

Olga Spiritual Bish

Be Balanced!

YOUR GUIDE TO LEARNING HOW TO HANDSTAND!



Table of Contents

1. The beginning
2. Mindset - Goals & the BodyMind connection
3. The Warm-up
4. Fear and the Exit Strategy
5. The Entry
6. General Alignment & Stacking
7. The banana back
8. Balancing
9. Arm Balances
10. Wall Work
11. Training Plan Ideas
12. Last Words



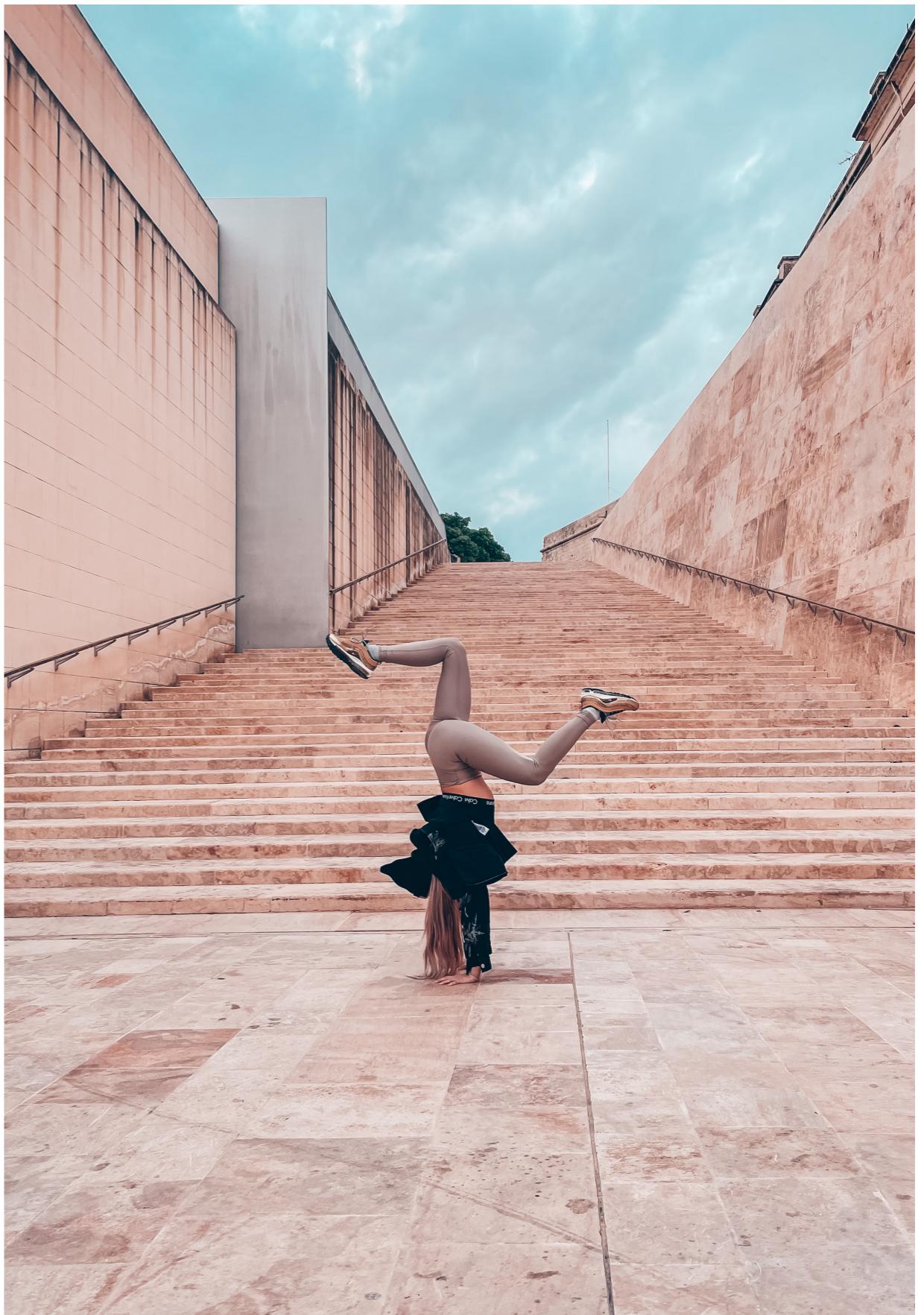
THE BEGINNING

Depending on what we're starting with and our level of experience, our training and approach will probably look a bit different. As beginner for example we probably shouldn't study anatomy textbooks off the bat thinking that we'll find the magic recipe

Not to mention, we should also probably take into consideration our previous movement background, body type, anatomy, mobility, motivation level, past injuries, passion, fear tolerance, expectations, strength etc. Which is why this process will look completely different for everyone, since WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT.

For some people it clicks right away and for others it may take even years, THERE IS NO MAGIC COOKIE YOU CAN EAT to teach you how to handstand overnight. Sorry to break it to you. This is a skill that takes consistent practice and leaning how to learn how to take satisfaction in all those small wins, because trust me, there will be hours upon hours of falls and fails that seem like are going nowhere (but in all actuality this is when we actually learn the most, I'll explain the science later). It takes dedication and a #growthmindset period dot.

So what in the heck is a growth mindset? Well, when we have a growth mindset we have an empowering perspective on learning and it becomes EASIER. To do this, instead of focusing on all the work we still have to do and the failures that happen along the way, we **focus on the JOY it brings us** and see effort as a way to build new abilities. And if failure does occur, we see it as a natural part of the learning process. The end goal isn't the most important, but the journey itself. If we don't learn to enjoy the process of learning how to balance on our hands we may end up quitting even before we even start. I won't lie it ain't easy and unless we've done gymnastics since we were little kids we won't learn it in a week, a month or even a year maybe so buckle up!





