5 Yoga Tips for People with “Creaky Joints”

For those of us who have always been “good” at physical activity, yoga can present a daunting challenge. The “can do” American spirit makes us charge right into the fray without listening to our bodies. From our genetics and poor dietary, exercise, and personal habits, and sometimes, just dumb luck, we have developed “creaky joints.”

As a discipline, yoga is quite different from what we’ve done in the past. So, when we throw ourselves into the fray, we injure ourselves. But we miss the feeling of wellbeing from yoga. So we go back and reinjure our creaky joints, ligaments, tendons, and muscles. To counteract this cycle, here are 5 yoga class tips to protect those joints and muscles:

1. Remember: Yoga is not a competitive sport

Or at least for most yoga practitioners... In its classic form, yoga is comprised of movements and breathing, allowing better communication with your body. Most yoga practitioners have spent years deepening those lunges, twists, and poses. It’s not “if they can do it, I can do it” or push, push, push. It’s accepting your body the way it is. It’s flowing with your body, using all its strengths and weaknesses.

2. Remember: “Come out of it”

When discomfort arises in a pose, many instructors say, “Come out of it.” Basically, that instruction means to revert to a resting pose (Mountain, Child’s Pose) or return to the starting point. Most people resist this because they: (1) are competitive (see above), (2) really need to stretch that muscle group, and/or (3) know they’ve executed this pose before and feel like their bodies should be able to do it again. What people don’t realize is the strength and flexibility in your muscles, joints, ligaments, and tendons can shift from minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour, and day-to-day.

If you don’t want to go back to a resting pose, then ask the instructor for an alternative pose. Another option is coming to back starting point, take several yoga breaths, and try the pose again with less intensity (i.e., shorten your stance, decrease the angle of the twist, lower your leg, etc.). You can also go into a comfortable pose for that muscle group that’s worked in the past.

3. Remember: Keep your knees soft

Keeping the knees soft means you have a little bend in your knees when you perform poses. This softness shifts the majority of the weight bearing into the core, where muscles and bones are designed for that type of stress. By keeping the knees soft, you are also ready to move into the next posture.

Most of us lock our knees because we want more stability. When we lock our knees, the knees can no longer shift, maintaining our balance. Plus, our center of gravity is no longer supported by the core, but by our poor torqued-out knees, causing immeasurable strain and the long-term damage to these joints. When you realize you’re locking
your knees, soften the knees and tighten your abdominals. If you are unable to perform the pose without locking your knees, then the stance of the pose may be too much for your body at that time. Try decreasing the intensity.

4. **Remember: Keep your shoulders down**

By keeping your shoulders down, you allow the muscles of the chest, upper back, and shoulder blades to support the upper body. This also allows the chest to open up so we can breathe better and improves our posture. This is especially important for computer workers, readers, knitters, and almost any type of activity where people hunch over their work.

Most people also lift their shoulders when supporting weight or extending their arms over their head, especially with Arms Up and Downward Facing Dog. If you’re not able to keep your shoulders down in these poses, it’s okay to broaden out the width between your arms and slightly bend your elbows. The strength building and flexibility will still occur.

5. **Remember: Tighten your lower abdomen when moving from one pose to another**

This normally happens during yoga breathing in the poses; you just need to accentuate the tightening of the lower abdomen. With a tightened lower abdomen, the rest of the body is supported and can move smoothly.

For a therapeutic stretch and support of the lower back, it’s especially important to tighten the lower abdomen in Downward Dog, Lunges, Twists, and Warrior poses. As the lower abdomen becomes stronger, you can begin holding the lower abdomen tight throughout the poses and breathe through the lungs and upper abdomen more. If you find the lower abdomen tiring, release it and take several yoga breaths.

**Realistic expectations**

Will you be able to remember all these things in your next yoga class? Of course not! You will still find your shoulders rising when they should be down, and your knees will be locked when they should be soft. Just reading the information and repeating it to yourself will make you more aware of your body.

**Everyone has their own tips**

Everyone has their own way of protecting their bodies when they exercise. What are some of yours? We would enjoy hearing from you!

More exercise tips will be passed on in future blogs!!!

—Susan Horne

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