

Suzette O'Byrne

Phone: (403) 651-3569
Web: www.suzetteobyrne.com
E-mail: suzette@flowtraingandyoga.com

Yoga For Tight Hips - What Are You Holding?

The most popular yoga poses often focus on releasing the hips. When we trace back the source of low back and knee pain, it often shows up as a problem in the hips. What are we holding in our hips that we have such difficulty releasing? Do we help our students learn how to bring balance back into the hips and relating structures?

Ball and socket joints including the hips are the most moveable in the body. Ease of movement along and through all planes of motion allows for fluidity of movement. The complex musculature allows for stability and balance. Drawing us out of balance are repetitive movement patterns that change our posture and hip, back and knee functionality. When this happens we experience injury, tightness, lack of movement and/or holding of tension. Sometimes a simple fix of stretching the hips is all we need but more often than not, it is much more complex.

The first step in restoring hip balance is releasing the tension in the hips and surrounding tissues. Hip releasers require the spine and pelvis to be in neutral and the legs to be supported to release the fascia, connective tissue and muscles and focus the release into the hips versus the low back. Breath focus and awareness assist to help direct release. Common hip releasers include the restorative rest position, legs up the wall and supported butterfly. In restorative rest, thighs rest over a bolster, low roll or on a chair. Breath focus is on the low back and specifically into the psoas area. In legs up the wall, the legs are resting against a wall or door. Breath focus is in the pelvis and specifically laterally. In supportive butterfly pose, the feet are together and knees are bent in a diamond shape with support under the knees or outer thighs. Breath focus is into the center of the pelvis. By releasing in one of these poses for a minimum of five minutes or until a heaviness is felt in the hips and pelvis we set the ground work for releasing tension and providing stability.

Our next step is to connect to movement and limitations within the hip and providing fluidity of movement. Figure 8 leg swings is a great example of a hip fluidity exercise. Stand on one leg with a yoga block 1 foot in front of your lifted leg and another yoga block 1 foot behind your lifted leg. Move your lifted leg across your body and around the block and then back and around the other block in a figure 8 motion. Allow the pelvis to move around the standing thigh bone (lean forward and back) as you move through full range of motion with the lifted leg. Avoid areas that increase pain and allow the movement to be fluid and exploratory. Hip fluidity movements create an increase in range of motion, stability and awareness in the hip while decreasing tightness.

Once we create awareness and fluidity we can focus on creating or deepening hip stability. Often this comes from creating activation from the feet, up through the inner thigh and to the outer hip stabilizers. By pressing down into the base of the big toe, little toe, inner heel and outer heel and drawing up through the center of the foot, we create a "lift" that can be felt up into the shin, inner thigh/hamstrings and pelvic floor increasing hip stability. When this activation is coupled with a hip lift, students learn to lift into the stabilizers in the hips and release their reliance on the deep external rotators and gluteus maximus to hold themselves up (buttocks clenching). The hip lift movement can be achieved by standing on a yoga block or sideways on a stair. Keeping the knee straight, lift the pelvis to neutral and then drop down so the pelvis is on a lateral angle. This strengthens the hip abductors and lengthens posture from the pelvis. By combining this hip lift with the arch lift, we feel the activation up the whole leg and wrapping around at the hips to the low back. The psoas, gluteus maximus and piriformis release their grip on the pelvis, low back and thigh and we stand tall and balanced. Tie it together with balance moves that allow students to feel lift in their hips and reinforce posture from the feet to the low back.

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From stability, finish with lengthening with awareness of connections. Start by choosing either poses where the body is stabilizing and lengthening or the body is softening into the ground or support. Standing yoga poses, such as triangle or warrior II, create length and stability as the muscles hold the body off the ground and from moving too deep. Laying or seated hip stretches such as pigeon pose or cow face pose allow a deepening with breath as the muscles soften into its support. By adding a twist or reach with the upper body and arm open the hips from the top down. Ask your students to explore where the upper body needs to be to open the hips and they will find connections between them. Ensure you choose poses appropriate for the needs identified through the prior poses.

Understanding that the hips hold tension, emotion, compensations and are easily pulled out of balance is important in identifying causes of pain and tightness. By releasing, creating fluidity of motion, stability and finally, lengthening with awareness of connections we can help our clients re-establish ease and function to their hips and let go of what is not needed.

bio: Suzette O'Byrne, is a yoga therapist, personal trainer, presenter and author living in Calgary, Alberta. A faculty member with Mount Royal University's Yoga Therapy Program, Master Trainer with Keiser Corporation and Senior Trainer with TRX, she can be reached through www.suzetteobyrne.com.

Namaste,

Suzette O'Byrne

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Heavens Elevated Fitness - Offsite Program Director - The Glencoe Club

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