

[to Article](#)

SFGate.com

Restorative yoga for those who want to relax

Meredith May, Chronicle Staff Writer

Monday, January 18, 2010



The sound of San Francisco rain on the skylight mixes with the music of Tibetan bowls inside the darkened studio.

Six students are lying under blankets in Savasana, "the corpse pose"- on their backs, palms up, with bolsters under their knees and tiny pillows covering their eyes. The instructor silently walks to each student and rubs lavender oil into his or her temples.

Although it looks like nap time for grown-ups, it's actually yoga - restorative yoga.

Also known as "active relaxation," this brand of yoga came to life in San Francisco during one of the most stressful decades on record, and classes like this one at Bernal Yoga are gaining popularity as people look for ways to quiet the body, and ultimately, the mind.

The classes are typically 90 minutes and involve only a handful of poses, all variations on napping.

The point is not to stretch but to relax, turn inward and stop thinking. Practitioners use props such as blocks, bolsters, pillows and blankets to build forts they can lean or lie on. Falling asleep is allowed.

"It's more like getting a massage," said instructor Elise Collins, who teaches restorative yoga to 50 students a week through Yoga Tree studios. "It's not what you accomplish. It's about dropping in deeply," she said.

Restorative yoga works best for those who feel fatigued or ill, and is especially beneficial during major life events: breakup, death of a loved one, change of job or residence, marriage or major holiday, according to Yoga Journal founder Judith Lasater of San Francisco, who is credited with popularizing restorative yoga with her 1995 book, "Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times."

Every year, she trains 2,000 yogis around the world in restorative techniques.

An advertisement for Discount Fabrics. At the top, it says "JULY SPECIALS" in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below that, "25% off" is written in a very large, bold, sans-serif font. Underneath, it says "Our entire inventory of upholstery as well as our entire inventory of Sewing Notions." in a smaller font. Below that, it says "See website for additional July specials" in a bold font. There are two logos for "VISA" and "MasterCard" below that. At the bottom, "DISCOUNT FABRICS" is written in a large, bold, serif font. On the right side of the advertisement, there is a small illustration of a woman in a long dress standing in a doorway.

"We have no rest built into our culture anymore," she said. "There are no front porches, banks no longer close at 2 p.m., and no one is taking Sundays off. People who try this at first say they can't lie on the floor because they get too agitated. I say, 'No, you are for the first time noticing how agitated you are.' "

Many health benefits

Studies have shown health benefits, too. Ovarian and breast cancer patients reported less depression, anxiety and fatigue after 10 weekly restorative yoga classes, according to a 2008 study in the Journal of the Society for Integrative Oncology.

A 2007 study of postmenopausal women published in Maturitas Journal found a 30 percent decrease in hot flashes after eight restorative yoga classes.

Dr. Herbert Benson, an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, coined the term "relaxation response" to explain his studies that meditation and resting calms the "fight or flight" sympathetic nervous system and stimulates the opposite parasympathetic nervous system, which has been known to lower heart rate and blood pressure and boost the immune system.

Inverted poses, such as lying with your legs elevated and resting against a wall, have been found to alter hormone levels and reduce blood pressure and fluid retention as the heart rate slows and blood vessels dilate in reversed gravity, according to psychobiologist Roger Cole, a sleep researcher for UC San Diego.

'Disco nap' for soul

Kevin Ho may not have studied the science behind restorative yoga, but he knows it's helping him balance his life as an attorney and endurance cyclist.

At first, he couldn't resist the urge to check his cell phone for texts between poses.

Now, after two years, he's able to completely check out of his life for 90 minutes every Saturday night, putting him in a good mood for the rest of his weekend.

"Restorative yoga is like a prolonged disco nap for the soul," he said.

In the past year, travelers have started coming to San Francisco seeking restorative yoga classes, said Karen Finch of San Francisco, a teacher and student.

"San Francisco is seen as the hub of this right now," she said. "I get many e-mails asking if I teach it, and that never used to happen."

Stress management

Yoga teachers are weaving more meditation into their practices, as a natural response to what their customers want.

"When the economy plummeted, I felt an urgency from my students to help them cope with crises," said Dina Amsterdam, a yoga teacher since 1994 who last year began adding 30 minutes of purely meditative "Inner Yoga" to her flow classes. She now leads Inner Yoga retreats around the country.

As her students at Yoga Tree studio on Valencia Street lie in the corpse pose, she guides them through a meditation about mindfulness, helping them get back into focus when their thoughts wander into "monkey mind."

"If you notice your mind wandering, just take note of it, 'Ah, thinking!,' and bring yourself back," she says.

Amsterdam sees inner and restorative yoga becoming more mainstream as people learn to connect chronic illness with long-term, low-level stress.

"As people become more aware of their own inner landscape, and how important it is to get their mind and body back in balance, then this will become the new form of stress management," she said.

E-mail Meredith May at mmay@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/01/18/DDDE1BDCLK.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

© 2010 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)