to bite your tongue at a meeting or in a traffic jam.

This collection is a start for those of you who are curious or believe you just need a little something to take the edge off. This is just the beginning of learning how to take care of yourself by letting go of some of your control.

If you look in the mirror and see the telltale signs of chronic pain and stress—furrowed brow, clenched jaw, worried eyes—you can expect a lightening of your symptoms. For decades there have been medical degrees given in pain management and methods for stress relief. Go to any major teaching medical center and you’ll find help. You don’t have to suffer needlessly.

First, Check Your “Duh” Factors

You can probably point to one person, situation or activity as the reason you need to relax your back, neck and shoulders. But, getting all wound up usually is a series of small insults to your body and soul. Let’s take a look at some the not-so-evident-to-you causes of stress, the “Duh” factors—those things that slowly erode your comfort and you really ought to know better.

• Your clothes – Are they too tight? The wrong length for ease of living? Do they pinch you across the shoulders? Are the armholes strangling your arms? Get rid of them! Years ago I realized that I don’t like wearing skirts so I replaced my skirts with slacks. My life, especially travel, is so much simpler and I’m more comfortable being my true-to-self tomboy.
• Your shoes – You will rarely hear a man say that his shoes are killing him. Are your shoes too tight, too high or
uncomfortable for any reason? Get rid of them or have comfy pair at your desk. I had to get used to “my look” being in flats, not heels. Besides, now I can sprint through an airport with the best of them.

- **Your posture** – Your mother was right; sit up straight. Many back and neck problems are caused by poor posture, which can lead to tight, aggravated muscles and connective tissues around the spine. Do body checks throughout your day, focusing on sitting and standing straighter than normal. The best posture is when your back feels weightless and long and your head feels light on your shoulders.

- **Your rear view mirror** – If your mirror is set for a regular slouch in the car, you need to adjust it for an ideal view only when your posture is straight. You’ll know you’re sitting up straight when you can see the cars behind you.

- **Your face** – Do you naturally frown? Purse your lips? You’ll know the answer by the time the permanent wrinkles etch themselves in your face. In the meantime, smile for no apparent reason frequently throughout the day. The frownies will be counteracted and you’ll even be sending a message to your brain to release some of those great natural drugs that relax your body.

- **Your bed** – Is your bed old and lumpy? Do a “sleep check” to make sure you are getting the most out of the hours you spend in bed. Don’t forget your blankets and pillow as well as the temperature, humidity, darkness and noise factors.

- **Your tunes** – Is your car radio blasting heart-thumping rap, brain-smart 60 beat per minute tunes or late-breaking news of some kind of disaster? Instead, listen to comedy CD’s, books on tape—or silence.

- **Your calendar** – Do you have eight hours to do twelve hours work? Realistically plan your commute, giving yourself extra minutes for traffic (it’s always there anyway). Learn to say “no” more often. Take a day off each week, for crying out loud!
• Your cell phone ringer – Does your cell phone scream at you? I will never understand those folks who don’t know how to (or don’t) turn down the volume on their phones. Put it on vibrate or, better yet, turn it off. My favorite ringer is a voice that whispers, “Call for you, dear.”

• Your diet – If we are what we eat, are you a high-sugared, caffeinated nerve-end or a protein-starved mass of knots? If you’ve read a newspaper or watched TV since 1991, you know what’s good and what’s bad for you and that diets don’t work.

• Your friends – Do you have high-maintenance, high drama friends or people who make you laugh and glad you’re with them? I believe the one of the most difficult things I’ve had to do since my panic attack is to “release” certain friends. I could probably write another book titled, Letting Go of Friends Who Aren’t Good for You.

• Your tongue – Do you hold a lot of tension in your jaw? Try lightly pressing your tongue on your gums about a quarter inch behind your upper front teeth. This small act will improve relaxation (balance) in stressful situations. It will also improve your physical balance. To test this, stand on one leg and have someone try to throw you off balance. Now, still standing on one leg, place your tongue as described above and have someone try to throw you off. Better, yes?