Think of it this way, when we were toddlers, did we learn how to walk on our feet overnight? NOPE. We had to fall many times until we learned how to take those first baby steps, same rules apply to handstands! Only back then our physiology and physics were more on our side. Not to mention our bodies are way more equipped to walk on feet than hands, however this analogy has helped me quite a lot when thinking about what goes on in a handstand.

During the first 5 or so years of our life our brain acts just like a big sponge, soaking up everything we see and experience (good and bad) however this extraordinary neuroplasticity we have at young age makes learning a lot easier. The older we get unfortunately, we have to try a lot harder and repeat things WAY more often to create those new neural pathways in order to turn whatever it is we're learning into something reflexive (like second nature).

In a handstand, our **WHOLE** body is working. Every body part is doing something different. That is a lot of information for our nervous system to take in all at once, especially if we were to start checking them all off the list: push through shoulders, thighs together, squeeze glutes and so on etc. So if we're just starting out, it will probably be really hard to be able to concentrate on doing all those things **PLUS** focus on the most important part of the handstand – balancing on our **HANDS**!

While our body sways ever so slightly (the act of balancing) different muscles tense up while others relax and so on and so forth, it's forever changing dance. It would probably make sense then in the beginning not to bombard our minds with a million and one alignment cues when in all reality we are actually hanging on for dear life just trying to hold that handstand for a split second or two and "not die" in the process!

Plus, as I just learned from one of my favorite neuroscientists Professor [Andrew Huberman](#) learning inversions as increases the neural plasticity. AND it's not that "perfect" handstand that does this, it's all the errors and fails we make while we're learning! The frustration we feel when making an error adds to our heightened awareness of what's happening and leads to greater focus and faster learning. Errors make a brain more plastic. I mean if you think about it why would a brain change anything if everything is going well? Right? So it's our mistakes that **ARE** our greatest teachers propelling us to change and growth!



