

On a Roll

Too busy for a massage? Grab some props and try these do-it-yourself tips from expert bodyworkers.

By Karen J. Ohlson

You're caught in the grinding maw of a stressful day and your neck and shoulders have morphed into a tight mass of tension. As your demanding boss or cranky child drones on and on, complaining, you find yourself drifting into your favorite fantasy. The one where you have an on-call bodyworker who's attractive, attentive, and available day or night, strong fingers kneading just the right spots to melt that aching tightness away ... A piercing yell from your boss or child yanks you back to reality, and you sigh as the fantasy fades.

As it happens, that dream isn't completely out of reach. When you don't have time or money for a massage or when your yoga practice doesn't penetrate certain tight knots, you can pick up a few props and follow these tips from expert bodyworkers. Here's what you need to know.

HEALING HEADACHES

If pounding headaches visit you all too often, it's time to learn how to tap into your craniosacral still point, a momentary cessation of the pulse of your cerebrospinal fluid that dissipates tension and pain. "It's great for headaches," says Ann Honigman, a chiropractor and craniosacral therapist in Berkeley, California. "It really helps you quiet the nervous system." The pros do this for clients with their hands, but you can do it for yourself by lying on an easy-to-make still point inducer.



WHAT YOU NEED Two tennis balls and a sock (stuff the balls in the sock and tie a knot at one end to hold them in place side by side), or a latex still point inducer (\$15 from the Upledger Institute, at www.upledger.com or 800-233-5880).

WHAT TO DO Lie on your back on a comfortable surface with a pillow under your knees. Place the tennis balls or the inducer under your head, at the base of your skull (in line with the bottom of your ears, as viewed from the side). Rest your head on the inducer, close your eyes, and lie quietly for 10 to 20 minutes. When you're done, lift your head with one hand and slide the prop away with the other.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR Don't use the inducer if you're allergic to latex.

RELEASING A TIGHT BACK

Massage your own back? It may sound like a job for an acrobat, but it's much simpler than you'd think. A couple of easy-to-find props can help you open your chest, release tension in your spine, and even work those tight back muscles exactly where they ache.

WHAT YOU NEED A standard three-foot-long, six-inch-diameter foam roller like the one pictured on the front page (\$25.95 from www.optp.com) or one of those swimming pool foam "noodles" (\$1.49 at Toys R Us)



rolled in a towel or folded sheet. For a deeper massage, you'll also need two tennis balls or racquetballs tied in a sock (see "Healing Headaches,") or a red Yamuna ball (\$19.50 from www.yamunabodyrolling.com).

WHAT TO DO

CHEST OPENING Lie on the roller with your knees bent and your feet on the floor, so the roller extends along your spine from your sitting bones to the top of your head. You can either relax on the roller without moving (which opens your chest laterally) or roll gently from side to side to massage the muscles along your spine. Try it for at least 20 seconds or until your chest begins to relax and open.

SPINAL RELEASE Position the foam roller horizontally under your shoulder blades, again lying on your back with your knees bent, this time with your hands gently supporting your head and neck-and roll your back (without arching it) up and down over the roller for at least 20 seconds or until you feel your muscles relax.

"This technique helps mobilize your spine, pinpointing stiff areas and releasing them," says Caroline Creager, a Colorado physical therapist and the author of *Therapeutic Exercises Using Foam Rollers* (Executive Physical Therapy, 1997).

DEEPER MASSAGE Lie on your tennis- balls-and-sock device, knees bent, with one ball on either side of your spine. With your butt off the ground (lower back straight, not arched) and head and neck supported in your hands, roll over the device to massage up and down your spine. When you find a sore spot, roll over it until you feel the muscle soften and release.

When you're really in a rush, grab some racquetballs and get a massage in your car. "You can put them between your back and the seat, and the motion of the car does the massage for you," says Sharon Kelly, a New York City exercise physiologist and massage therapist. (She prefers racquetballs to tennis balls because of their smaller size and greater give.)