• Your breathing – This is so important that it has it’s own section. See below.
Suck It In

Did you know that you could switch off the stressed part of your nervous system just by paying attention to your breathing? That is because your “fight or flight” response kicks in whenever you are anxious or stressed. This then triggers your breathing to become quicker and shallower by moving your breathing from your belly to your chest. At the same time, your stress hormones suppress the flow of chemicals that have a calming effect.

When you take a deep breath don’t just inhale and blow it out fast. Correct breathing involves the entire torso, especially the abdominal wall muscles. Your chest should expand in all directions, your tongue should rest lightly on the gums behind your front teeth and your jaw should be slack.

This can be done sitting, lying down or walking. Allow your hands to rest on your lower belly and to rise and fall with each breath. This should come naturally but often it doesn’t. Don’t worry; a lot of people have difficulties with this.

For practice: take a deep breath and empty your lungs with a prolonged exhale in little puffs. While breathing in, count to three, hold your breath for a count of three and then breathe out while counting to three. Each inhalation, hold and exhalation should become longer over the duration of the exercise.

A Quick Thump

In human anatomy, the thymus is an organ located in the upper anterior portion of the chest cavity just behind the sternum (breastbone), beneath the hollow of the throat. Hormones produced by this organ stimulate the production of certain infection-fighting cells. It is of central importance in the maturation of T cells. The thymus gland is active when we're young, and then slows as we age. It contributes to the development of a healthy immune system.
Use your fingertips, alternating with the right and left hand, to deliver a tap (or thump) on your sternum for about 20 thumps. You can learn to calm yourself in particularly stressful situations by using this technique.

Please, Get Used to Silly

These movements have been put together from my diverse relaxation and exercise experiences – Stretching, Pilates, Yoga and Therapeutic Horseback Riding. They aren’t designed for you to look cool or like an exercise expert. In fact, some of the movements are downright goofy looking but they work! Yes, you’ll feel strange while making the faces but they work! Your coworkers might whisper that you’re getting weird(er) but you’ll be less stressed! You might look foolish to the person in the next car but you’ll arrive home less hassled.

When you think about NOT having to go to a gym or studio, spend money on a personal trainer, schedule a massage or even break a sweat, doesn’t it make sense to get used to silly? It does, because it works!

Warning: Don’t do any exercises that cause you pain. If you are currently under medical care, check with your healthcare provider before doing these movements.
Before Anything—Do THE TEST

It is important that you do THE TEST before you begin your *Silly Desk Yoga* movements. It provides you with an opportunity to experience the difference in your body and this will support your muscle memory. The more you use THE TEST, the more aware you’ll become to how much the movements are working for you.

**THE TEST** for your current range of motion (ROM) of your head, neck and shoulders is:

- Sit straight in a chair with your hands on your thighs and both feet flat on the floor
- Keeping your head level, turn it SLOWLY and SMOOTHLY in one direction
- Keep your chin parallel to the ground and avoid rotating your head diagonally backwards
- Turn only as far as you can comfortably without force or strain
- Notice how far behind your shoulder you can see
- Mark the farthest place you can spot on the wall. This will be referred to as “Your Spots.”
- Return your head slowly to the starting point and repeat to the other side (one side is usually “tighter” than the other)
- Hold three fingers (index, middle, ring) like the “scout salute” and insert them gently into your mouth (wash hands first, please)
- Note the tightness in your jaw and the ease of inserting your finger

Remember, get used to Silly—it’s for a good cause!
Your Head and Jaw

All these exercises and movements are best when done in the order they are below. Also, they should be done slowly and smoothly—don’t rush, jerk or sweat it. Begin by sitting balanced with your back in a relaxed-but-straight position and both your feet flat on the floor.

Note: If you are stuck in a traffic jam, sit straight but keep the correct feet on the brake and gas pedals.

