

Yoga movements for good gut health

By Jessica Hatchett
Yoga teacher and therapist

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Introduction

Dear Readers,

We know that now, more than ever, people want to be empowered to live and be better, every day. We work with Ireland's brightest minds and aim to bring you access to some of their latest thoughts, tips and up to date advice.

In this yoga series Jessica Hatchett, yoga therapist and teacher will share four examples of yoga exercises that help to promote good gut health. This advice can be used as a tool kit to help you take care of your mental health. You can also watch the full series of short videos on www.layahealthcare.ie/thrive/health



About Jessica

Jessica Hatchett is a yoga teacher and therapist living and working in West Cork. She qualified as a yoga teacher in 2004 with Contemporary Yoga Cork. Following this, her training at the Active Birth Centre in London led to a ten-year focus on teaching Yoga for pregnancy, birth and early parenting. During this time, Jess began working with clients on a one to one basis and completed further study at the biomedical centre in London. She applies a unique and holistic approach to teaching yoga for the whole person, body, mind and spirit.

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Your gut is the first place that stress is felt

More and more research is proving the theory that a healthy gut is connected to a healthy mind.

These exercises, when practiced regularly, have been created to **promote good gut health**. Here, we examine the way fear and stress is felt in the body, and most especially in the gut. The gut is the first indicator of stress and the exercises outlined in this booklet can be part of your tool kit for taking care of your mental health. Regular exposure to stress and fear causes many painful and irritating sensations in the gut, which over time we learn to switch off from - we disassociate from these feelings.

However, this switching off only gives us temporary relief. Long term disassociation from our feelings leads to other mental health problems like anxiety and depression. We become fearful of our own feelings - anxiety. Or we become so numb that we can't feel anything - depression.

The solution to many of these wide ranging, often chronic mental health problems is to learn to feel your feelings, slowly, safely and with support.

“As time passes you will begin to feel more alive, less worried and overwhelmed, more grounded and able to cope with life’s varied and often challenging experiences.”

A simple and very effective way of avoiding the habit of switching off is to **create movement and sensations in your tummy** so that you can start to tune back into the messages your gut is giving you in an enjoyable and comfortable way. In the following pages, we'll cover some topics that will help you to notice and release tension in your gut.





How belly breathing can help with stress management

Our body is intelligent. Every one of our billions of cells is like a tiny brain.

Cells have the capacity to receive and process information, learn, communicate and change. This is something that yoga has taught us for thousands of years and Science is now catching up. What scientists and the medical profession agree on is that **this body intelligence is particularly true for the gut**. In terms of understanding our mental health better, the 'Gut-Brain-Axis' as it's called, is a real breakthrough. There are over 100 million brain cells in our digestive system, the job of these cells is to communicate with the brain in our head to help keep us safe and healthy.

The power of brain cells in the gut

The brain cells in the gut work closely with our nervous system. Information about safety is felt in the gut and sent to the brain along the Vagus nerve. This 'am I safe?' signal from the brain cells in the gut is delivered to the brain in the head and processed into a thought and subsequent reaction. The signal could be 'all is good, I'm safe, I can relax and respond accordingly'. Or the signal could be 'Not good, unsafe, need to prepare and respond accordingly'.

This stress response happens in a split second, and constantly throughout our lives. It is essential for our survival and health, both physically and mentally. We may think our species has evolved and our human concerns have moved on but we are all driven and motivated by the same gut feelings as those of our ancestors.

“there are over 100 million cells in our digestive system”

What causes stress?

Stress is a worldwide epidemic and **the symptoms of stress are considered the number one cause of illness.** It can be caused by modern problems like money, work, family, exams, delayed flights etc. These ‘modern problems’ at their core give us the same worried, uncomfortable, unsettled, feeling as our ancestors felt when they were unsafe. **It is this unsafe feeling that causes stress and it is a feeling that begins in the belly.** Our tummy is the receiver of the ‘this isn’t safe’ feeling from our nervous system.