MINDSET & the body mind connection

“I’m all about callusing the mind. Do something that sucks.” David Goggins

One thing that you will discover sooner rather than later in your handstand journey is how absolutely frustrating and horribly inconsistent it will be. To me, it has actually felt like torture at times, it's not an easy discipline to say the least. You can go from having an incredible practice one day to an absolute disaster full of fails on the next, that's just how this cookie crumbles. But this is where real growth lies, when we start to leave our comfort zone.

Having a big distant goal like “ I WILL LEARN TO HANDSTAND” is good because it keeps you motivated, but if it's the only one you have sooner or later it might overwhelm you. Bad days happen, injuries happen, LIFE happens and that's just how it goes. That's why I'm such a proponent of setting small goals along the way as to not quit when life gets in our way, and trust me IT WILL #facts

This bring me back to the GROWTH MINDSET. In Carol Dweck's work she discovered that certain children enjoyed solving problems even tough they knew that they couldn't solve them. What they enjoyed was throwing themselves into the nitty gritty of trying to figure out the problem. The result of this was that they became better at problem solving. So the take away from this is the idea of “enjoying the process” but without attachment to the goal itself, which is an ancient spiritual truth from Krishna himself. (In the Bhagavad, Krishna says to Arjuna: You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action.)

The neuroscience behind this process is that we do better by wiring our reward circuitry to release dopamine DURING THE PROCESS rather than after we reach the “BIG goal”. Meaning we try to take little victories in achieving small milestones (i.e. growth) along the way, instead of just waiting for the final outcome. Dopamine not only helps us grit through failure and in persisting until we improve, but we can also use narrative to help support dopamine release by consciously coupling the feeling of frustration with a positive reaction. That can be something as easy as telling ourselves that we need to make all these errors as they are a key step towards learning. So the goal of “I WILL LEARN TO HOLD A HANDSTAND” needs to be outside the window of attention for our “growth” to occur, rather we can concentrate on the drills and things we are doing at the moment (like for ex. kicking up at the wall).

If we only have this distant goal of “LEARN TO HANDSTAND” it may be very intimidating and down putting as it will most likely take months or YEARS to learn. If however, we have smaller goals, like Monday: 30 kick-ups by the wall and three 30 second holds at the wall and we DO IT, our brain will release dopamine and we’ll feel HAPPY and accomplished!

BY learning to enjoy these small victories we can keep motivated and not be tempted to quit. The added benefit of this is that if we train our minds like this it will sooner or later translate into our “real lives” as well making us stronger physically AND mentally. But this won’t happen by sitting on the couch watching Netflix or scrolling through Instagram comparing ourselves to others. If we want to grow we have to leave our comfort zone and suffer a little by doing things that will most likely SUCK in the beginning. NO ONE is a great handbalancer from the get go, you have to build up calluses on your hands and fall a million times before you become great. Luckily neuroscience research has also shown that error triggers learning, so all that falling and failing is how we learn and how we build calluses on our minds to have the strength to get back up and do it all over again the next time!

With time not only will our bodies get stronger and more flexible to be able to do more advanced variations and holds but all those new neuralpathways will build stronger connections in our brain allowing electrical impulses to travel more efficiently. “**Neurons** that fire together, wire together.” Neurobiologist from Stanford Karla Shatz first used this phrase in 1949. She wanted to describe how pathways in the brain are formed and reinforced through repetition. So what are you waiting for, get those neurons firing!



The brain stem (often called the reptilian part of our brain) is our first line of defence when there is a threat. It has way quicker impulse control than our thinking mind ever will. So naturally, it will learn to react quickly when let's say we're losing balance. It will help us NOT TO FALL on our FACE AND ‘die’. In order to build this reactivity on our hands we need to let our nervous system do it's job and just DO THE DAMN THING! So I think it's also important to know when to stop hyper focusing and analysing all the details of what we have to do next and instead JUST DO IT. I think learning how to be in the present in this intuitive state makes balancing much easier and it's defiantly not something learned over night, but it will build with time and practice.



