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Kitchen Yoga

by Carol Krucoff

Mellow Moves to De-Stress Cooking, and The Cook

A good friend calls it "arsenic hour" -- that frazzled window of time after work and before dinner when the kids are cranky, the adults are exhausted and everyone's bite-your-head-off ravenous.

If you're like me, the last thing you feel like doing during this volatile period is cooking. What I really crave is to shut myself in a quiet room, light a scented candle, turn on soothing music and do 20 minutes of yoga to unknot the physical and mental kinks of my day. Sometimes I do just that, then begin cooking dinner in a much brighter state of body and mind.

But all too often, other priorities prevail: The kids have a lesson or sports event to attend, my husband or I have a meeting, or everyone -- myself included -- is too darn hungry to wait an extra 20 minutes for dinner.

We could eat out or bring food in, but that carries its own stress, not the least of which is the cost. Someone else in the family could cook, but let's not even go there.

After years of struggling with this dinner dilemma, I recently hit upon a solution that's altered my attitude toward cooking. I call it "kitchen yoga," a practice that integrates the components of yoga with the tasks of preparing dinner.

Before you picture me doing a headstand while stirring the peas, let me explain. Yoga means "union," and this ancient Indian art seeks to unify body and mind, with the goal of uniting mortal humans with the eternal divine. The physical discipline that has become so popular in our stressed-out society is called hatha yoga and was created, in part, to help release bodily tension so practitioners could sit still to meditate. Hatha yoga is just one of eight distinct yoga practices with the same goal -- to achieve enlightenment.

Hatha yoga has many health benefits including stress reduction, weight control, increased flexibility and strength. But to think of this spiritual discipline as merely physical training is a common Western mistake that I realized I was making when I felt forced to choose between yoga and cooking. The healthier approach is to combine the two.

"Yoga once or twice a week for an hour or so is certainly better than no yoga at all," write Georg Feuerstein and Larry Payne in their excellent, if unfortunately titled, guidebook *Yoga for Dummies*. "But you unlock the real potency of yoga when you adopt it as a lifestyle. This means living yoga. . . (and) applying the wisdom of yoga to everyday life."

For me, applying yoga to cooking requires a little preparation. I change into comfy clothes, kick off my shoes (or wear wool clogs if it's cold), drink a glass of water and put on soothing music.

Then I'm ready to practice kitchen yoga. The first step is "sink centering." I wash and dry my hands, then rest them lightly on the edge of the sink while focusing on the three central elements of hatha yoga:

1. **Posture.** Good alignment reduces the stress on muscles and joints and allows deep, full

breathing. Proper standing posture means keeping the weight equally distributed on both feet, relaxing the shoulders and arms, slightly tucking the pelvis and extending the spine so that the head floats gently upward on the neck.

2. **Breathing.** Yogis have known for centuries--and modern studies confirm--that breathing provides a powerful link between body and mind, uniting them and helping establish a state of physiological calm. Proper breathing expands the abdomen, allowing the deepest part of the lungs to fill. To practice "belly breathing," I place both hands on my abdomen, with index fingers touching each other near the navel. I inhale deeply, so that my abdomen expands and pushes against my hands. On exhale, I tighten my abdominal muscles to push air out of the bottom of my lungs.
3. **Attitude.** Yoga seeks to cultivate a positive mind-set characterized by two qualities--awareness, which means being consciously present in the moment, and relaxation, which means releasing unnecessary tension. I continue belly breathing for a few minutes and do a quick scan of my body, using my breath to help release any tension I feel.

Now I'm ready to cook. As I go about the varied tasks of dinner preparation, I try to retain good posture, breathing and attitude. And whenever I have a few minutes -- say, while waiting for water to boil -- I do a yoga stretch.

Here are a few kitchen yoga poses you can try, whether you're just preparing a quick dinner or slaving over an extravagant holiday meal:

- **Counter Dog Pose:** Rest your palms lightly on a counter top or shelf. Walk your feet back so that your upper body straightens, forming a right angle with your lower body at the hips. Inhale, then exhale and feel the stretch running from your hands to your tailbone. Keep your knees soft and also feel a stretch in the backs of your legs.
- **Shoulder Opener:** Raise your arms overhead, then drop your hands so that you're holding the elbow of your right arm with your left hand and your right hand is lightly touching your back. Gently pull the elbow behind your head. Breathing normally, hold the stretch for 15 seconds, then repeat on the other side.
- **Prayer Hands:** Place your palms together, fingers pointing upward as if in prayer, with your thumbs lightly touching your breastbone. Keeping your wrists in this position, gently rotate your hands away from your body as far as you comfortably can, then return to prayer position.

While it's true that kitchen yoga is no substitute for a yoga class or practice session, it sure beats cooking with the poisonous spices of tension and resentment. It also helps build flexibility, not just of body but of mind.

True fitness isn't about going to the gym a few times a week. It's a matter of staying in touch with your body and honoring its needs for movement and for rest throughout your day.

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