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## "I Can Finally Touch My Toes Again!"

When Brittany Brown, 27, went from being an amateur dancer to working a desk job, her flexibility disappeared. FITNESS helped her get her stretch back.

### My Goal

You wouldn't know it now, but I was captain of the dance squad for my college basketball team. I did splits and other Gumby moves practically every day; think *Glee* without the singing. Going to graduate school ended all that, and now the long hours I work at an advertising firm in Manhattan mean I'm lucky if I make it to Spinning twice a week. When my boyfriend and occasional



*That's me on the left when I could kick my leg as high as my head.*

workout buddy noticed that I couldn't even lift my leg up onto the handlebar of the bike to stretch after class, I was truly mortified. I'd always joked that my legs were permanently stuck in desk-chair position, and here was proof of just how tightened up I'd become. I literally needed to unwind—and fast. Thankfully, FITNESS offered to assist.

### My Moment of Success

As they say, the first step is admitting you have a problem, right? After an initial flexibility assessment with the FITNESS pro found that my hamstrings, hips and back all lacked the range of motion a woman my age should have, I got to work doing stretching exercises and regular yoga.

One month later I can place my palms on the floor when I bend over rather than grasping my shins, as I did at the testing session.

I haven't attempted a split yet, but my boyfriend is impressed that I can easily hoist my leg onto that handlebar!

*Turn the page to see how Brittany did it.*



## What Worked for Me

### Inch toward your goal.

My yoga instructor, Karen, taught me to use these props as training wheels until I could do poses on my own.

**BLOCK** Set hands on the block when they can't quite make it to the floor in poses like forward fold: Start with the block where it's comfortable, either on its end, on its side or with its widest side flat on the floor.

**STRAP** Sit on the floor with legs extended in front of you, then wrap the strap around soles to pull toes toward you to stretch calves and hamstrings.

### Do periodic spot checks.

When I met my physical therapist, Marty, we did the following exercises to determine the flexibility—or lack thereof—in my legs, hips and back. I still do these drills to keep tabs on my progress.

- Lying faceup on floor, lift left leg toward ceiling, keeping both legs perfectly straight. (The goal is to reach a 90-degree angle without bending either knee.) Repeat with right leg.
- Stand facing a table, right palm flat on top. Bend left knee behind you and grab ankle with left hand. Hinge forward at hips and squat slightly on right leg as you pull left heel to touch butt (or come as close as possible).
- Stand tall and bend forward at hips with back flat. (You should be able to grab your ankles.)

For more drills, go to [fitnessmagazine.com/flex](http://fitnessmagazine.com/flex).

### Om at home.

My aim was to do two or three full yoga workouts a week. In my one-on-one sessions with Karen, I learned to ace the basic poses and test my hamstrings' limits. When I was time-crunched or intimidated by all the bendy women at the studio, I practiced with a *Shiva Rea Flow Yoga for Beginners* DVD (\$15, [acacialifestyle.com](http://acacialifestyle.com)).



### Add more flex time.

I was used to holding a stretch for 10 seconds tops until Marty suggested relaxing into the pose for 30 seconds the first week and adding another 30 seconds to each stretch every week until I reached two minutes. I do my stretches as I watch the news so I won't skimp on holding still for the required time or simply flop onto the couch.

### Rise and pose.

*At night I put my yoga mat on the floor next to my bed so I can get up in the morning right onto the mat for five sun salutations. I not only get a good stretch, but it also puts me in a good mind-set for my day at work.*

### Try these hamstring helpers.

Marty and Karen recommended these three stretches to loosen up my tight hamstrings. I did them four times a week along with regular yoga.



**DOWNWARD DOG** Start on mat in full push-up position with hands directly under shoulders. Slowly press hips toward ceiling, lowering heels to bring body into an inverted V as you press shoulders away from ears. Hold for five to seven breaths.

**WARRIOR I** From downward dog, step right foot forward next to right thumb, bending knee 90 degrees. Pivot on heel of left foot to turn toes out at a 45-degree angle and straighten torso upright into a lunge position with left leg extended behind you. Keeping hips forward, lift arms overhead, pressing palms together. Hold for five to seven breaths.



**TRIANGLE** From warrior I, rotate torso to left and extend arms out to sides at shoulder level, then bring right leg in one step and straighten right leg (feet should be about three feet apart). Hinge to right from hips to place right hand on floor by right foot or on shin as you extend left arm toward ceiling; look up at hand. Hold for five to seven breaths. Repeat entire sequence twice, alternating sides.

### Tip Sheet

**Stay off your toes.** "High heels shorten the back of your leg muscles and make your hamstrings, calves and foot muscles tight," says Karen Nourizadeh, an instructor at Pure Yoga in New York City. "Opt for heels that are no taller than three inches or wear supportive flats."

**Give your hamstrings a break.** "Stand up from your desk every 40 minutes and do shoulder shrugs and trunk rotations; then touch your toes. This helps counteract the shortened position your hamstrings are in when you sit," says Marty Jaramillo, FITNESS advisory board member and founder of I.C.E. Sports Therapy in New York City.