Do THE TEST First – note Your Spots and the tightness of your jaw.

JAW MOVEMENTS

Move your jaw SLOWLY side to side 8-10 times and then jut your lower jaw forward and backward SLOWLY 8-10 times. (Be careful if you have TMJ) Do not grind your teeth; leave your jaw loose.
TONGUE MOVEMENTS

Stick your tongue *out and down* to the right, move it to the left and back again -- repeat 8-10 times.

Stick your tongue *out and up to* the right, move it to the left and back again -- repeat 8-10 times.

Are you feeling silly yet? Just wait!
EYE MOVEMENTS

Note: Don’t do any of the movements in the car that take your hands off the wheel or your eyes off the road.

With both eyes together, look up and to the right, then to the left and back again -- repeat 8-10 times.

With both eyes together, look down and to the right, then to the left and back again -- repeat 8-10 times.

Now…you’ve got to be starting to feel silly with the next set!
COMBO MOVEMENTS

In opposition, move your tongue down and to the right while both your eyes look up and to the left.
Then, move your tongue down and to the left while both your eyes look up and to the right. Repeat 8-10 times.

Switch by moving your tongue up and to the right while both your eyes look down and to the left.
Then, move your tongue up and to the left while both your eyes look down and to the right. Repeat 8-10 times.

NOW, do THE TEST – note Your Spots and your jaw. Do you notice an improved Range of Motion? Not so silly, after all!
There is a simple explanation as why these exercises work. You are moving the muscles and joints that tend to get locked when you are concentrating, on a tight deadline or under normal stress. As well, you are breaking patterns of muscle memory and cross-firing the nerves to break these blockages.

**Your Head and Neck**

**HEAD SHAKEING**

Stay seated or standing comfortably, looking straight ahead with your arms hanging relaxed at your sides. Shake or “jiggle” your head side to side in small 1-inch movements. Try to use very little effort and continue being relaxed in your head and neck. Continue this motion for 30-60 seconds.

Move your head slightly to the left (about 30 degrees) and jiggle your head for 30-60 seconds. Repeat with your starting position 30 degrees to the right of center.

This is a good movement when you are stuck in traffic or want to allay fear quickly (like behind a door).
MASSAGING THE OCCIPITAL JOINT

Use your index, middle and ring finger of both hands to massage the area between your skull and first neck vertebrae (the occipital joint). Softly and gently, continue in a circular motion for 30-60 seconds.

Leave the fingers on the joint, stop massaging and stretch your elbows out to the side as much as you can comfortably. At the same time gently move your head forward 25-30 degrees, hold 10 seconds. Back to neutral, then gently move your head backward 25-30 degrees, hold 10 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.

SKULL MASSAGE

Use two fingers to firmly massage the base of your skull (the bump behind your earlobes. Vary the method from up/down, front/back, in small circles. Continue 30-60 seconds, switch to your other side. At first, this may be uncomfortable but will lessen when the massage is done several times a day.
JAW MASSAGE

Use three fingers to lightly massage your jaw “hinge.” Use small circles forward and backward, varying the speed and intensity. (Careful if you have TMJ) Continue 30-60 seconds and finish by using your flattened hand to press firmly (without movement) for 10-15 seconds. Release, smile.

NECK TILTS

Neck tilts should not create pain, so remember to move gently and slowly. Inhale and stretch your spine upward through the top of your head. Keep your sternum (breastbone) lifted. On exhale, allow your head to tilt toward your left shoulder. Hold and relax several breaths. Repeat on the other side. Don’t allow your back to round as you breath while in this position.

NOW, do THE TEST – note Your Spots. What is the improvement in your Range of Motion?
Your Shoulders and Upper Torso

To relax your upper torso, you need to Perfect The Pluck.

