



**Thousand Waves**  
Martial Arts & Self-Defense Center, NFP

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## Self-Care Stretches for Physical Relief and Release

**Introduction:** Everyday stress—whether mental, emotional or physical—often manifests as physical pain or tightness in our bodies. Over time, the physical symptoms can worsen or become chronic. Taking the time to care for our physical bodies can prevent or relieve this pain. Self-care can also keep us feeling strong and healthy—better able to face the stressors in our lives. The following techniques offer options for physical self-care that are easily incorporated into even the busiest of schedules.

**Seated Stretching:** *Take a break at your desk or try them out while sitting on the bus! These techniques can be done as a series or one at a time. Be sure to do exercises on both sides. Go slowly and if you feel pain at any time, discontinue. Breathe as you go; if you can't breathe comfortably, pull back from the stretch until you can.*

Sit tall in your chair, feet on the floor directly under your knees. Breathe normally.

- Flex and extend your ankles, pressing balls of feet into floor as heels rise, then press heels into floor and pull toes up to shin.
- One at a time, straighten lower leg to make it parallel to thigh. Try to stay balanced in your upper body, using your core strength.
- Engage quads (thigh muscles) one at a time.
- Tighten glutes (butt muscles) and hold, continuing to breathe, then release.
- Cross one leg over the other, ankle on top of thigh. Keeping back straight and long, slowly bend forward. Breathe as you hold the stretch. Switch legs.
- Torso twist: sit tall, keeping hips and knees pointing forward. Turn first at the lower waist, then ribs, shoulder, neck and head. Use opposite hand on outside of knee to deepen the twist.
- Roll shoulders up, back, down many times, breathing as you go. Reverse direction.
- Lift arm straight overhead, then drop forearm down behind your head. With opposite hand, gently pull on elbow to stretch shoulder.
- Rotate arms at elbows, both directions.
- Rotate wrists both directions, keeping fingers taut.
- Straighten arms to sides, making a T shape, palms forward. Relax shoulders. Gently press arms back, stretching the chest. Option: Gently raise chin to increase stretch.
- Stretch neck: keeping nose as pivot point, drop ear towards shoulder, raise chin away from opposite shoulder. Slowly turn nose toward one shoulder and back, then toward the other shoulder and back.
- Slowly nod head yes, no. Circle head gently – both directions.
- Squeeze all the muscles of the face into the point just below the nose—as if you just bit into a lemon. Stretch out your face muscles, opening mouth and eyes wide.



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**Self-Care Stretches and Releases:** *Many of us have tension in our necks and lower backs. The following techniques can loosen tight muscles in these areas. Remember to breathe comfortably as you do these techniques. If at any time you feel additional pain, discontinue. A general rule is to go slowly and hold a stretch for several breaths to deepen the impact.*

#### Releases for tight neck and shoulders

Self-massage: Make a hooking 'claw' with one hand, bending fingers and lining them up next to each other. Bring hand across your body to opposite shoulder. Find a part of the muscle that is tight and drop the 'claw' in, letting the arm hang. Use the weight of the arm to slowly release the muscle. Breathe. Move to another part of the neck, repeat. Option: slowly move head as you stretch. Switch sides.

Shoulder rolls: Gentle rolls, forwards and backwards, can bring release to many muscle groups that may tighten during stress and cold weather. Stand tall, bend knees gently, relax arms by sides, and do 10 rolls one direction slowly. Breathe as you go. Switch directions.

#### Low back care

Sitting in a chair, cross one leg over the other, ankle on top of thigh. Keeping back straight and long, slowly bend forward. Breathe as you hold the stretch. Switch legs.

Lie down on back. Bend one leg, bringing it up towards chest. Hold bent leg between thigh and shin with both hands, gently pulling leg towards chest. Switch sides. Bring both knees up, holding on with both hands, and rock gently, from head to feet and from side to side.

Put one foot on a stable chair in front of you. Slowly lean into that leg, letting it bend. Breathe as you hold stretch. Switch legs. If you don't feel the stretch/release, adjust the height of the bent leg up or down.

Get on hands and knees. You may want padding under knees. Make sure shoulders are over wrists, hips over knees. Begin inhale. Slowly lift pelvis and head, letting belly drop. At top of inhale, begin to breathe out, reversing movement so back is high and head/pelvis are dropped. Repeat. Option: come to neutral back, and turn sideways, bringing head to one hip. Return to center and go to the other side. Breathe into the movement.

Sitting comfortably cross-legged on the floor, inhale. As you exhale, gently curve your back away from hips, dropping your head, forehead towards floor. Then inhale and arch back the opposite way, pressing belly forward and letting head drop back as neck stretches. You can press hands into knees for support. Continue at the pace of your breath.

Child's pose: kneel with knees spread out wide and feet next to each other. Drop torso down towards floor, relaxing head. Hands can be palms down on floor reaching forward, or palms up by hips. Breathe deeply, letting ribs move out in all directions. Relax body and mind. Adjust as needed to make the posture comfortable.

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