Try this experiment:

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND STAND ON THE GROUND. REALLY TRY TO NOTICE ALL THE MICRO MOVEMENTS YOUR BODY IS MAKING EACH SECOND IN ORDER FOR YOU TO REMAIN STANDING. DO YOU FEEL YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND? WHAT ARE THEY DOING? NOW TRY PICKING ONE LEG UP BUT STILL KEEPING YOUR EYES CLOSED AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR BODY. DID THE MOVEMENT GET MORE INTENSE? DID YOUR BREATH CHANGE?

I BET IT MIGHT'VE SINCE WE ARE NOT USED TO STANDING ON ONE LEG (ESPECIALLY WITH OUR EYES CLOSED THIS TAKES AWAY THE HELP OF THE VESTIBULAR SYSTEM WHICH WORKS TOGETHER WITH THE EYES TO HELP US BALANCE). DOING THIS PUTS OUR ANS (AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM) INTO OVERDRIVE AS IT'S TRYING TO "SAVE US FROM IMPENDING DOOM". NOW LET'S SAY YOU ARE A LIFE LONG YOGI WHO'S USED TO STANDING ON ONE LEG OR A PROFESSIONAL CIRCUS PERFORMER WHO DOES ONE ARM HANDSTANDS IN THEIR SLEEP, THIS TASK TO THEM WON'T BE SUCH AN IMPOSSIBLE FEAT BECAUSE THEIR BODIES HAVE ALREADY BUILT THESE NEURAL PATHWAYS (ALSO KNOWN AS "MUSCLE MEMORY" BUT THE MEMORY ISN'T IN THE MUSCLES IT'S IN OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM!).

The eyes

Our eyes are sometimes called the window to our soul, but they are literally also the window to our brain and nervous system. How and where we look effects our mind state and our whole physiology.

The narrowing of our visual attention sends signals to the whole body that it need to get ready for action. This creates alertness and arousal, releasing neurotransmitters (like adrenaline) in the brain, our blood pressure goes up and a cascade of other things begin to happen. So it would make sense then that if we want to stay focused and alert to help us balance, gazing at one spot without moving our eyes around would probably be a good idea. From my experience, in the beginning it's optimal to gaze in between the hands. You may even notice that as soon as our gaze wanders somewhere, our attention and balance wander away right with it!

Then on the other hand, when we switch to peripheral view and look at a horizon or something further away from us for example, it causes the whole body to start to slow down and relax.

Focusing our gaze makes us more conscious and aware, where our attention goes energy flows! In yoga this gaze focus is called Drishti and has been known about for ages. Depending where and how intensely we look we can shift our energy from "rest and relax parasympathetic to "fight flight" adrenaline powered side of the autonomic nervous system.

Chances are in the beginning we will be more in the hyper focused, adrenaline rush, narrowed eyesight mode while practicing handstand. But this is a good thing as all this alertness will help us LEARN. Then with time and practice our eyes and gaze will relax, the body won't be as tensed up, the nervous system will calm down and the whole experience in general will be a lot less "intense".

All this is fine and dandy you may be thinking, but does mindset really matter?

Well, yes. Research has shown that our mindset and beliefs have a big influence and shape our response to stress, exercise and even to the foods we eat. (check out [the "hotel worker study" A. Crum E. Langer 2007](#) and all the other [mindset/placebo work of Dr.Crum](#))

As it turns out, our mindset actually works very similarly to the placebo and nocebo effects. Social context and our beliefs have impact on our physiology. What this literally means is that our mindset can either be helpful or it can counter act all the benefits we would otherwise be receiving from handstands or whatever else we may be doing. So if we are getting upside down with an attitude "I'm never going to learn this" .. chances are we may be slowing down our progress and it may even reflect back in our physiology.

