

# ACE FIT LIFE

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## How to Get More Out of Your Yoga Practice

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There's always room to grow and enhance your yoga practice, whether you're new to yoga or someone who has been practicing for decades. Discover how to get more out of your time spent on the mat with these tips from top yoga teachers, and find out how doing so can help to enhance your life outside of the yoga studio.

### **Come As You Are**

As each day changes, so do our moods, energy levels, emotions and physical capabilities. That's why each time we step onto our mats, we must commit to simply coming as we are, says yoga teacher and director of [Well Equipped](#) Jane Bahneman, M.S., E-RYT 500. "Yoga is not only about practicing when you feel wonderful and up to it, but it is about arriving even when you feel less than stellar."

To make the most out of your next yoga class, take 60 seconds or less at the start of class to check-in with yourself—physically, mentally and emotionally—and just accept your current state. Bahneman recommends revisiting how you feel at the end of class as well and using this "check-in" technique off the mat to help stay calm and collected in everyday life.

### **Make Your Inner Challenge Your Intention**

We all have strength and weaknesses, many of which we discover on our mats, shares [Elizabeth Kovar](#), M.A., a mind-body movement specialist in Seattle, Wash. “Whether it’s balance, strength, flexibility, mental concentration or rhythm of breath, find your area that needs improvement and set an intention at the beginning of class to focus on. Use this as the base of your practice with expectations of small improvements each class. Small, 1-percent improvements on intentions lead to some of the biggest changes.”

### **Let Your Breath Lead**

In the words of wellness expert and yoga teacher [Stacy McCarthy](#), B.S., E-RYT 500, “Yoga without the breath is like surfing without the waves.” While many people commonly believe that yoga is all about the physical postures, poses take a back seat to the breath, says [Rob Glick](#), B.S., international fitness educator and yoga teacher at Yoga Works and Corepower Yoga. “Think of your breath as a dance partner and let it lead,” adds Glick, as doing so will help you gain more awareness within each pose. “If you follow Oprah’s advice and ‘listen to your inner GPS,’ you’ll have a safe, exciting yoga practice that will last you a lifetime.”



### **Allow Each Pose to Serve as a Metaphor For life**

From balancing postures to heart openers, try to think of each pose as a metaphor for your life, says [Lawrence Biscontini](#), M.A., award-winning international fitness instructor and mindful movement specialist. “When balancing in tree pose, for example, think about the shaky aspects of your life and how learning balance can help to make you stronger outside of the yoga studio. When you do this, you learn that it’s not about yoga on the mat that matters, but rather the yoga you practice off of the mat that really improves the overall quality of your life.”

## Never Stop Exploring

It can be easy to get caught up in working toward mastering more advanced poses that put our physical strength and flexibility to the test. But in doing so, we forget about some of the most important aspects of practicing yoga—like the breath and mind-body connection—that we would more likely experience if we opted to regress a pose and experience a familiar asana in an entirely new way. “Challenge yourself to try and connect to something new in an ‘old’ or basic pose,” shares Bahneman, who suggests using this approach when trying more intricate postures as well. “Stopping to notice the fine details helps us to refine the big picture we are ultimately creating, so take the time to deconstruct, explore and discover.”

## Always Honor Yourself

Our individual yoga practices are always evolving, and it’s important that we listen first and foremost to the true teacher in the room: ourselves. “Our wants and needs for a practice change all the time, even within one class,” explains Glick. “For example, you may need a more restorative practice one day, but feel self-conscious to take breaks. Or, you may have tons of energy and want to crank out chaturanga push-ups all class long and that’s fine too. All that matters is that you’re being honest with yourself and listening to your inner voice to honor yourself every practice.”



**By Jessica Matthews, MS, E-RYT**

Jessica Matthews, M.S., E-RYT is assistant professor of exercise science at Miramar College. As a leading fitness expert, writer and educator Jessica is a regular contributor to numerous publications, including Shape and Oprah.com. She holds a B.S. in physical education teacher education from Coastal Carolina University and M.S. in physical education from Canisius College. She is a certified Personal Trainer, Group Fitness Instructor and Health Coach through the American Council on Exercise (ACE) as well as an Experienced Registered Yoga Teacher (E-RYT) through Yoga Alliance and trained stand-up paddleboard (SUP) yoga instructor. Prior to teaching at Miramar, Jessica worked full-time ACE, serving in a number of key roles including exercise physiologist, certification director and senior health and fitness editor. Her past work also includes serving as aquatics director at Conway Medical Wellness and Fitness Center and designing health and physical education curriculum for grades K-12.