

✦
DISTRRACTED?
✦

✦ BUSY?
OUT OF SHAPE? ✦

get back on the mat

WITH OUR 21-DAY YOGA CHALLENGE

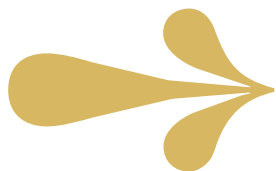
✦ A fun, inspiring
& totally doable home
practice program.

photography by
David Martinez

by Hillari Dowdle







Here's a koan for you:

What is yoga without practice? The world seems to be filled with yogis who've let their practices slide, with rolled-up mats

and meditation cushions collecting dust in closet corners. Or maybe it's just me. 🍌 I think of myself as a yogi, but my bolsters, blocks, and wedges beg to differ. In the past year, they've been used to build forts for my four-year-old and his friends, not to support my alignment in Revolved Triangle or Half Moon Pose. And, oh, the stories my yoga mat could tell of misuse (mostly of the tent-building variety) and neglect!

I keep these props handy to remind me that the real juice in yoga comes from regular practice. Specifically, home practice. I want them to be ready for me whenever inspiration strikes. But for the past year or so, they've mostly been inspiring guilt. I want to feel like a yogi again, to build a bridge back to my practice. So how come I don't? How can I get my groove back?

Those are the questions I'm pondering when the editors at *Yoga Journal* ask me to test-drive the 21-Day Yoga Challenge. The idea behind it is simple, they explain: We all want to be healthier in body, mind, and spirit, and we believe that yoga helps bring us into a healthy state of balance. Why not, at the start of a new year, commit to doing yoga every day for 21 days in a row in order to make the practice an ingrained habit? They promise me that they're going to make the challenge as easy as possible to stick to, that the *Yoga Journal* website will have video sequences of varying lengths and styles—morning wake-up routines! core busters! some of them only 15 minutes long!—as well as pranayama instruction and guided meditations. (To watch the videos and sign up online, go to yogajournal.com/21daychallenge.) All I have to do is show up on my mat every day, with no lofty goals and no expectations, and see what unfolds.

It doesn't take me long to realize that this challenge is right up

my alley. I can take 15 minutes out of my day for three short weeks to commit to my own well-being, right? Right. I'm intrigued, I'm inspired, and I commit to the 21-Day Yoga Challenge. Here is my story. I hope it inspires you to take the Challenge, too.

overcoming obstacles

First, I have to come to grips with the hot mess of my life—the ticking clock, the flab, the cluttered house, my aging body, my distracted mind. Years ago, when

I was a single career girl, I could rock a modified Ashtanga practice packed with arm balances and inversions like nobody's business. I can't do yoga the way I used to, so I'm tempted not to do it at all. Clearly, I need to make my practice more appropriate for who I am now...but how?

For help, I call San Francisco-based teacher Jason Crandell, who is not only a friend, but is teaching some of the video sequences offered online as part of the Challenge. He's heard my list of yoga obstacles...and he's heard it plenty. "As practitioners, we accept the notion of change theoretically, but in reality, it's very humbling to modify your practice to meet

Yoga teacher Laura Christensen thrives on regular practice.



21-day challenge

Join the fun at yogajournal.com/21daychallenge!*

your current needs,” he says. “We all want to plod along doing what we know how to do.” Um, check.

Crandell is a stellar teacher, drawing students from around the globe to his workshops. Though he welcomes them all, he directs them to the place where yoga really happens: on their own mat, at home. Classes are great for learning the skills and tools of asana, he says, but our personal practice is where we apply and integrate them. All yogis should have a home practice—and all yogis can. So with patience and great care, he lobs all of my obstacles right back to me.

Too busy? “Keep it simple,” he says. “You don’t have to replicate a yoga class every time you practice at home. Start with 15 minutes. If you have more time, great. If not, that’s enough.”

Too chubby? “If you’re letting your weight keep you off the mat, you’ve got a self-esteem issue,” he says. “Ignoring your body won’t help; doing skillful things with your body in asana practice will make it easier to nurture the kind of body you have now.”

Too distracted? “Asana is perfect if you’re distracted because it shifts the mind state from endless thinking into sensing, observing, and feeling,” Crandell says.

Too injured or old? “The great thing that an injury or a new physical limitation does is to show us how attached we are to a particular way of practicing asana,” he says. “These things help us see our own ego and vanity so that we can move beyond them.”

Too scattered? “Listen, we’re all householders, so for better or worse we are shifting the context in which yoga is practiced,” he says. “We live in a very different time and place than the ancient yogis who developed this practice. But you can still roll up the carpet or move a table out of the way. You can practice

Go online daily for instructional videos by four talented teachers: Jason Crandell, creator of the *Yoga Journal* DVD *Your Complete Home Practice Companion*; Kate Holcombe, founder of the Healing Yoga Foundation; vinyasa flow teacher Elise Lorimer; and yoga and Pilates teacher Rebecca Urban. You’ll find practices for every day of the week:

MONDAY | a fun flow practice to kick-start your week

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FRIDAY | a “peak pose” sequence to master backbends, arm balances, or splits

SATURDAY | a tension-releasing restorative practice

SUNDAY | a gentle routine to reconnect you with yourself

+ Download audio meditations and pranayama practices, sign up for a daily newsletter, and share your experiences in the 21-Day Challenge chat room!