Whether it’s that angry bear or that angry boss, the signal has the same effect on our guts. Your stomach feels as though it’s tightening into a knot, you feel butterflies and a heavy drop like a stone, bloating, wobbles and churning. These gut feelings are your body’s initial signal to you that you aren’t safe.

Trying to control stress signals with thoughts like ‘don’t be silly, you’re fine’, when your tummy’s turning somersaults...doesn’t do any good, it makes things worse. Learning to listen and respond to the gut brain, rather than over ride stress with the head brain is the key to managing stress and stopping it turning into a whole pile of mental and physical problems.

How can yoga help with these feelings of stress?

The most important part of any yoga practice is **‘Interoception’** the ability to feel your body’s signals. This can seem simple but because we all live in our heads so much, we have learnt to switch off what our body tells us. Therefore, **we need to relearn what our ancestors knew instinctively; how to listen to our guts.**

If you regularly stop for a few seconds and check how your body is feeling, how you feel in your belly, then you will be practicing the most important skill in stress management. You will be able to work out and respond to stress at its source. When you are noticing the feelings in your gut, you can practice a few belly breaths to settle, calm and bring you back to feeling grounded and safe again. This simple practice works best if practiced regularly and it only take a few seconds, about six or eight breaths is good.



Belly breathing technique

Bring one hand to your belly and see if you can feel any sensations there now... Hunger, cramps, tiredness, warmth? Then bring your awareness to the feeling of your breath moving in your belly.

1

On the inhalation, your belly moves out, expands and inflates like a small balloon. Then on the exhalation your belly relaxes back and draws in slightly. Exaggerate this belly breath a few times, feeling more expansion on the inhale and more contraction on the exhale.

2

See if you can slow down your breath so that you take longer smoother breaths, and pay close attention to the end of the exhale, when you feel your tummy draw in and the small pause before you inhale.

3

You can practice this exercise in any position and can do it without your hand on your belly once you know the feeling. If you struggle with sleep problems this is a great exercise to practice in bed to help you get to sleep.

4

After practicing this belly breath your tummy should feel a bit more relaxed and most importantly your head should be less caught up with solving all the ‘problems’

How to release gut tension with a yoga twist

Disassociation is the medical term for switching off, day-dreaming, distraction and basically getting totally lost in your thoughts. It's that experience we all have of being so distracted when you are driving that you arrive and don't know how you got there. This mental process is a normal human tendency and it is something we develop as children to help us cope with painful and potentially traumatic situations. If we leave our bodies and fly off into our thoughts, then we can't feel our pain.

At its most extreme, disassociation can result in severe mental health problems but there are many minor forms of disassociation and we all experience some of them; being forgetful, distracted, fantasising, worrying and overthinking, to name just a few.

Mindfulness

Yoga is a practice that **teaches us how to spend more time in our body**, become connected to the moment and help us to learn tools and resources for avoiding this old habit of switching off. It is this switching off

that is essentially mindfulness. Mindfulness practice teaches us the ability to stay with our feelings and manage even the most challenging of experiences as they happen.

Take a few deep belly breaths

Feel your tummy expand and stretch on the inhale, then draw your tummy back in towards your spine on the exhale. Take a few more breaths like this, seeing if you can feel a massaging squeezing sensation on the exhale. (It might make you burp!).

Stay here breathing in this slow massaging way for about ten breaths if you can.

Bring all your attention into your body, into your belly, while you take slow, deep breaths. Then turn back to centre, take a deep breath here, letting your tummy relax. Rotate in the other direction to practice this exercise on the other side. You might notice this side feels different to the first. This is normal as the two sides of the body are very different and have lots of different sensations and reactions. Noticing these differences and all the varied



comfortable and uncomfortable sensations in the body is the aim of these practices. There is no such thing as getting it right or wrong if you can feel something and just breathe into whatever your body is telling you, right here, right now.

