

A Sense toolkit



sense

connecting sight, sound and life

# Making Sense of Yoga

A resource to explore inclusive yoga for people with sensory impairments and complex disabilities.





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## Part one

# The value of yoga

Yoga is an ancient practice dating back thousands of years, with its origins rooted in India. Although there are many types of yoga practiced across the world, Hatha yoga is a term used to describe a modern form of yoga practiced in the Western world.

Hatha yoga involves a combination of asanas (physical postures) and pranayama (breathing practices), to create a link between the body and the mind.

In partnership with experienced yoga teachers, Sense deliver a range of yoga classes across the country, to people of all ages with sensory impairments and complex disabilities. This resource has been developed in collaboration with these yoga teachers, and participants who attend their classes regularly.

There are many benefits to taking part in yoga regularly, including:

- Being mindful of your body.
- Helping you to focus on being in the present moment.
- Improving your strength, balance and mobility.
- Supporting you to make new friendships and socialise.
- Creating both calming and uplifting energy.
- Making you more aware of your body and the space around you.
- Making you feel good.
- Making everyday tasks and chores (such as housework, shopping, or getting changed) more manageable.



# How to use this resource

## Yoga teacher

This resource provides some top tips for practicing yoga teachers, who wish to make their classes more inclusive for participants with sensory impairments and complex disabilities. On page 14 you can also find a list of additional information and resources to support your on-going practice and development.

## Participants, care workers, friends and family

This resource is intended as an “introduction to yoga” for people with sensory impairments and complex disabilities. It may also be useful for carers or family members, who want to support someone with a disability to become more active.

For someone who has never done yoga before, the idea of joining a class can be quite daunting. People often feel they need to be extremely fit and flexible to do yoga. This resource aims to address some of the concerns many people have about yoga, and reassure you that yoga is an activity that can be accessed by people of all ages and abilities.

This guide also describes what to expect in a typical yoga session. Different teachers will have their own individual style, so while the basic structure will be the same, all yoga sessions will be slightly different. Also included are some examples of basic postures, which, combined with breathing exercises can be practised at home.

If you feel inspired and want to find out more about our classes, visit [www.sense.org.uk/get-support/arts-sport-and-wellbeing](http://www.sense.org.uk/get-support/arts-sport-and-wellbeing).

Details of where to find a local yoga centre or teacher nearer to you can be found on page 14.

## Odyssey has benefitted a great deal from her Sense yoga sessions, as her mother describes:

“Odyssey has a history of finding new activities too challenging to undertake. She has however responded extremely well to the yoga sessions. Richard is a kind and gentle facilitator and takes his lead from her supporters. The calm atmosphere and interest from others attending, clearly reassures her. Five years ago, no one would have believed she could achieve this degree of interaction. Who knows what she might achieve in the next five?”



## What does an inclusive yoga class involve?

Most yoga classes will follow a basic structure and last about an hour. Remember that all yoga teachers have their own style of teaching, so not all classes will be exactly the same.

It is also important to remember that in yoga, you do not have to push yourself beyond what is comfortable for you. If you feel any pain or discomfort, it is important that you stop, or find a different way of doing the exercise, which works for you. A good yoga teacher will be able to help you adapt the postures to make them suitable for you.



“It is important to remember that you do not have to push yourself beyond what is comfortable for you”

## Structure of a yoga class

### 1. Introduction to participants

A yoga class will usually start with the teacher welcoming everyone. There will be some time for everyone to settle into the environment and make themselves feel comfortable. The space can be prepared with soft lighting and calming music to create a relaxing atmosphere. Some participants may decide to use blocks or straps to help with some of the movements. The yoga teacher will then explain what is going to happen in the session.