*The official start date is January 10, but you can join in anytime after that.



standing in line or on an airplane. It’s better to practice in chaos than not practice at all.”

Suddenly, I realize that I’ve created every hurdle in my path—my rigidity is the problem, not my circumstances. I thank him for the advice, and then ask the million-dollar question: “So what should I do?”

His answer is simple: “The only way you’ll ever get your practice back is if you learn to enjoy it again. Do exactly what you want to do.”

setting simple goals

Next, I speak with Kate Holcombe, founder of the Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco, who contributed some gentle asana sequences to the Challenge. She’s a student of T.K.V. Desikachar (author of the seminal yoga guidebook, *The Heart of Yoga*) and an expert in functional yoga. “If I’ve learned anything from my teacher, it is that yoga is there to meet us where we are,” she says, registering my list of complaints. “You should never feel bad about where you

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➤ simple everyday practice } BY KATE HOLCOMBE

1



SUKHASANA INHALE, feeling your abdomen gently expand. EXHALE, feeling your abdomen gently contract. Repeat for 8 to 12 breaths.

2



Inhale ➤
➤ Exhale
Repeat 4 to 6 times



VAJRASANA FORWARD BEND AND MODIFIED CAKRAVAKASANA Come into Vajrasana forward bend. INHALE, lifting your chest and head, and come up onto all fours, keeping your hips in line with your knees, and your shoulders over your wrists. EXHALE, bringing your hips toward your heels, and rest your head on the floor, arms extended forward.

4



Inhale ➤
➤ Exhale
Repeat 4 to 6 times



MODIFIED SAVASANA AND MODIFIED DVIPADA PITHAM Starting with your arms and knees bent and your feet flat on the floor, INHALE to lift your hips, only as high as is comfortable, keeping your thighs parallel. EXHALE to lower your hips back to the floor.

5



EKA PADA APANASANA AND MODIFIED EKA PADA URDHVA PRASRTA PADASANA EXHALE and gently bend your knee into your chest. Holding the back of your knee, INHALE and gently

7



Exhale ➤
➤ Inhale
Repeat 4 to 6 times
per side, alternating



MODIFIED SAVASANA AND MODIFIED JATHARA PARIVRTTI With your arms outstretched, knees bent, and feet flat on the floor, EXHALE into a twist, lowering your knees to one side until they rest on the floor or on a cushion, turning your head to the opposite side. Keep both shoulders and your low back firm on the floor. INHALE, bringing your head and knees back to center. EXHALE, lowering your knees to the other side and turning your head in the opposite direction.

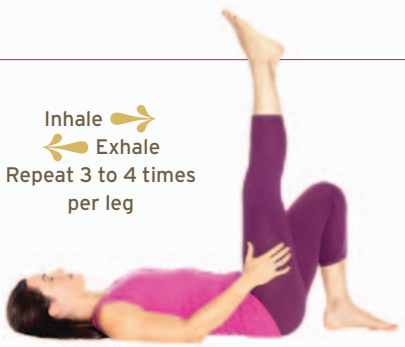
3

Inhale →
← Exhale
Repeat 4 to 6 times



MODIFIED SAVASANA Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. **INHALE**, gradually sweeping your arms wide along the floor and overhead. **EXHALE**, gradually sweeping your arms back down to your sides. Keep your neck and back relaxed throughout the movements.

Inhale →
← Exhale
Repeat 3 to 4 times
per leg



extend your leg toward the ceiling. Straighten the leg only as far as is comfortable. Hold for 2 to 3 breaths, gently pointing and flexing your outstretched foot and rotating your ankle. Switch sides.

6

Inhale →
← Exhale
Repeat 4 to 6 times



APANASANA AND URDHVA PRASRTA PADASANA **INHALE** as you gently extend both legs toward the ceiling, straightening your legs only as far as is comfortable. At the same time, extend your arms to rest on the floor overhead. **EXHALE** as you lower your arms to your knees and bend your knees into your chest. Keep your neck and back relaxed throughout the movements.

8

Inhale →
← Exhale
Repeat 6 times



APANASANA Keeping your neck relaxed, **INHALE**, gently moving your knees away from your chest, until your arms are straight. **EXHALE**, slowly moving your knees toward your chest with your hands on your knees. Keep your shoulders on the floor and the back of your neck long.

9



MODIFIED SAVASANA **INHALE**, feeling your abdomen gently expand against your hand. **EXHALE**, feeling your abdomen gently contract. Repeat for 8 to 12 breaths.