**SHOULDER PLUCKING**

Using your left hand on your right shoulder, pinch the large muscle that runs between your neck and shoulder (trapezius) between your thumb and your index and middle fingers. Pluck the “cord” up and away, then repeat twice. Switch hands/sides. This is a quick motion. This exercise is usually tender at first but will get better as the muscle relaxes. You can also do this lying in bed when you first wake up.

**FINGER FAN**

With your shoulders and neck relaxed, reach your hands forward shoulder height and width, keeping your wrists straight. Spread your fingers wide, hold 5 seconds, relax, repeat 4-6 times.
Your Back and Spine

Your starting position is sitting on the front part of a chair, placing your hands on your thighs, your feet flat on the ground and shoulder-width apart. Your body will form four right angles: chin to torso, torso to thigh, thigh to calf, calf to foot.

THE SPINE TEST for your current range of motion (ROM) of your back and spine is:

- In the starting position, gently and without force, lift your head and eyes toward the ceiling
- Note Your Spot
- How far up the ceiling you can see easily?
- NEVER, drop your head backward fast or heavily
BACK ARCH

In starting position, slowly lift your head and eyes toward the ceiling while arching your back gently. Slowly return to starting position. Repeat 3-5 times.

ROUNDED BACK

In starting position, slowly rotate your head and eyes to the ground, simultaneously rounding your back. Try to imagine wrapping yourself around a basketball. Slowly return to starting position. Repeat 3-5 times.
KNEE PULL

In starting position, lift your right knee toward your chest by placing your left hand under the knee and your right hand wrapped around your kneecap. Gently and slowly pull your knee to the point that you feel a very slight stretch in your lower back. Hold for 10 seconds. Gently put your knee down and switch legs. Do 3-5 repetitions on each side.

TOES AND HEELS

In starting position, lift your toes up and down together and then lift them alternately. Play with speed and rhythm.

Do the same with lifting your heels—up and down, together, then alternately up and down. Play with speed and rhythm.
Your Grand Finale

Congratulations! You have just completed your session of *Silly Desk Yoga*. Now is the time for the final tests to prove that you *really are* looser, more relaxed and less stressed.

**Do THE TEST** for your range of motion of your head, neck and shoulders.

Note Your Spots. How much further can you move your head to the right and to the left?

**Do THE SPINE TEST** for your range of motion of your back and spine.

Note Your Spot. How much further can you see on the ceiling?

The Payoff

Of all your activities of daily living, loosening up your head, neck, shoulders and back are the ones that give you both immediate and long-term payoff. By reducing the tightness a little each day—or, better yet, several times a day—you’ll be avoiding greater, more painful problems such as headaches, stiff neck and back spasms.

The beauty of using *Silly Desk Yoga* is that your body will let you know when it is needed and how well you’re managing. Your friends, coworkers and family will let you know, too. Without your stress, you will be more agreeable to be around and, in turn, they will be more pleasant to you.

What could be better than lack of stress, being around pleasant people and having more energy for fun? Well, as they say… PRICELESS.
About the Author

Relevant and timely, Connie Merritt, RN, PHN, is a nurse, speaker, business professional and award-winning author, with a new book just released from McGraw-Hill: *Too Busy For Your Own Good* – which is particularly timely in these “do more with less” economic times.

Connie has a reputation for delivering breakthrough information to get that spark for life – including timely research gathered from top leaders in medicine, business and brain-response studies.

Her body of work draws upon her life experiences as a registered nurse, business owner, speaker, author, researcher, rehabilitation equestrienne, wife, recuperating overachiever and recovering Superwoman.

With Connie’s step-by-step tactical teachings, that are well-seasoned with energy and humor, she has a gift for providing critical content and connecting with her audiences by spinning unforgettable tales, in a compelling manner – helping people and organizations to take action which reap benefits now and into the future.

When not playing above and below the oceans of the world with her husband, Lynn Hughes, they’re at home in Laguna Beach, California, with Lucy the Labrador, Zoey the Labradoodle and Maggie Rose, an American Quarter Horse.

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