

Body Work for Stress Relief

A guide to using gentle, targeted movement to release tension and calm the body during the working day.

Stress doesn't just live in the mind — it settles in the body. Under pressure, the shoulders creep up, the jaw and chest tighten, and breathing becomes shallow and fast. Left unaddressed, that physical tension feeds back into the mind and keeps the stress response switched on.

Movement offers a direct way back out. Releasing physical tension sends the nervous system a signal of safety, helping shift the body out of a wired, high-alert state and into a calmer one.

Much of what follows is yoga-informed — postures and flows developed and refined over a very long tradition of practice. It sits alongside more everyday movement, like shaking out and stepping away from the desk, that works through the same basic principle: release the tension the body is holding, and let the mind follow.

Body work for stress relief

Forward folds

Why: Folding forward, even gently, is widely used in yoga to settle an overstimulated nervous system — softening the front of the body rather than bracing it.

Bend the knees as much as needed
Let the head and neck hang heavy
Come up slowly, a vertebra at a time

Slow, restorative twists

Why: Gentle, unhurried twists release tension held either side of the spine, without the heart-rate lift of a more active movement — better suited to winding down.

Move slowly, following the breath
Hold each side for a few slow breaths
Works seated at a desk or standing

Grounding shapes

Why: Low, still, supported shapes — resting close to the floor or with the legs raised — are often experienced as settling and secure when the mind is overstimulated.

Try child's pose, lying supported, or legs up a wall
Support the head, or raise the legs — whichever suits
Let the breath slow naturally
A few calm minutes is enough

Release & mobilisation

Why: General movement that physically loosens tension — a loose shake-out, slow shoulder and neck rolls, or deliberately clenching then releasing a muscle group — helps discharge nervous energy and eases the muscles that tighten under stress.

Shake out arms and legs for 30–60 seconds
Or roll shoulders and neck slowly, a few each way
Or squeeze then release fists, shoulders, jaw
Use whichever feels most needed

Step away & walk

Why: Changing physical location, even briefly, interrupts the stress spiral. Rhythmic walking gives the body a steady, repetitive movement that's naturally calming.

A short walk, indoors or out, is enough
Let the pace settle on its own
Leave the phone behind if you can

Light strength work

Why: Bodyweight-only strength work gives an outlet for built-up tension, without the harder effort of a full workout, which can itself add to stress.

Bodyweight only — squats, wall push-ups, calf raises
Keep it light and steady, not to failure
A short, gentle set is enough
For building strength, see the Strength pillar

Building a regular practice

The moves above help in the moment. For longer-term stress regulation, it's regular practice that counts — and it doesn't have to mean one long session. In most cases, the same total adds up in a similar way whether it's done in one go or spread across the week in smaller amounts.

Yoga

How much & how often: the strongest evidence comes from full sessions of around 45–60 minutes, 2–3 times a week. Shorter, more frequent practice (even 10–15 minutes) is less well studied on its own, but still counts towards the total and is a good way to build the habit if a full session isn't realistic. Why: this is where the evidence for lowering stress hormones and self-reported stress is strongest — benefits build over weeks of consistent practice rather than appearing after one session.

Walking

How much & how often: aim for a brisk, purposeful pace, building towards 20–30 minutes a few times a week — but it doesn't need to happen in one block. The same total split into several shorter walks appears to work just as well, and some evidence suggests more frequent, shorter walks may be even better for stress specifically. Why: linked to lower stress hormones and improved mood.

Light strength work

How much & how often: short bodyweight sessions add up — a few minutes here and there across the week, at least a couple of times a week, is enough. Evidence suggests spreading the same total volume across more frequent, shorter sessions works just as well as fewer longer ones. Why: resistance movement is linked to meaningful reductions in anxiety and stress, and keeping it light and bodyweight-only avoids the sharper cortisol spike that harder, heavier training can bring — well suited to stress relief specifically. For building strength and structured progression, see the Strength pillar.

Evidence base

Backed by research

Brief bouts of movement and muscle-release techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation have a well-established evidence base for lowering perceived stress and physiological arousal (heart rate, cortisol) in the short term. Regular movement breaks during the day are also linked to lower self-reported stress and better mood. Resistance training is separately linked to meaningful reductions in anxiety and stress, though most of this evidence comes from general resistance training rather than bodyweight-only protocols specifically. Where yoga has been tested directly for stress and anxiety, meta-analyses show a consistent, moderate reduction in both self-reported stress and physiological stress markers, though study quality and sizes vary.

Rooted in yoga tradition & practice

Many of the specific themes here — forward folds and inversions as a nervous-system reset, grounding shapes for settling the mind, twists for releasing held tension — come from a body of yoga teaching and lived practice refined over hundreds of years, rather than from clinical trials. This isn't the same kind of evidence as a randomised trial, but it's a plausible alternative, worth taking seriously alongside the science rather than instead of it.