

LIFE & STYLE

Blocks and Straps: Not Just for Yoga Beginners

How Basic Props Can Help Even Veterans Deepen Their Stretches and Maintain Alignment

By RACHEL BACHMAN

Many who practice yoga see the foam blocks and straps used in classes as crutches that they discard once they achieve a measure of proficiency. But those props also can help intermediate and advanced practitioners deepen their stretches, maintain proper alignment and challenge themselves, yoga instructors say.

The best function of blocks and straps lies in helping people fit a pose to their body “like a fine, tailored suit,” says Bethany Lyons, founder of Lyons Den Power Yoga in New York City. People often are less flexible on one side of their body than the other, for instance.

Some yoga practices use props more often than others, but the tools are available for use without charge in most classes. Ms. Lyons (pictured) and Robin Armstrong, an instructor based in Vancouver, British Columbia, discuss several ways to benefit from props:



The straps and foam blocks used in yoga classes are viewed by many as training wheels. But they can help even veterans get more out of their poses. Photo: Danny Ghitis for The Wall Street Journal

The Triangle Test



Standing triangle pose DANNY GHITIS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Ms. Armstrong says when she teaches anatomy to yoga instructors, she pairs them up with someone of similar height. She has each pair compare the lengths of their legs, arms and torsos to illustrate the wide variability in bodies and illustrate the need for accommodation.

For instance, a person in **standing triangle pose** plants feet about 3 feet apart and holds out arms parallel to the floor, then tilts sideways toward the front foot until the arms are perpendicular to the floor. Someone with long legs and a short torso might be better off reaching down to touch a block, rather than straining to go all the way to the floor. “Then they can keep their form instead of trying to get those extra 2 inches,” Ms. Armstrong says.

Extend Your Pigeon



Half-pigeon pose DANNY GHITIS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A popular hip-opening stretch is **half-pigeon**, in which you start on all fours and slide one knee toward the same-side wrist so the thigh is parallel to the mat, with the hips squared forward. The other leg slides straight back and the upper body folds forward.

Even people who practice yoga regularly can struggle to do this pose comfortably, Ms. Lyons says. So she recommends using three blocks: one under the rear end of the bent leg, another under the thigh of the straight leg and a third under the forehead. The blocks allow someone to go deeper into the pose and stay in it longer.

Get a Leg Up



From left to right, dancer's pose, forearm stand and hero pose. DANNY GHITIS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Ms. Lyons, a former ballet dancer, has ample flexibility to perform **dancer's pose**. The position is typically done with a person balancing on one leg, bending the other knee behind and holding the foot of the bent leg while stretching the opposite hand forward.

But Ms. Lyons says using a strap helps her keep her hips squared to the front of the mat rather than opening to the side. She loops a strap under the foot of her bent-knee leg, kicks out and holds the strap behind her with both hands, her elbows above her ears.

Locked in Upside-Down

In **forearm stand**, Ms. Lyons cinches a strap around her upper arms to keep her forearms parallel on the mat as she raises her legs straight above her head. The strap keeps her elbows from splaying out.

Ms. Lyons recommends a yoga strap with a cinch buckle so the strap can be looped and cinched in place. (For other poses, she recommends firm foam blocks in the standard size—4 inches by 6 inches by 9 inches.)

We Can Be Heroes

A block can help even simple poses, Ms. Lyons says. She begins each practice with meditation while in **hero pose**, where she sits on her knees. A block under her rear end eliminates knee strain.

“The block takes away pain and keeps me from fidgeting,” she says.

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