



# ASANA TO COMBAT THE WINTER BLUES

A SomaYoga Therapy Home Practice for Stress, Anxiety, & Depression

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**S**tress is a modern day disease resulting from our fast paced lifestyle. It can be the cause of chronic pain, anxiety, and depression. We are born with reflexes for survival, and these reflexes live in our neuromuscular system. They are meant to assist us when we are in danger or need to take quick action. We want to use these reflexes wisely, for their purpose, and then consciously release them. If they go unchecked, and become a constant state of contraction, they affect our posture and become habitual. The three primary reflexes that SomaYoga Therapy, a blend of somatics, therapeutic yoga, and classic asanas (postures), utilizes are the: Startle Reflex, Landau Reflex, and Trauma Reflex. These reflexes activate on a daily basis when we go to answer the phone or the door, work slouched over a computer, drive a car, carry a child, or a heavy bag on one side. These habitual actions begin to feel like a normal way of being and begin to bring in chronic stress, pain, and strain in our somas. Soma is the Greek word referring our first-person experience of living in our mind, body and spirit; what the practice of yoga aims to unify.

In the state of the startle reflex, the back side of our body lengthens, our front side shortens and tightens, our hip flexors, shoulder girdle, neck, and jaw all experience tension. Our upper, mid and lower back may throb and ache. Our thoughts begin to loop and traffic jams in our somas occur. This affects our breath, blood flow, and overall function causing dis-ease to set in. When our somas begin to experience chronic over compensation, sadness, anxiety and depression can set in. When we take time to remember, to get current with ourselves, through the eight-limb path of yoga, we begin to build our awareness of our soma's mobility, strength and stability.

The following will guide you in a SomaYoga Therapy practice suggested by Ann Blackburn, owner of Tula Yoga & Wellness, to re-educate your neuromuscular system out of the startle reflex. Done regularly this practice will grow your interoceptive awareness (a sense of one's internal responses such as heart rate, hunger, soreness, etc.) and proprioceptive awareness (a sense where your body is in space and the strength needed for specific movements). Approach it as you might a moving meditation, and begin by closing your eyes to practice sense withdrawal (Pratyahara). Allow yourself to sense and feel the practice with compassion. Stay pain free while doing practice. Allow muscles to move into areas that feels tense, and slowly release and lengthen rather than "stretching," which could cause the muscle to tighten up rather than release. This re-educates the muscles on how to let go, lets the tension melt away, and find new freedom. Repeat if you notice stutters —this is evidence of chronically held muscle tension. Keep this practice curious and slow. Produce small, slow, mindful movements.

**POSES 1 – 9 ARE DONE LYING ON THE FLOOR. AFTER EACH POSE YOU GIVE YOURSELF A MOMENT TO SENSE AND FEEL CHANGES IN YOUR SOMA (BODY, BREATH, AND MIND) AND TO STAY PRESENT.**

**1. DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATH:** Lie on your back with your arms and legs comfortably extended on the floor. Notice how your body is connecting with the floor – your neck, shoulders, arms, back, hips, legs, and feet. Notice your mind, emotions, and breath. Your breath (pranayama) will help you become embodied and draw inward (pratyahara) to increase awareness. Put one hand on your diaphragm (where the lower ribs come together) and one hand on your navel. As you inhale, notice your lower ribs and abdomen expand. As you exhale, notice your ribs and abdomen return to center. This engages and releases the diaphragm, calms the mind, and helps draw you inward. Set an intention that nourishes you, guides your practice, and that you can take with you into life (e.g., self compassion, courage, being present, contentment, strength, etc. ).



**2. ARCH & FLATTEN:** Bend your knees, feet are on your mat hip-distance apart. This is called Effortless Rest Pose (ERP). As you inhale, allow your navel to rise and your lower back to gently arch, tailbone rolls toward the ground, and back muscles begin to activate. Pause. Exhale and relax your back muscles toward the ground to come out of the arch. Allow your abdominal muscles to contract toward your spine and flatten – let your back muscles lengthen. As you inhale, slowly release the abdominal muscles allowing your spine to return to a resting position. Repeat 3 – 5 times, staying curious and noticing each movement.



**3. ARCH & CURL:** Clasp hands behind your head and continue the Arch & Flatten. Now, add to your flatten, a rounding up by lifting your head and possibly your upper back off the ground. Bring elbows toward each other, engage your pectoral muscles and widen your upper back. As you inhale, slowly lower back, elbows, and head down. Allow the whole front body to release and lengthen. Repeat 3 – 5 times, slowly feeling the back and front body supporting each other. As you engage your back muscles, your abdominal muscles release, and as you engage your abdominal muscles, your back muscles release. When complete, extend legs out on floor to sense and feel any changes.



**4. KNEE DIPS EXTERNAL:** Return to ERP. Place your hand in the hip crease and originate the movement from femur (thigh bone) and hip joint. Move your right knee out and back to center slowly. Keep the other side quiet to experience the true range of motion in your hip. Your hand will serve as a way for you to connect with those muscles (proprioception) in the hip joint. Do 3 – 5 times slowly. Repeat on left side. Sense and feel any differences between your hips.



**5. KNEE DIPS INTERNAL:** Widen your feet on floor, dip your knee inward, internally rotate your femur in the hip joint, and back to center. Again, move slowly to notice, sense and feel. Do 3 – 5 times.



**6. WASH CLOTH:** With feet hip distance apart, slowly move both knees to one side in same direction, as your head moves to the other side in the opposite direction of knees. Pass back through center as your knees and head move to their other sides. Do 3 – 5 times slowly. Extend legs out on floor to sense and feel and changes.



**7. BRIDGE:** With feet hip distance apart, press feet into floor and lift hips into a very subtle bridge – just until you feel the glutes engage, hold for three breaths and then slowly release the glutes as you bring hips down, completely relax them. Repeat three times to stabilize.



**8. SHOULDER RELEASE:** Press the front of your right shoulder forward, release back to neutral. Do 3 – 5 times, each side slowly. Press back of right shoulder toward ground, slowly release to neutral. Do 3 – 5 times, each side. With arms toward ceiling, reach one arm up and slowly allow muscles on back of shoulder to release toward ground. If those muscles are quiet and you cannot feel the release, tap on the muscles. Do 3 – 5 times, slowly on each side.



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This sequence is continued from the previous page. Don't miss out!

**9. WASH CLOTH:** Repeat #6. Then roll onto stomach.



**10. DYNAMIC COBRA** – Completely relax into the ground and connect with diaphragmatic breath. With hands on floor under shoulders and shoulders down, shoulder blades moving toward spine, gaze at the floor in front of you, inhale as you press hands into ground, lift behind heart center. Exhale as you release towards the floor. Back and shoulders relax. Repeat three times.



**11. CAT COW** – On hands and knees, as you inhale, let your navel move toward floor, activating back muscles (Cow/Arch). Exhale, draw navel toward spine lengthening back muscles (Cat/Curl). Notice the movement all along your spine from head to tailbone.



**12. CHILD'S POSE** - Kneel on floor, sit back toward your heels and rest head on floor, or on arms. If kneeling isn't comfortable, lie down on your back and gently hug knees.



**13. SAVASANA** - Take some time at the end of your practice, relax your soma, and integrate your practice. Use your intention as a mantra to help you stay focused on your breath, e.g. "I am focused," "I am compassionate," "I am content," etc. Enjoy!



Contact Yoga North's International SomaYoga Institute and Tula Yoga & Wellness for classes, private sessions, and trainings.