A Yoga twist that can relieve bloating

Yoga abdominal twists are a combination of stretch and compression in the belly which give you something you can feel and focus on, with the addition of belly breaths which move and massage your internal organs. This easy and quick exercise is also good for releasing gut tension and helps to get your system relaxing and moving properly. You can also try this as a way of relieving bloating, trapped wind, and indigestion, which are all linked symptoms of stress in the gut.

How to do a yoga twist

Turn in your chair so that your hips are still facing forward but your chest is turned as far round towards the back of the chair as comfortably possible. You can hold the back or arm of the chair as a support. Then see if you can feel a stretching and pressing sensation in your tummy. At first you might just feel your back, shoulders and hips so close your eyes and see if you can just focus on your tummy and the sensations there.



The practice and use of diaphragm breathing

How to use diaphragm breathing to help manage stress

It's hard to know exactly what causes stress. It can sometimes be a question of what comes first; like the chicken or the egg. Does stress create tension in the body or does the tension in your body make you stressed? Is stress creating that tight knot in your stomach and that hard to breathe feeling? Or does the tight restricted feeling in your ribs and stomach make you feel nervous and stressed?

Well, which ever came first there is no doubt that the two are interlinked and one can lead to another. We would all love to believe that if our physical problems go away then our stress will go too. But we know it's not that simple. **Ongoing stress has a very negative effect on our body and when you have been under a lot of pressure your body feels the effects such as tight, tired muscles, headache, digestive and sleep problems.** These physical manifestations of stress can really stress you out!

Another example is when you are nervous such as when you're about to give a big presentation or go into an important meeting. You will likely feel these nerves in your stomach. This can be a tight burning knot, or a churning unsettled feeling. This will come with the added pressure of tension in your breathing, short shallow nervous breaths. These uncomfortable physical sensations will only lead to more stress and increase your nerves.

How can yoga help?

Yoga breathing exercises are a brilliantly quick and simple way of taking back the control with stress. Diaphragmatic breathing is especially good for targeting the area around and in the stomach, which is so often where nerves are felt.

The diaphragm is like the engine for our breath. It is a large, strong core muscle in the centre of the torso that moves all the time as you breathe. Picture an open umbrella below your stomach attaching to the bottom of the ribs all the way round. When you inhale, your



diaphragm moves out and downwards, the umbrella opens and gets bigger pulling your breath in. When you exhale, your diaphragm moves in and upwards, the umbrella closes slightly and moves up forcing your breath out again.

If your diaphragm is tense it will stay pulled up, tight and closed which restricts your breathing making it hard to get a deep breath in. When your diaphragm is tense and tight this will lead to tension in the stomach which is right beside it. Causing that uncomfortable knot and leading to digestive problems.

Why does stress make the diaphragm tighten?

All our muscles are controlled by the nervous system and the brain. If our nervous system perceives a threat, like knowing you are about to walk on stage, our nervous system gives the signal to prepare for the impending threat by tensing your muscles. This is all well and good if you are about to fight or run, but if you need to be calm and collected then tension in your muscles and breathing doesn't do you much good.

Noticing that you are tense, that you can't breathe and you have a knot in your stomach is the first step. Then, take a few minutes to address the place of stress, and work with the breath in this area will open, unwind and settle you.

Focus on your breathing:

Bring your hands to the bottom of the ribs, with all your fingers facing forward including your thumbs, this way your shoulders and arms will be able to relax down.

1

See if you can feel your ribs moving in and out with the breath. This is the diaphragm expanding and contracting.

2

Give your ribs a gentle push inwards on the exhale to exaggerate this movement and feel how mobile and flexible your rib cage is.

3

Then gently push your ribs out into your hands on the inhale to feel how far out the ribs move and how open you can get them.

4

Continue to breathe with this gentle bit of resistance, which will stimulate and stretch the diaphragm.

5

Look for a stretchy feeling around the stomach and an opening across your mid back.

After just a few minutes of practice you should notice that your breath is a bit deeper and the tension is leaving your tummy. At first try this exercise lying down, as that will allow your muscles to relax and stretch even more. Then, when you feel comfortable with it, you can do this sitting and even standing.