So what we do AND what we think about it BOTH matter. This doesn't mean that we should pretend to be happy and be all good vibes only BUT, watching out for negative self talk and beliefs is kind of like weeding in the garden, it's always a good idea!
#mindsetmatters

Another thing to be aware of is trying to keep a healthy balance between DOING TOO MUCH and DOING NOT ENOUGH. If you are doing too much and not letting your body rest and recover between sets/trainings you may welcome an injury before you reach that goal you had in mind. Especially since in the beginning we don't really have that much body awareness or enough learned methodological technique to be able to differentiate between small errors and big ones, but if you find yourself experiencing pain (especially in any joint) that can be an indicator we may be doing too much too soon.

On the other side of the spectrum is not practicing often enough. You can't expect to learn to handstand anytime soon if you are only practicing 15 minutes a week because by the time you get around to your next session your bodymind will have already forgotten what you asked it to do last time. Remember, we're not only training our body to stand upside-down but we're also trying to convince our mind that it's a good idea! The latter of which is actually harder to do, from my experience anyway. Getting over the fear and mental blockages we may have can take a lot of TIME, but I'll get into that in a later chapter.

So try to carve out sometime in your week for training, use my training plan as you see fit and modify it if you need to. Watch your mindset. Set small goals. Keep yourself accountable, find some friends who are also on this journey and motivate each other (in real life or online) and most importantly try not to be too serious about it, play and have fun with it! After all, research has shown that playfulness and novelty are key to longevity!





Playfulness

Our ability to play can either help us in learning (neural plasticity) or it can hinder it.

Did you know that all mammals play, and that it's not just for FUN we need it for homeostasis just like we need eating and drinking. As a matter of fact, playing effects the PAG part of the brain (located in the brain stem) releasing opioids into our system, which is why playing makes us feel GOOD. But this doesn't make us stupid or zoned out, on the contrary it expands the processes of the neocortex (the executive command center of the brain) and can make us more creative, shows us new possibilities, new ways of being, teaches us social dynamics and more! This is why almost all animals (especially mammals) play when young, it is how we learn about life, relationships and ourselves in a safe and friendly environment.

Research has also shown that play increase neural plasticity, meaning it helps us learn and grow. So playing is not just about games, it's how we LEARN, and the good news is we can continue reaping all the benefits of play even in our adult life because our brain is "plastic" during our whole lives!

All this science confirms what I experienced in my own personal handstand journey, it was play and novelty that actually helped me not to quit when something wasn't working! Whether through trying new shapes or transitions, presses or handstands on people (Acro yoga) I learned to not take it all so serious, to keep going and to just have fun, even though it was scary at times!

So like we discussed earlier, being hyper focused can make alert and it's a great tool for learning facts and technique, however it can also make us rigid and lead to burn out both physically and mentally in the long run. Play on the other hand (when stakes are low enough, so not like in professional sports like in the Super Bowl) can also bring us into alertness and focus but while feeling safe and relaxed. So it's the opposite of rigid perfectionism, when playing we are trying to be not attached to the outcome, instead just doing something for the sake of doing it. Exploring different movement, thoughts and activities. It's not about becoming better or the BEST at something we know how to do, rather it's about exploration and novelty. SO what are you waiting for, just do the damn thing!

The Warm-Up

There are many different ways you could approach your warm-up

but regardless the technique, you should **ALWAYS** do one (especially the wrists!). I try not to use the word always often because I just know how commands like that can sometimes make you want to do the exact opposite but trust me you don't want to injure your wrists or shoulder and be out of training indefinitely so **JUST DO IT!**

So what exactly is mobility? Well to put it in scientific terms, mobility is “proprioception” – our perception and awareness of our body’s positions and movements. Mobility training then, can include a wide range of different exercises and drills designed to increase our range-of-motion, control muscles surrounding each joint, and help us to move more actively. This will not only lead to better handstands but also a healthier body!

