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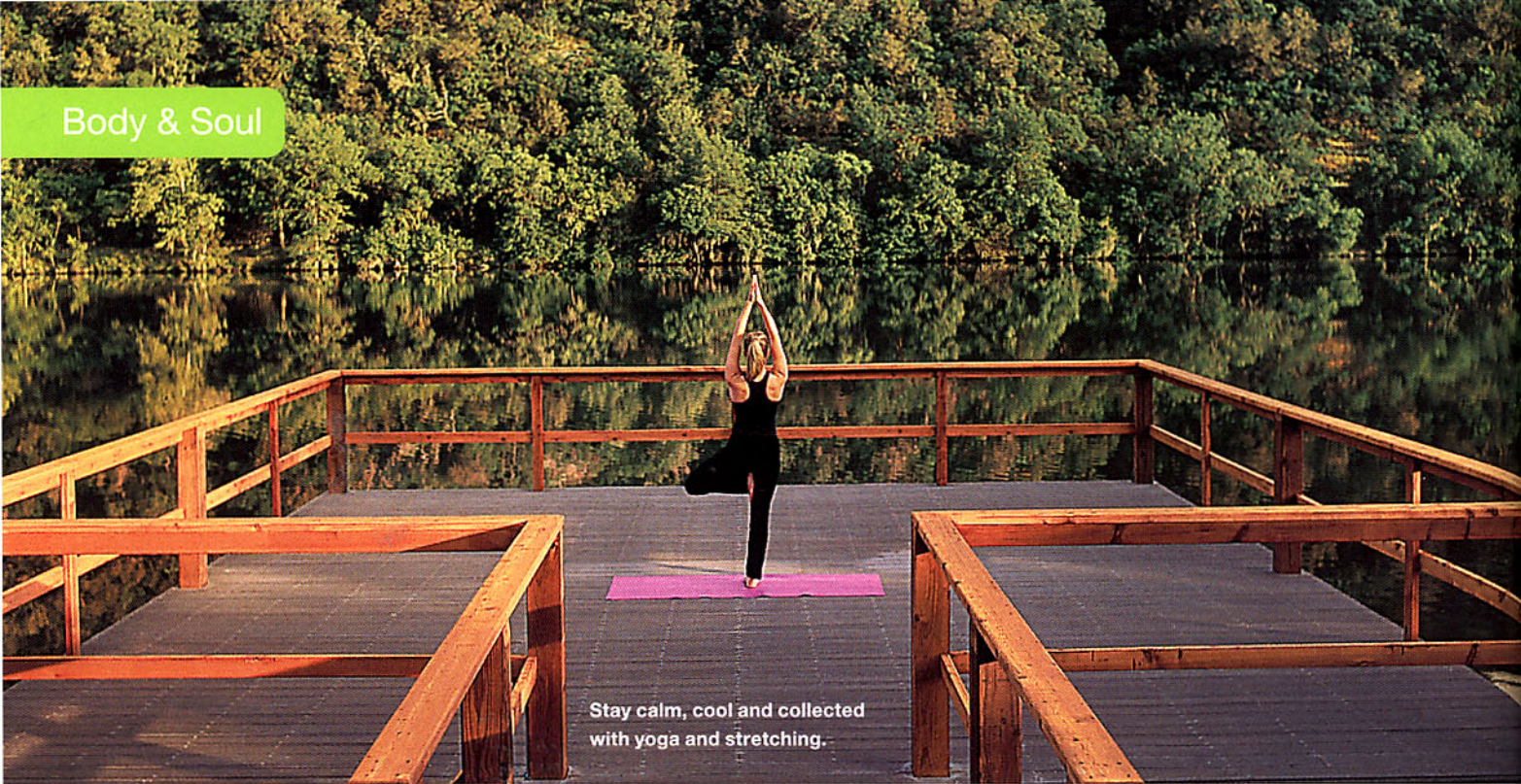
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Stay calm, cool and collected with yoga and stretching.

It's A Stretch

Fight winter doldrums with these easy moves *BY BEVERLY BURMEIER*

SHORTER DAYS and less sunlight in winter may cause feelings of depression or lethargy, but fitness experts say it's possible to exercise yourself into a happier state of mind. Physical activity improves mood by lessening tension and fatigue. Plus, exercise releases endorphins, the feel-good hormones.

Yoga does a body good

Stretching and flexibility poses from yoga can help your muscles get back in shape, clear your mind and improve your mood. "To be healthy the spine needs to bend forward, backward, and twist every day," says Charles MacInerney, a Hatha Yoga teacher.

Got the blahs? "Postures that move the spine into a backbend will lift your mood," MacInerney says. Backward poses energize by stimulating the sympathetic nervous system. "Anything that opens and stretches the chest will help clear your mind," adds Paul Smith, yoga instructor at Lake Austin Spa Resort in Austin.

Feeling stressed? Postures that round the spine forward will calm and relax.

Breathe for health

Need a mental boost? Inhale deeply for six counts or seconds, hold for three, then exhale for six (same length for breath in and out through the nose). Smith recommends the Yoga breathing technique called "Kapalabhati," or Breath of Fire for clearing the brain

and improving focus. Take 12 rapid breaths in through the nose and then exhale with strong, quick contractions to the pelvic muscles. This is a great move to warm up inside when it's cold outside. (Don't try this if you are pregnant or have a severe ear infection).

Prep your muscles

When you're sedentary, as often happens in winter, muscles get short, tight and weak. Moving around is the best antidote, but go easy on your body early in the morning, says Smith. "Practice range of motion movements such as inhaling arms up over your head, then exhaling arms down." Make circles with shoulders, arms, legs, ankles and wrists to get fluids circulating and bring oxygen and nutrients to the joints.

Buddy up

Partner-assisted stretch with a friend or trainer can help you stretch deeper, says Shana Ominsky, Director of Spa and Wellness of Barton Creek Resort and Spa. A partner pulls slightly but firmly on wrists or arms to increase range of motion. Communication is important to avoid over-extension. "Listen to your body and do what feels good," Ominsky says.

Skip the burn

"Stretching should feel wonderful," MacInerney says. "If you feel discomfort you are most likely straining ligaments and tendons rather than stretching muscles. Think about how a cat


stretches and do the poses with the same joy and intuitive feelings. There's no need to push, grimace and grunt."

"If you stretch early in the day, especially in winter or when your body is cold, go slowly," says Smith. "For each pose do four repetitions while inhaling and exhaling and then hold the pose for four to eight breaths." Repetitions prepare joints for the longer holding pattern and a deeper stretch. Remember to breathe because holding your breath could raise blood pressure.

Stretch your mind

Because yoga helps you stay calm while becoming more alert and energized, it's a good way to transition out of the hectic pace of the holidays into something relaxing and imaginative, says MacInerney. "It can put you in a good place for creative endeavors."

Smith also recommends "Tratak," a meditative pose that helps create a contemplative, peaceful frame of mind. Look at a candle. Close your eyes, and visualize the candle enlightening your heart and giving off positive vibes.

While the social atmosphere of a yoga class or gym is a positive thing, physical activity of any kind, including what you do at home, promotes a sense of well-being. "When you stretch correctly, you'll experience pleasurable sensations throughout your body," says MacInerney. 

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