For more about self-massage, check out the Yamuna Body Rolling system website (www.yamunabodyrolling.com). You'll find specially designed balls and massage sequences that go from the beginning to the endpoint of each muscle-so muscle-gripped areas like your spine can get as long as possible.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR Backs can be tricky, so don't use these techniques if you have an acute injury or symptoms that call for professional care (see "When to Go to a Pro," end of article). Also, don't roll your sacrum, the triangular bone at the base of your spine, over balls if it's unstable or the ligaments are loose. "Too much pressure can disrupt the joints between your sacrum and your pelvis," cautions Art Riggs, a certified rolfer in Oakland, California, and the creator of the seven-volume video series *Deep Tissue Massage and Myofascial Release* (\$230 from www.deeptissuemassagemanual.com).

SOOTHING SORE FEET

You pound along on your feet day after day, rarely giving a thought to all the force they absorb on your behalf. Next time they start to complain, treat them to a session with one of these simple props.

WHAT YOU NEED Golf balls or (thick) empty glass soda bottles chilled in the freezer, or Yamuna Foot Wakers (\$30 a pair from www.yamunabodyrolling.com).

WHAT TO DO Sit on the edge of a chair and place a golf ball or bottle under your foot. Roll the sole of your foot over the prop, pressing into the tight spots. Continue for three or four minutes and repeat several times a day. If a spot is too sore to massage directly, work around or in front of it. For deeper stimulation, try Yamuna Foot Wakers, nubby, sea-urchin-like domes you stand and rock gently on to massage and stretch the soles of your feet.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR If you're using glass bottles, be careful to avoid breaking them. And don't stand on the balls or bottles, you might fall and end up with more than sore feet!



Easing Overall Aches and Pains Sometimes all you need to do is put a little pressure right where it hurts. But you might also want to try the indirect approach of acupressure, which unblocks energy at one place in your body to relieve pain elsewhere. Pressing a spot on your hand, for instance, can ease pain in your head.

In fact, the Hoku point (also known as LI 4), deep in the webbing between your thumb and index finger, is a great overall pain reliever, says Michael Reed Gach, the founder of the Acupressure Institute in Berkeley, California. And unlike pain medications, the Hoku point is always there when you need it-free of charge.

WHAT YOU NEED Your fingers. If you want to explore other acupressure points, pick up a book such as Gach's *Acupressure's Potent Points: A Guide to Self-Care for Common Ailments* (Bantam Books, 1990, available from www.stressreliefproducts.com) or Matthew D. Bauer's *Healing Power of Acupressure and Acupuncture* (Penguin Group, 2005).

WHAT TO DO With the thumb and fingers of one hand, grasp the V-shaped webbing between the thumb and index finger of your other hand. (It's the grasping thumb that goes on the back side of the other hand.) Use the grasping thumb to press close to the bone that attaches to the index finger, angling underneath the bone, to find the place that's most sensitive.

Now apply firm pressure to that spot for at least one minute, and move the area that hurts (your sore neck, for instance) to send it a pain relief message. Repeat on the other side.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR Stay away from the Hoku point if you're pregnant, since it can bring on uterine contractions.

WHEN TO GO TO A PRO

Some aches and pains, especially in your back, may signal problems more serious than can be treated with self-massage. The following red flags, suggested by yoga therapist Leslie Kaminoff (founder of the Breathing Project in New York City) and Oakland physician's assistant Laura Turiano, are signs that it's time to see a medical professional.

- Tingling, numbness, or loss of sensation
- Pain that radiates down an arm or a leg
- Persistent joint pain
- Pain that starts in a joint
- Bowel or bladder incontinence
- Pain that doesn't improve with rest
- Back pain that isn't relieved by lying down or changing position
- Any pain that persists for a week or more
- (or doesn't improve more than two days after an injury, despite rest and cold packs)

Of course, you can visit a bodywork professional anytime, whether you suffer from these symptoms or not. These pros offer more than just a well-trained pair of hands to reach places you can't. They can help you figure out where your pain or tension is coming from and what to do on your own. So don't let your newfound self-care savvy rule out the occasional, or even regular, visit to an expert.

Before you know it, between self-care and professional care, your 24-hour bodywork fantasy will become a reality.

Karen J. Ohlson is a writer and longtime yoga student in Oakland, California, who loved testing the techniques in this article.

