

Yoga to Let Go of Habits



Yoga can help us let go of habits we know aren't good for us. It puts us in touch with our body and mind, helping us to see what's going on when we have a craving and understand what steps we can take to break through without giving in.

Smoking and vaping are good examples of difficult habits to break. This is because nicotine changes the brain chemistry to create powerful cravings. These cravings can be particularly strong whenever you're in a situation where you would normally light up or vape (after a meal, during TV ads, after exercise). However, a craving only lasts two minutes, so you can remind yourself that just a short intervention can be enough to allow it to pass. There's more good news too: your brain constantly changes the way it's wired, which means, in time, your cravings will weaken.

Don't battle with yourself

Giving up habits or creating new ones can feel overwhelming, especially if we start thinking of the habit as something we 'should' or 'shouldn't' do. We might start to feel deprived, or worry about failing, or feel ashamed or weak if we don't succeed straight away. This mental activity is all part of the package, but it doesn't have to stand in the way of you giving up. This breathing exercise will help you step back from this struggle, and feel calm and clear.

“When the breath wanders, the mind is unsteady, but when the breath is still, so is the mind still.”

from the Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Alternate nostril breathing

Lift your hand into position as pictured. Read the instructions for one round, then have a go at completing five rounds, then work your way towards three sets of five. Always start and finish on the left side.

One round

As you follow each step, remember to keep the breath gentle and steady, without holding it.

- Close the right nostril (thumb) and breathe in through the left
- Close the left nostril (ring finger) and breathe out through the right
- Keeping the left nostril closed, breathe in through the right
- Close the right nostril (thumb) and breathe out through the left

How yoga breathing makes you relax

Because you're only breathing through one side of the nose, alternate nostril breathing gradually makes your breathing deeper and slower. This lowers your heart rate, which calms the nervous system and switches you from stress response 'fight or flight' to a more relaxed state 'rest and digest'. Breathing practices like this one are great to do before meditation.



TIPS

- It might help to visualise the breath moving in an arc.
- Don't overfill your lungs breathing in or empty them too much breathing out.
- Focus on relaxing and find your natural rhythm not breathing too fast or slow.
- The cleansing qualities of this exercise should leave you revitalised.

Caution: Do not try this if you have a cold, bunged up airways, sinus problems or respiratory issues.



When the urge hits

Whenver you feel yourself being pulled back into an old habit, such as craving that nicotine hit, try this routine. It will help you 'ride out' any cravings and see that you are bigger than the urge to give in. It's also helpful to have something to do, as a distraction. Do this sequence three times, linking your movements with a slow, steady breath. Stay aware of each in-breath and out-breath, including the natural pause before the in-breath starts.

Yoga and meditation help break habits by bringing you into the here and now. For example, by noticing and allowing yourself to experience a nicotine craving, you can then make a calm decision about how to respond.



1. Child

Rest like this for three deep breaths.



2. Angry cat

Exhale, coming up onto your hands and knees.



3. Happy cat

Inhale, lift head gently, arching the whole spine.



4. Downward dog

Exhale, lift up into an upside down V shape with knees bent; relax head and neck.



5. Downward dog

Inhale, try to straighten the legs and stretch through the arms and back (*Downward Dog*).



6. Plank

This one is optional! If you're feeling strong today, *inhale* and come forward into this pose. *Exhale* and return to pose 5. Flow between these postures three times with the breath, ending up in pose 5.



7. Swan

Exhale, as you come down onto your knees. *Inhale* and lean back. Then lean forward and begin the cycle again with pose 1.

**“Giving up smoking is
the easiest thing in the world.
I’ve done it thousands of times.”**

Mark Twain, author and humourist (1835-1910)