

Long COVID *and* Yoga

The Need for Radical Rest!

Words: Nadyne McKie



The ongoing effects of Long COVID have challenged individuals and healthcare systems, leaving many feeling stuck in cycles of fatigue, breathlessness, and discomfort. Yet, yoga, when approached with care and an understanding of its therapeutic potential, can provide a gentle, transformative, and profound way to support recovery.

A Case Study: When Traditional Yoga Doesn't Fit

Sophie, a 42-year-old teacher, had always found solace in yoga and practiced regularly, enjoying the physical and mental benefits. However, after developing Long COVID, she found herself trapped in a frustrating cycle. Desperate to regain strength, she returned to her usual practice, only to experience severe relapses. The effort left her utterly drained, exacerbating her symptoms instead of alleviating them.

Feeling disheartened, Sophie almost gave up on yoga entirely, but through our work together, we reshaped her understanding of yoga, shifting away from dynamic flows and towards a more restorative, breath-focused practice. By embracing radical rest, functional gentle breathing, and deep relaxation, Sophie discovered a way to support her nervous system rather than overwhelm it. Slowly but surely, she began to feel more empowered, experiencing fewer crashes and on the path to recovery.

Sophie's journey highlights an essential truth: **recovering from Long COVID requires a different approach**, one that honours the body's need for rest and recalibration rather than pushing through exhaustion.



Understanding Long COVID

Long COVID is not simply an extension of the acute illness; it is a complex, multi-system condition that can persist for months or even years after the initial infection. Common symptoms include chronic fatigue, shortness of breath, brain fog, and dysregulated autonomic function, leaving individuals trapped in cycles of overexertion followed by profound crashes. For many, the road to recovery feels unclear and frustratingly slow.

Traditional yoga practices may offer relief, but it's essential to adapt them to meet the unique needs of those with Long COVID. While yoga is often associated with challenging postures or vigorous flows, therapeutic recovery-focused yoga requires us to reframe the practice entirely. This isn't about pushing; it's about listening, softening, and allowing the body and mind the space to heal.

Drawing on insights from our book, *Breathe, Rest, Recover*, which I co-wrote with Fiona Agombar, let's explore how yoga, a return to functional breathing, and an emphasis on deep rest can help those navigating life with Long COVID.



Why Breath is Central to Recovery

Breathing is life, and for those with Long COVID, reclaiming healthy breathing can be transformative. Respiratory issues are among the most common and distressing symptoms of Long COVID, often involving breathlessness or a feeling of not getting “enough air.” While these sensations are very real and scary, they are often made worse by dysfunctional breathing patterns such as over-breathing, mouth breathing, or chest-dominant breathing, which increase the stress response in the body.

Nasal Breathing: Your Body’s Pathway to Peace

Nasal breathing is one of the simplest yet most powerful tools for recovery. Breathing through the nose filters, warms, and humidifies the air we inhale while optimising oxygen exchange. More importantly, it encourages diaphragmatic (belly) breathing, which promotes relaxation and parasympathetic nervous system activation, a crucial state for healing. Mouth breathing, by contrast, often signals stress to the body and perpetuates a fight-or-flight response.

By gently encouraging nasal breathing, we can help calm an overstimulated nervous system and bring the body back into balance.

Functional Breathing Over Pranayama

Many traditional yoga practices emphasise pranayama, or breath control, which can involve extended breath holds, alternate nostril breathing, or energising techniques like *kapalabhati*. While these practices have their place, they are often far too intense for someone recovering from Long COVID. Instead, the focus should be on gentle breathing, restoring a natural, effortless rhythm to the breath.

This means

- Breathing gently and slowly through the nose.
- Balancing the inhale and exhale.
- Allowing the diaphragm to move freely without forcing the breath.

Simple breath awareness practices, such as observing the natural flow of air or feeling the rise and fall of the belly, can be profoundly healing. These techniques ground us in the present moment while signalling safety and calm to the nervous system.

Deep Rest: The Superpower for Recovery

If there’s one thing Long COVID demands, it’s rest. But in a society that glorifies busyness and productivity, true rest is often misunderstood and undervalued. For many, especially those accustomed to “pushing through” discomfort or distraction, slowing down can feel like an immense challenge.

Why Deep Rest is Different

Rest isn’t just about lying down or taking a nap. And most importantly, it means stepping away from screens, a major challenge for many! Deep rest is a state in which the body and mind are fully supported to let go, allowing the nervous system to shift into repair mode. Practices like yoga *nidra* (guided relaxation), restorative yoga, and simple supported postures can help create the conditions for this profound rest.

The Challenge of Letting Go

For many people the hardest part is giving ourselves permission to rest. Our cultural conditioning teaches us to think of rest as laziness and to prize productivity above all else. Add to that the lingering guilt or frustration that often accompanies chronic illness, and rest can feel impossible. Yoga offers a compassionate pathway through this resistance. By framing rest as an act of self-kindness and healing, yoga helps us rewire our relationship with stillness.





Legs-Up-the-Wall Pose (10 minutes)

- Lie on your back with your legs resting up a wall or over a chair.
- Place a folded blanket under your hips for support if desired.
- Let your arms rest by your sides, palms facing up. Focus on soft, natural breathing.

Reclined Butterfly Pose (10 minutes)

- Lie on your back with the soles of your feet together and your knees falling open.
- Support your knees with cushions to prevent strain.
- Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest, noticing the gentle movement of your breath.

Savasana with Guided Relaxation (10-15 minutes)

- Lie flat on your back with props under your knees or head for comfort.
- Listen to a guided yoga *nidra* recording or simply allow your breath to settle into its natural rhythm.

Embracing the Journey

Healing from Long COVID is not a linear process. It's a journey of discovery, patience, and profound self-compassion. Yoga offers not a cure, but a toolkit, that empowers us to reconnect with our breath, embrace rest, and listen deeply to our bodies.

As you navigate this path, remember: every breath is an opportunity to begin again. Recovery takes time, but with each moment of stillness and every act of self-compassion, you are creating the conditions for your body's remarkable capacity to heal. Let yoga be your companion in this process, not as a prescription, but as an invitation to come home to yourself.

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A Sample Yoga Practice for Long COVID Recovery

The following sequence is designed to be gentle, accessible, and restorative. The goal is not to achieve a certain pose but to create a sense of ease, comfort, and support for your body and mind. Use props like bolsters, cushions, or blankets to ensure maximum comfort.

Supported Child's Pose (5-10 minutes)

- Place a bolster or stack of cushions lengthwise on the mat.
- Sit back on your heels and drape your torso over the bolster, turning your head to one side.
- Breathe softly through your nose, feeling the support beneath you.