*Starting position on a mat*



*Starting position on a chair*



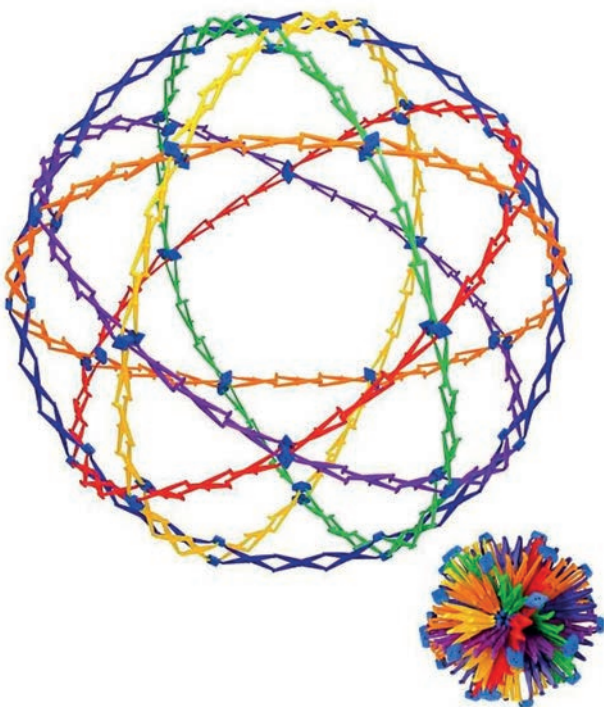
## 2. Warm up

Before starting, the teacher may take you through some breathing exercises to help you relax and feel centred before the session begins. A very simple exercise is to breathe in deeply through the nose for three seconds, and then out through the mouth for three seconds. Repeat this five times.

The breath can be a difficult concept to understand. Putting your hand on the top of your stomach can help you to understand that as we breathe in deeply, our abdomen expands. As we breathe out, it lowers again. If you are supporting someone with a breathing exercise, you could place their hand gently on your stomach, so they can feel the sensation of the abdomen rising and falling as you breathe.

You may also find it helpful to represent this concept visually using a Hoberman Sphere - a ball which you can hold which you can expand and collapse. You could hold onto the sphere with the participant, expanding it for three and collapsing it for three seconds.

*Hoberman Sphere:*



To warm up, teachers usually follow what are called “anti- rheumatic” exercises. These may sound complicated, but they are simply gentle exercises which work through the joints, including the neck, shoulders, back, hips, wrists and ankles. They can be done sitting on a mat or a chair.

You may work through a sequence of movements like the following:

- Bring one of your arms across your body with your elbow bent, using your opposite hand to guide and hold it in place.
- At the same time, turn your head to face in the direction your arm is pointing. Slowly come back to centre, repeating on the opposite side.



Hold both arms out in front of you and make a fist with both hands. Then, extend your fingers so that they point forwards.



With your legs straight out in front of you, point your toes towards the floor, creating a straight line with your legs and feet.



“ Throughout the session, yoga teachers will often ask you to check in with your breathing, and provide different techniques to help you align your breath with the movement ”



### 3. Middle of the class

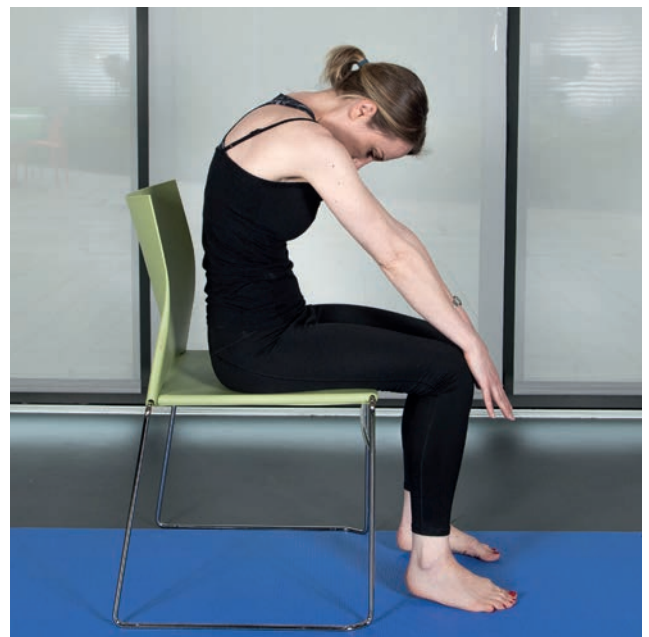
In this part of the class you will create different yoga shapes or 'poses.' These will vary depending on your teacher, but these are the most common:

- Forward bends
- Back bends
- Twists
- Lengthening
- Balance

You may work through a sequence of these movements, such as the following.