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get back on the mat

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are, or wish you were more like your neighbor. There is a practice for you right now, just as you are."

Holcombe has been in my shoes. Years ago, after the birth of her first son, she let her 90-minute daily asana practice slip away, assuming that pranayama and meditation were more essential to her life as a mom. But with Desikachar's help, she learned to adapt her practice to a tighter schedule. "He told me that my first priority was taking care of my family," she recalls. "There would be plenty of time for more intense practice later. But he also told me, 'You can't leave your body behind.'" He gave her a 15-minute asana routine—and it made a world of difference. Today, she has three kids and still makes time for her practice every day.

Holcombe now refers to herself as a recovering perfectionist and suggests that I, too, will have to let go of my unrealistic ideal in order to get back on the yoga track. To help me (and you, reader), she has created a short, doable morning practice and a mellow evening routine (*see page 90*). Both of these practices, plus 11 others, are available as online videos at yogajournal.com/21daychallenge. Most of these sequences hadn't been created when I started, so my challenge was to practice one or the other of Holcombe's routines daily for 21 days.

lessons learned

I jump on the routines with the zeal of the newly converted. The movements are mostly simple, but damned if I don't do my best to make them hard. I hold poses longer than Holcombe suggests; do more reps; add in other, more challenging asanas. But with every ounce of extra effort comes pain—achy wrists, creaky knees, sore shoulders, mental resistance.

Eventually, my over-efforting fades, and I relax into Holcombe's sequences, connecting the movements to the breath, learning to run my muscles and joints through their complete range of motion without strain. Soon, I realize that this soft, yielding, receptive approach is helping me get back in touch with my body

without all the nattering judgments I associate with trying and failing or, worse, not trying at all. In these simple routines I discover a new form of intensity. I love it.

Holcombe's sequences are like medicine, healing my rift with yoga. In their subtlety, they show me how "gross" I've been in my former practice—so intent on muscling through the poses that I've sometimes left my spirit behind. Now, I simply enjoy spending time with myself, especially during the nighttime practice, something I can do after my four-year-old son is in bed, no matter what.

Despite their relative ease, these simple daily sequences do all the things yoga is meant to do. They make me stronger and more flexible; they connect me to my breath; they improve my energy and stamina. And lo, on the days when I have the time and the drive to do a stronger practice, it comes more easily. Daily practice builds its own momentum, and now I crave my moments on the mat. I feel more inspired to show up to a class, too, knowing I can participate fully—or listen to my body's needs for modification without judgment or shame.

When I report to Holcombe at the end of my 21 days, she is happy to hear about my success but not surprised. "It's my job to adapt the yoga to the individual, not the individual to the yoga," she says. "A lot of people spend years conforming the self to the practice. If that works for you, great. But if not, you need something that's realistic for you—if that's six minutes a day, then great."

the gifts of practice

My practice isn't perfect (and truth be told, I've missed a day or two), but I've learned a lot from Holcombe's approach. I can do yoga anywhere, anytime. I don't need special clothes or a sacred space. I've heard it before: Even 10 minutes every day is better than a two-hour sweatfest once a week. But during my 21-day challenge, I truly came to understand the value of daily practice—not just intellectually, but physically and spiritually.

Why is this so important? Because your personal mat is the perfect yoga

laboratory, where you can experiment with poses to understand how they feel in your body. Because even small movements can pay big dividends when you do them daily. (Practicing gentle shoulder openers regularly, for instance, has helped me drop more deeply into Down Dog.) Because you can really attend to your body's needs, which change from day to day. Because you get quiet enough to hear the great advice that often comes from the teacher within.

But more important, I've realized, daily practice puts yoga front and center in your consciousness. I've learned to attune to the breath and to stay connected with it throughout the day (even while chasing my toddler around!). I've enjoyed Holcombe's sequence so much it's become a part of my regular bedtime routine. Daily practice has increased my capacity to stay present with the uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, and sensations that come up on the mat—and in the dentist's office, the grocery store, and the pickup line at school. In other words, I more easily remember that the skills I build through practice come in handy all the time. Yoga spills over into my life.

I invite you, too, to go online and sign up for the 21-Day Challenge. Get on your mat for three weeks and watch your life change for the better. A word of caution, though: Instead of making a laundry list of goals (to be thinner, younger, calmer), just give yourself the gift of daily practice—then, share your experiences with the *YJ* community at yogajournal.com/21daychallenge. The folks at *Yoga Journal* are challenging us to commit to a daily practice, but they're also challenging us to rethink how we practice.

The Challenge reminded me that real yoga is not about fancy poses or power practices; it's about developing a willingness to be present in the moment, which is always precious—and fleeting. Now I do yoga the way we all do yoga, ultimately: microsecond by microsecond, in the body I have, in the midst of the life that God has given me. And it is good. ❖

Hillari Dowdle is a freelance writer—and now a practicing yogini!—in Knoxville, Tennessee.

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