Mobility training is great because it helps to keep our body nice and “oiled up” preventing our muscles and joints from becoming tight, immobile and then suffering because of lack of movement(maybe even leading to potential injury). Think of it this way if you leave your bike or car outside for months on end it’s probably going to get all rusted up, our bodies just like machines NEED movement to work properly. The less we move the less mobile we’re going to be with time and our body might tell us it’s had enough, it’s as simple as that.

In this course you will find 3 warm-up videos. Depending how much time you have and what your goals are, maybe you can do one warm-up, two or maybe just part of one, either way try to at least warm-up your wrists and shoulders, since they are our main two joint superstars when it comes to balancing on our hands!

Once we feel warmed up we can really turn up the heat by jumping right into our handstands (pun intended) because there's no better way to warm-up for a handstand than to just do some handstands!

WRISTS



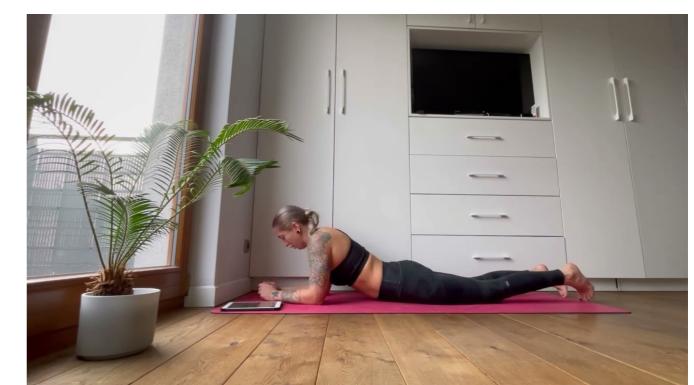
SCAPULA- ELEVATION/DEPRESSION



SCAPULA- PROTRACTION/RETRACCIÓN



5 MINUTES OF JOY



WARM-UP CARS



WARM-UP - WRISTS, SHOULDERS & CORE



Bear to crab

More warm-up ideas

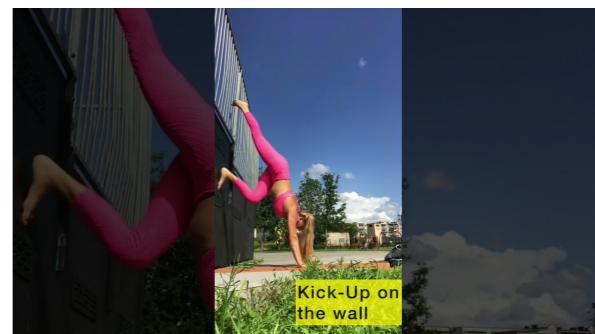
WALL WALK UPS



LOW TUCK UP



KICK UP ON THE WALL



Fear & Exit Strategy

Unless you have been doing gymnastics or acrobatics since you were little, chances are there will be some fear involved when first going upside down.

For me personally, the fear was extremely paralysing and debilitating, but at the same time it gave me the only rush!! And each time that I faced that fear head on, it was a small victory in and of itself.

Fear is a normal and healthy response. Our body has an automatic fear reflex but it is quite generic in it's activation, meaning that we can become scared or traumatised by anything really because our nervous system doesn't really discriminate.

The Amygdala, located in the limbic area of the brain, is often called our natural "smoke detector".It's job is to scan our environment for threat in order to keep us safe. Since going upside down isn't exactly a "natural" thing, you can be sure that that smoke detector will be going off!

The only way to convince our nervous system that turning our whole body upside down is a good idea, is by practicing (duh) and by having a plan for a safe exit! And obviously only reading about the technique of exiting a handstand isn't the same thing as **DOING THE THING** (like we discussed earlier) and it won't happen over night.

When the "smoke detector" goes off it sends our body either into fight, flight or freeze state and with it a bunch of chemicals and neurotransmitters into our body. This threat response system that we all have really is incredible because its helped us humans survive as long as we have on this planet. Unfortunately it's not quite so helpful in these modern high stress times were living in or when trying to learn how to handstand so repetition and practice is the only remedy!



