An Introduction to YOGA NIDRA for those with ME/CFS and Long COVID

Yoga teacher Rebecca Allen, who has been teaching people with ME since 2010, gives an overview of the practice of Yoga Nidra and its potential and widely experienced benefits for people with ME/CFS and more recently, Long COVID.

Some of you may already be familiar with Yoga Nidra, a guided relaxation practice originally developed by Swami Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga. Often described as “yogic sleep”, it is a structured practice of deep relaxation which is now widely used to support deep rest and nervous system regulation.

To practise Yoga Nidra, very little effort is required. We do not even have to "try to relax" (which can in itself be stressful). Instead, we are invited to find the most comfortable and supportive position to rest in, and listen to the guidance, following it in the mind. Yoga Nidra can be done in a group class led by a trained teacher (in person or online), or at home using a recording. No movement is required and when done at home, it can even be done in bed. It is a widely accessible practice that can support rest and wellbeing, whether someone is well, unwell, or living with limited energy or mobility.

Many of the beneficial effects of Yoga Nidra are particularly relevant for people with ME/CFS and Long COVID

In the 1980s, researchers at the University Clinic in Cologne, Germany used EEG to look at brain activity during different relaxation practices. Their findings suggested that Yoga Nidra was linked with patterns associated with deep relaxation, along with changes in brainwave activity and a greater sense of coordination between different areas of the brain (1). Around the same time, Dr Hans Lou and Dr Troels Kjær in Copenhagen used PET scanning alongside EEG to explore these states further (2).

Deep relaxation, as opposed to simply resting passively, can support beneficial physiological changes in the body. These may include helping to regulate the nervous system, encouraging more efficient breathing, and contributing to a greater sense of overall physiological balance (3).

Since then, interest in Yoga Nidra has continued to grow, and more studies have explored what may be happening in the brain and body during practice (4). This research suggests that Yoga Nidra is associated with brainwave patterns linked to deep rest and a quieter, more inwardly focused state of awareness, often including slower rhythms such as theta activity.

While the research is still developing and studies are relatively small, the findings so far point in a generally consistent direction. Yoga Nidra has also been explored in relation to sleep, stress and wellbeing, with many studies suggesting it may be helpful, particularly in supporting relaxation and better sleep.

Alongside this scientific work, many years of practice and the experience of teachers and practitioners continue to point towards benefits that are felt deeply in everyday life, even if they are not yet fully captured in research.

In her book *Beat Fatigue with Yoga*, Fiona Agombar describes improvements in her own nervous system regulation, measured through heart rate variability, following deep relaxation and meditation practices (4). As a structured form of deep relaxation, regular practice of Yoga Nidra can help people access these benefits more reliably and with greater ease over time.

For people living with fatigue, Yoga Nidra can often feel both refreshing and settling, whilst also calming mental activity. This can be particularly helpful for those with ME/CFS who may experience both physical exhaustion and mental overstimulation or “brain fog”.

Yoga Nidra offers a structured way to rest without effort. It may help calm the nervous system, reduce overstimulation, and support better quality sleep over time.

While it does not replace sleep, it can feel deeply restorative and provide a form of intentional and constructive rest, especially on days when sleep has not been sufficient.

In the book *Yoga Nidra*, it is suggested that "one hour of Yoga Nidra is equivalent to four hours of normal sleep" (6). This is best understood as a traditional or anecdotal way of expressing how deeply restorative the practice can feel, rather than a scientifically established measure. Many practitioners do report a level of rest that feels comparable to several hours of sleep. Research does suggest that Yoga Nidra and similar practices may support people with insomnia by helping the body shift out of a heightened stress state into a more restful mode, reducing mental and physical arousal and supporting improved sleep over time.

For those experiencing insomnia alongside fatigue, Yoga Nidra offers a way to rest deeply during the night when awake, or when finding it difficult to fall asleep.

Further benefits may include a reduction in the experience of pain for some people, partly through the release of physical and psychological tension. In addition, the "pairs of opposites" stage of the practice may support a more balanced nervous system response to sensory experience, potentially influencing how pain is perceived.

During Yoga Nidra, brainwave patterns tend to slow and become more synchronised across different regions of the brain. This increased coordination is associated with states of relaxed awareness, where the mind is quiet but not asleep. In this state, people often find it easier to sense the body from within and experience a greater feeling of internal steadiness.

Yoga Nidra is more than just a relaxation technique. In addition to physical relaxation, the practice can develop the ability to "witness" one's experience with a little more distance and clarity. This may support better pacing, self-awareness, and decision-making, which can be particularly valuable for those managing fluctuating energy levels.

