

Help Your Students with RSS

Repetitive Stress Syndrome, a disabling pain and stiffness in the arms and hands, plagues office workers and yoga students alike. Learn why it happens and how to help your students alleviate the condition.

By Paul Grilley

In order to understand how RSS develops, try this experiment: Sit in a chair with a dinner plate in each hand. Holding the edge of each plate, turn your palms down and extend your arms slightly to the front. Don't fully extend your arms, but mimic a slightly exaggerated typing position. Now stare forward and don't move for five minutes. You should very soon start to feel tension in your neck and shoulders. The final touch of undesirable stress can be added by turning your palms down even more, with enough effort to cause tension in the forearms and wrists. In five minutes, this can become very unpleasant.



This is the type of physical stress an office worker—more specifically, a computer user—undergoes day after day at work. Admittedly, they're not holding plates in their hands, but they are holding their arms at this angle for hours every day. Adding to the strain is the fact that they hold this pose while doing mentally stressful tasks in a competitive environment.

In a Taoist analysis, yin is stillness and yang is movement. Yin is muscular relaxation and Yang is muscular contraction. To maintain healthy muscles, we must alternately contract and relax those muscles. To maintain healthy joints, we must move them regularly in their full range of motion and not hold them in one position for too long.

Chi and Blood Stagnation

In Chinese medicine, chi is the force that keeps us alive. It helps move blood into our tissues and move waste fluids out of them. If a person's chi is inadequate or obstructed, that flow slows or even stops. Chi stagnation makes us feel stiff, cold, or, in some instances, numb. If chi remains stagnant for too long, then the blood in the affected area will also stagnate. Chi stagnation is a vague feeling of stiffness, but blood stagnation is painful. In Chinese medicine, RSS is a blood stagnation that has been ignored for so long that muscles and nerves have begun to shrivel and stiffen.

Yin and yang, movement and stillness, contraction and relaxation must be in harmony to maintain health. Too much yin or too little yang leads to stagnation. So the first therapeutic measure is to increase yang, or movement. While you will want to teach your students specific asanas to fight RSS, remind them (and perhaps yourself) that, while at work, they should also simply drop their arms away from their keyboards and move their necks, shoulders, and arms several times a day. These movements can be as easy as stretching your arms over your head, or as difficult as pushups. What's important is that the muscles are squeezed and released, and the

joints are moved. This brings an immediate sense of relief. It is what school children instinctively do when forced to sit at their desks for too long.

Five Postures for RSS

If a student already has RSS, then frequent movement will not be enough to correct the condition. The following are five specific exercises that are useful for rehabilitation. Two are for the neck, two for the shoulders, and one for the wrists.

1. The first neck exercise depends on yang, or movement. It is designed to relax the tension at the base of the head and neck, which is a frequent result of straining and overusing the eyes. This, in turn, lessens flow of chi and blood to the arms. Ask your students to bend their heads back and shrug their shoulders. They should squeeze the muscles tightly, then release. Explain that it should almost feel as though they are massaging the base of their skulls with their own trapezius muscles.
2. The second neck exercise depends on rest, or yin. While your students are seated, have them gently drop their heads forward. They should try to relax all the muscles of the neck and feel a gentle pulling on the cervical vertebrae. This gently stretches the largest and most elastic ligament in the body. Holding this position for two or three minutes is very relaxing and encourages chi flow. With practice, students will be able to feel this ligament release. A standard asana that would accomplish a similar release is [Halasana](#), or Plow Pose. The advantage of this simpler exercise is that it requires no preparation and can be repeated several times a day with good effect.
3. The first shoulder exercise is a variation of the arm position in [Garudasana](#), or Eagle Pose. In Taoist Yoga, it is called Twisted Branches. Sit on the floor with legs straight and feet apart. Wrap the right arm or elbow under the left and grab hold of the thumb of the left hand. Lean forward and rest the right elbow on the floor or on a bolster between the legs. Relax and feel the muscles at the back of the left shoulder release. Hold for a minute or two and then change. This pose can also be done sitting in a chair with the elbow on a desk.
4. The second shoulder exercise is a variation of Reverse Namaste. In Taoist Yoga, it is called Broken Wing. Lie on your left side and bend the right arm up behind the back. The right hand is between the shoulder blades, or as close as you can manage. The palm of the hand should be turned out, away from the spine. Now slowly roll onto your back so you are lying on your right palm and forearm. There should be a strong stretch on the front of your right shoulder. Hold this pose for two or three minutes. When finished, roll back onto the left side and release the right arm. Then perform the pose on the other side. Broken Wing can also be done with both arms at the same time, if desired.
5. A nice stretch to relieve tension in the wrists and forearms is a modified form of Mayurasana, or Peacock Pose. Kneel on all fours, as in Cat Pose. Keeping your arms straight, bring your elbows together and turn your wrists so that the fingers are turned back toward your knees and the wrists are turned forward. Now very gently lower your buttocks toward your heels while maintaining some weight on your hands. This should generate a strong stretch in the wrists and forearms. Hold the pose for 30 to 60 seconds and then relax. Repeat two or three times.

I have found these poses very helpful for yoga students with RSS. However, since no two people respond to the same movements in the same way, be cautious when working with these poses. Caution and mindfulness are important to remember when teaching any yoga student, but they are particularly necessary when working with a student who is injured.

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