#### Example 1

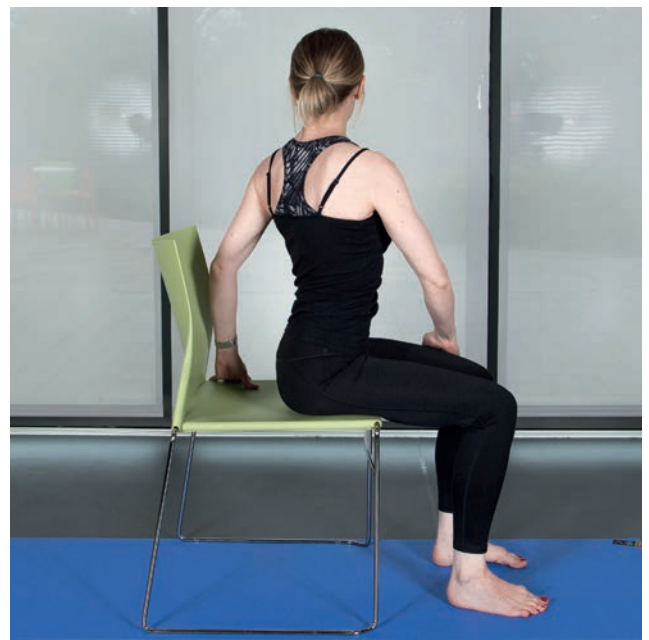
- Sit forward on your chair, sitting up straight with your feet flat on the floor and your hands resting on your knees.
- Slowly bring your hands back towards your hips as you arch your back, opening up the shoulders and lifting your head to look towards the ceiling.
- Then go the opposite way, bringing your hands past your knees as you round forward at the shoulders and bring your head to look downwards.





## Example 2

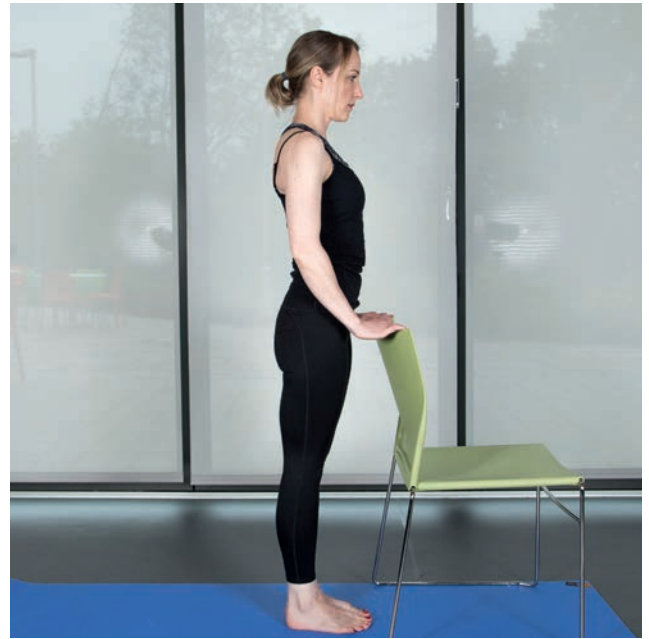
- Sit forward on your chair with your arms pointing straight up in the air and your feet flat on the floor.
- Keeping your feet on the floor, twist from the waist, using your closest arm to hold the chair for support.
- Bring your other arm across your body and rest your hand on your outer thigh.
- Slowly twist back to centre and repeat on the opposite side.



### Example 3

- Stand behind your chair, holding onto the back of the chair for support.
- With your hands still on the chair, walk your feet backwards, until your arms are straight and you are bending to create a right angle at your hips.
- Keeping it straight, slowly lift one leg up off the floor, until it is straight out behind you, creating a straight line from your toes, through your body to your fingers.
- Repeat on the opposite side.