As with all yoga exercises their benefits will be noticed through practice. If you work with this every day for a week leading up to an important date, you will be able to use this tool to calm your nerves when you need it most.



Developing your core strength to improve gut function

In yoga terms our gut is our battery pack. It is a store house of energy.

Connecting with and building strength and support from the bottom to the top of the abdomen will help to balance and improve the flow and function of your energy. **Improved energy flow in your gut will support both your physical and mental health.** Each area of the gut is responsible for different types of energy or 'Prana' in yoga terms, and this energy corresponds with your thoughts and feelings.

Working upwards the pelvic floor and pelvic organs are connected to feelings of trust and support. The very bottom of the abdomen is literally our foundation, the floor of our body. Slightly higher, in our lower belly the energy here supports creativity, confidence and being 'in flow'. Then

at the top, the upper belly is like our internal sun, the energy here gives us drive, determination and strength.

So, building muscular strength in your core or abdominal and pelvic muscles will benefit more than just your lower back. One of the biggest benefits of core strengthening is a general **gain in confidence**. Feeling steady, strong and able is a wonderful feeling, you feel that **anything is possible** because you have the strength and physical support to do it.

But for many of us, the opposite feeling is a reality a lot of the time. We feel heavy, in pain, tired and that we just don't have the strength to do what is required. Everything we do and feel physically has a mental and emotional connection. If you physically feel dragged down, tired and heavy you are of course going to have a similar mental response.



“you feel that anything is possible because you have the strength and physical support to do it”

Improving the function, control and strength in your body is going to **lead to feeling more mentally strong and in control**. When you read this, it of course makes total sense, but we can often forget to join these dots, and expect our head to feel great even though our body doesn't.

For example, if you decide you want to feel physically and emotionally stronger you might decide to hit the gym. If you went from zero strength to doing 20 sit ups, you would not only exhaust yourself and have a miserable time, but you would most likely put other weak muscles into shock and end up with severe back pain.

I recommend **starting gently** and doing lots of simple small 'mini sit ups' which will be a more enjoyable, sustainable and a much healthier option for your sensitive gut.

In this final article, I'd like to show you a **simple and very effective core strengthening exercise** that can be practiced sitting, lying down or standing. It requires no leggings or sweat bands, no gym membership and hardly any time.

How to practice this exercise in our day to day life

Imagine you have a zip running from your pubic bone to your navel (tummy button). Then imagine zipping up your lower belly to your upper belly.

This should create a small forward tilt in the hips and a tightening in the lower belly. You should also notice that your lower back flattens, gets longer and more open, which will relieve pressure and tiredness there.

Practice this zipping up movement with your breath. Exhale to zip up and inhale to relax or zip down.

A note on the breathing:

The reason you tighten and lift on the exhale and not the inhale is because this is the natural movement of the breath. The pelvic floor which you should be able to feel tightening when you zip up, works with the diaphragm to move air out of the body (for more details read the previous diaphragm

breathing blog). If you tighten and lift on the inhale it encourages a shorter and shallower breathing pattern. It's always best with any core strengthening work to lift and tighten on the exhale.

Once you are familiar with this **'Zipping up'** movement you can practice this if you get an achy lower back when walking or if you must stand for long periods.

This exercise along with the other yoga gut health exercises demonstrates that there are many **simple and effective ways of connecting with the intelligence in your gut**. Building strength in your lower belly gives you awareness in your abdomen and soothing in your stomach. This in turn gives you physical and mental grounding and support to **cope with the challenges in life** and feel fit and well enough to enjoy the good times.

Ready to begin?

Practicing these exercises will help you to notice and then manage the feelings in your gut. Your gut and therefore your mind will be healthier. For more information on yoga you'll find Jessica's introduction to yoga on layahealthcare.ie/thrive/lifestyle

At laya healthcare, we've built a health and wellbeing programme called **'Thrive'** designed to empower your team so that they can thrive at home, at work, physically, and mentally, in mind & body.

To find out how we can help your team improve their health and wellbeing visit layawellness.ie





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