How does it feel, this "state of Yoga Nidra"?

Experiences vary. Many people report a sense of deep rest, ease, or quiet awareness. It can feel similar to the edge of sleep, where the body is very relaxed but the mind is still gently aware.

From experience of teaching Yoga Nidra over many years, many people notice some benefit from the beginning, although this is not the case for everyone. Some people may fall asleep, feel restless, or find it difficult to settle at first. All of these responses are normal. Even sleeping during the practice can be helpful if rest is needed. If restlessness arises, practising at home with the option to adjust position may feel more comfortable than in person in a group.

Yoga Nidra can be translated as "yogic sleep" or "sleeping with one-pointed awareness". Rather than being fully asleep, we are guided to rest on the borderline between waking and sleeping, supported by continuous guidance.

During the practice, brain activity may shift from more active, thinking states into slower, more relaxed patterns often associated with dreaming and deep rest. At times, there can be a sense of drifting between sleep and awareness, with moments of clarity within deep relaxation. This is quite different from everyday mental activity, which can often feel busy or effortful.

The different stages in a Yoga Nidra – a systematic progression into deep relaxation

A Yoga Nidra session may include several stages, such as settling, resolve or intention setting (sankalpa), the rotation of awareness around the body, breath awareness, pairs of opposites (imagining feeling heavy and light, cold and hot etc), and visualisation (for which you do not have to be a visualiser – simply bringing things to mind or having a mental sense of them is enough).

In this article, we focus on two of these possible stages in a little more detail: the Rotation of Awareness and the "Resolve".

Rotation of Awareness

This is a fundamental element of Yoga Nidra. It stems from the ancient Tantric practice called "Nyasa" in which long mantras (phrases) were placed mentally on parts of the body in a particular order.

In a Yoga Nidra we are simply being guided to gently move attention around different parts of the body in a particular order. We are invited to become aware of them and to repeat their name mentally - which helps keep us awake and aware. This movement of awareness helps engage the brain's map of the body and supports a gradual release of tension. This can encourage the nervous system to settle and contribute to what is often called the relaxation response.

The "motor homunculus" (see picture below), illustrates how different parts of the body are represented in the brain, with more sensitive areas such as the hands and face taking up more space. The rotation of awareness broadly follows this map, helping to reconnect awareness with the body in a systematic way.



Resolve (Sankalpa)

In the deeply relaxed state of Yoga Nidra time is often allowed at the beginning and at the end of the Yoga Nidra to introduce and use a "Resolve". This is a short phrase about a simple, positive change or

development you intend to bring about in your life. This is not about forcing change, but about finding and gently planting a direction for healing or support.

In the quieter state of awareness which we find during the practice of Yoga Nidra, we may feel a little closer to our deeper needs and responses. This can sometimes make it easier to recognise what might be helpful, whether practically or emotionally, and to begin to support that change in a gentle way.

Conclusion

If possible, it can be helpful to learn Yoga Nidra with a trained teacher, particularly at the beginning. However, it is also entirely possible to practise at home using a suitable recording made by a qualified teacher. It is best to start with a short practice for a beginner and build up to the complete practice gradually.

If you have history of trauma or are living with serious mental health issues it is best to discuss doing Yoga Nidra with your medical practitioner and discuss this with the yoga teacher to make sure the practice is the best type for you.

Yoga Nidra can be practised daily, weekly or as often as feels comfortable. Some people benefit from regular short sessions, while others prefer occasional longer practices.

Above all, the practice offers a simple opportunity to rest. That in itself can be valuable.

Yoga Nidra is usually included in the Sheffield Yoga for ME/CFS and Long COVID online classes taught on Friday Mornings. Recordings of these are also made available to attendees to use at home in their own time.

Footnotes

(1) https://www.yogameditation.com/reading-room/the-relaxed-state-and-science/see paragraph headed "The original Yoga Nidra compared to relaxation based on suggestion".

(2) https://www.yogameditation.com/reading-room/pictures-of-the-brains-activity-during-yoga-nidra/ also reproduced in Yoga Nidra by Swami Satyananda Saraswati ISBN 81-85787-12-3 page

(3) https://www.yogameditation.com/reading-room/the-relaxed-state-and-science/
see paragraph headed "The immune system is balanced"

(4) https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2025.06.16.25329676v2.full?utm_source=chatgpt.com

(5) " Beat Fatigue with Yoga", by Fiona Agombar, Chapter 9, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, What causes CFS?, page151

(6) Yoga Nidra Swami Satyananda Saraswati ISBN 81-85787-12-3 p14

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