The teacher will usually demonstrate the poses and offer adapted poses for anyone who wants to do this in a different way. These poses can usually be done seated or standing. Again, the teacher will ask you to think about your breathing as you do these poses, and will often ask you to coordinate your in and out breaths with the movements.



#### 4. Cool down

Like any activity it is important to cool down at the end. A yoga cool-down often focuses on:

**Your breathing** – focussing on your breathing helps you to quiet your thoughts and relax your body.

**Mindfulness** – being aware of your thoughts and feelings as they happen, this can help us to think clearly and create positive change.

**Relaxation** – helps us to slow down and relax our bodies after giving them a workout.

**Meditation** – helps you to quiet your thoughts and support you to be still.

“Focussing on your breathing helps you to quiet your thoughts and relax your body”



## Part two

# Useful tips for teaching an inclusive yoga class

### Before the session:

- Choose a safe and accessible venue.
- Don't make assumptions about the individuals who are attending and get to know them.
- Ask the participant and carers how the class could be adapted so that it works for them.
- Set the class up in a circle or an arc, so everybody can see each other.
- Some people find that 'objects of reference' can help them to remember and prepare for a yoga session. For example, if you use a block or strap, and the individual is shown or feels this before a session, this will help them to prepare for what is to come. Perhaps the individual might be given a block or strap to take home, so they can understand that they will be taking part in a yoga session later?
- Learning basic yoga signs can be helpful when working with deaf or hearing impaired participants. You can learn some basic signs online, by visiting [www.british-sign.co.uk](http://www.british-sign.co.uk)

“Ask the student and carers how the class could be adapted so that it works for them”

