

UP TIGHT? Try stretching.

Mimi Solaire

Stretching not only relaxes the body but also has a calming effect on the mind and emotions. Among the benefits of stretching include: mental and physical relaxation, body awareness, reduction of muscular tension and soreness, production of chemicals to lubricate connective tissues and joints which helps to reduce injury to joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons and enhanced physical fitness.

There are three important things to understand before incorporating a stretching routine into your fitness program.

1. ***Stretching should never be painful!*** Many people resist stretching because of previous experiences which resulted in soreness or even injury. To stretch safely and efficiently go slowly and be gentle. Imagine that the tight areas of your body are similar to an onion with layers upon layers of tension. Try relaxing the outer most layer first by gently stretching that area just enough to feel a mild sensation or resistance. Direct your breath into that area until you feel a release as the muscle relaxes. Then go deeper into the stretch as if peeling away another layer of tension. Be sure to hold the stretch long enough to experience the release- about 3- 5 minutes.
2. ***Muscles can only do two things- relax or contract.*** They can't stretch! The muscles you are feeling when stretching are not the muscles that are stretching- they are the muscles that are resisting. Most often we are not aware of our chronically tight muscles to which we are accustomed. Most of the exercises and activities we choose for sport or fitness contract the muscles for strength. However a chronically contracted muscle eventually becomes a weak muscle because it constricts the flow of blood, nutrients and energy which the muscle needs to function.
The sensation we call stretching is experienced when a contracted muscle releases. Deep relaxation allows the muscles to return their natural relaxed state. A relaxed body sends messages to the mind and emotions that "all is well" for an overall sense of well being.
3. ***Set realistic goals!*** Our capacity for stretching is largely determined by our genes which determine the amount of collagen in our bodies. Women have more collagen than men and therefore are generally more flexible. However the greater limiting factor is stress. Stress produces the chemical cortisol which contracts muscles and tissues. An excess of this chemical is primarily responsible for the feeling of ***up- tightness***. Stretching helps to release this chemical from the body with determination of mind's intention to relax. The goal of stretching is to reclaim your body's unique capacity of flexibility- to feel comfortable inside your body so that you can enjoy the things you love to do!