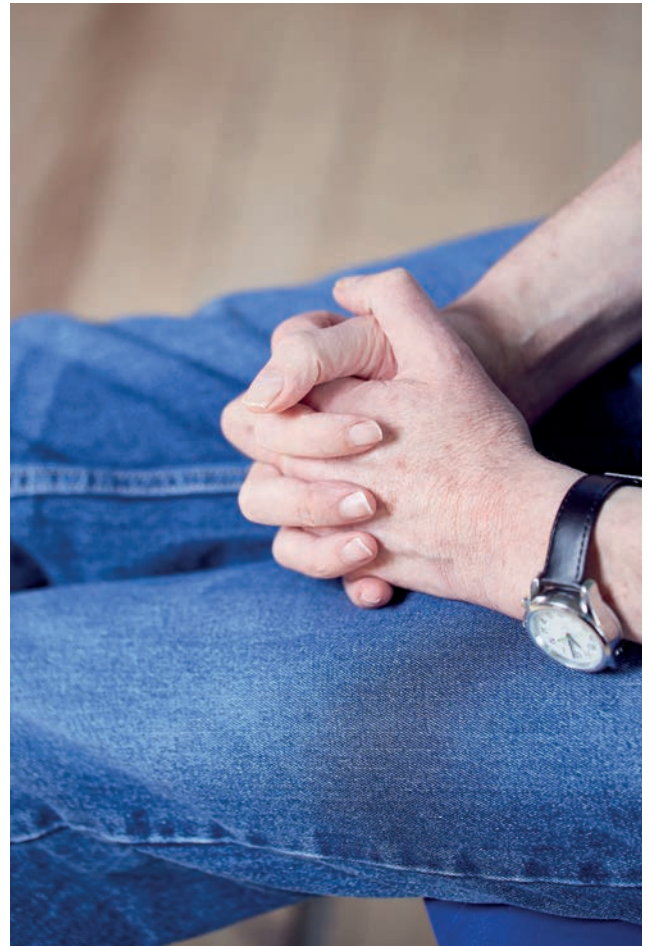


## During the session:

- Provide a clear and definitive start and end to the sessions.
- Be adaptable, and have your own “toolbox” of session plans and ideas to delve into throughout the class.
- Use clear, simple language and make sure you repeat everything.
- Summarise what is happening, and what is about to happen next, before moving onto it.
- It can be useful to start with chair based yoga, building up to standing and moving onto a mat for those who are able to.
- Make things tactile and use the wall, or props.
- The breath can be a tricky concept to communicate. Find creative ways of exploring the breath – for example, breathing loudly so others can hear, allowing someone else to feel your breath, or putting someone’s hand on your torso so they can feel your breath etc.
- Work in collaboration with their carer/support worker – they are there to support the individual to take part.
- Think about where you position yourself for those with sight and hearing impairments – for example, think about where you stand when demonstrating a pose and speaking clearly, so that people can see your face.
- Provide a consistent environment for sessions each week so that everyone feels comfortable and at ease.
- You can use touch to guide visually impaired participants where appropriate – but always ask permission each time. (Respect people’s personal space.)

## After the session

- Be reflective. Not every session will go to plan, so think about what did and didn’t work and how you might be able to adapt this next time.
- Talk to your participants and/or their support staff to find out how they found the session.



“Using body, mind and breath for improved health, relaxation and inner peace. Yoga embodies everything that we are and is accessible to everyone - irrespective of age or ability”

Richard Kravetz, Yoga teacher

# Further resources

## Further resources for teachers:

These websites will help you to offer inclusive yoga.

### Websites:

[www.specialyoga.org.uk](http://www.specialyoga.org.uk)  
<http://www.yogaforall-uk.com>

### Training:

<http://www.specialyoga.org.uk/training>

### Videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4yTI1Npkeg>

## Useful resources for participants and teachers:

These will help you to find out more about yoga, or find a local class or teacher near you.

### Websites:

[www.bwy.org.uk](http://www.bwy.org.uk)  
[www.tsyp.yoga](http://www.tsyp.yoga)

### Books:

Fraser, T. (2010) *The Easy Yoga Workbook*, London, Duncan Baird



# Frequently asked questions about yoga:

## 1. What do I need to wear?

In a yoga session you will make different shapes with your body, so it is important to wear something comfortable which you can move around easily in. There are no specific items of clothing required for yoga. You could wear a t-shirt or vest, and leggings or jogging bottoms – whatever feels most comfortable to you.

## 2. Do I have to take my shoes off?

Many people who participate in yoga choose to remove their shoes and socks, as it helps them to feel grounded to the earth beneath them - an important concept in yoga. Some people may not want to remove their shoes and socks, which is their personal choice and will be respected.

## 3. Do I need any specific equipment?

A mat will probably be provided for the session – but best to check with the teacher before your first session.

## 4. What if there's part of the class I can't do, or don't feel confident doing?

An inclusive yoga session should ensure that everyone is able to participate. Every yoga posture can be adapted in a way which suits each participant. If there are certain movements you find challenging, don't be afraid to change it slightly by holding onto a chair for balance or doing it seated. Or if you have any pain in a certain area speak to your yoga teacher, and they will help you to adapt the movements. You can always speak to them before the session if you would rather do this in private.

## 5. If I have health conditions, is yoga safe for me?

Yoga is a great way for people with health conditions to continue being healthy and active. It is important you make your yoga teacher aware of any health conditions you have, prior to beginning yoga.

## 6. Does Sense run inclusive yoga classes?

Yes, Sense runs inclusive yoga classes across the country for people with complex disabilities to attend. To find out more and get involved, visit [www.sense.org.uk/get-support/arts-sport-and-wellbeing](http://www.sense.org.uk/get-support/arts-sport-and-wellbeing) or contact us at [sense.active@sense.org.uk](mailto:sense.active@sense.org.uk)

## With thanks to:

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and

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Sense TouchBase Pears Yoga Group



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## **About Sense:**

For everyone living with complex disabilities. For everyone who is deafblind. Sense is here to offer personalised support to help people communicate and experience the world. We believe that no one, no matter how complex their disabilities, should be isolated, left out, or unable to fulfil their potential. Our experts offer support that's tailored to the individual needs of each person, whether that's at our centres, through our holidays and short breaks, or in people's own homes. In addition to practical support, we also provide information to families, and campaign for the rights of people with complex disabilities to take part in life.

**If you, or someone you know, require this information in a different format, please contact Sense Information and Advice – contact details below.**

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Registered charity number 289868



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