There has been some new and exciting neuroscience research emerging showing that dopamine (the “feel good” neurotransmitter) is present during a process called “fear extinction”. This process is not about erasing fear, it’s a learning process in which we introduce a new idea in order to change our perception of our fear and in effect get “rewarded” by the dopamine! SO for example if we have a big fear of falling, we acknowledge the fear but change the narrative into something like “Yes I am fearful of falling but I want to learn how to handstand and I will practice anyway”.

How do we change this narrative? Well this is where interception and being mindful (in the present moment) come into play. When we are AWARE of what is happening RIGHT NOW we can consciously CHOOSE to respond in a different way. Meaning that by learning to feel our body and it’s sensations we can come into the present and bring our “watchtower” back online so that we can get back in the drivers seat. We can override these automatic reflexes using top down processing (from mind to body).

SO if we are panicking, sweating and shaking every time we practice handstands we can start by acknowledging what is happening inside of us, instead of ignoring it or running from it. Let’s listen to our body and the signals that it’s sending, maybe we can try thanking our body. “Good body I know that you’re trying

to protect me but it’s all right now. Yes going upside down is scary I know, but I really want to learn and I know I can get better!” And with this “exposure therapy” of practicing again and again the fear will lessen with time.

Research has shown that the more times we retell a story of fear/trauma in detail, the physical sensations in our body become less and less intense ([link to study](#)). This is the whole idea behind different talk therapies and obviously if it’s a trauma with a capital “T” we would want to do it with the support of a clinician, but if we are talking HANDSTANDS we can get similar effects from doing things like journaling or even blogging.

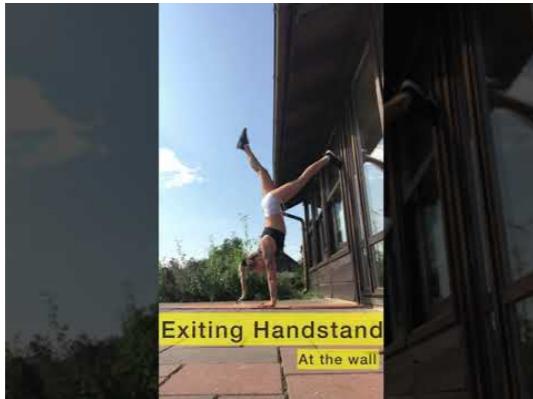
SO maybe you can start your very own HANDSTAND DIARY. This can not only help you lessen your fears but it will be a lot easier to look back and track your progress to see how far you’ve come! Also maybe find your tribe of like minded individuals (online or IRL). We are social creatures who need social engagement to live long healthy and happy lives... AND not to mention nothing motivates more to practice and grow than a group of fellow upside down friends!



Are you ready to become friends with your fear?

Exit Progressions

Exiting Handstand - back to the Wall



Exiting Handstand facing the Wall



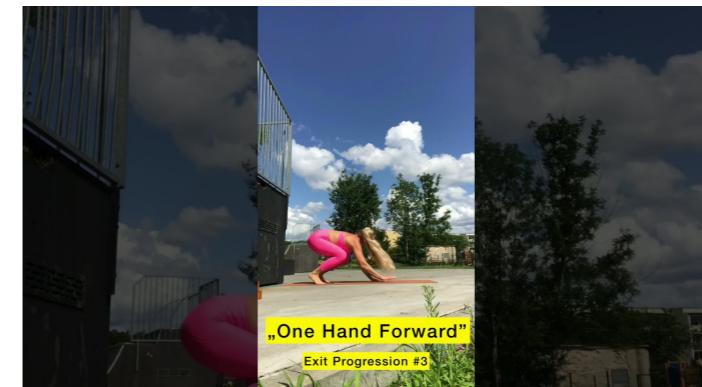
The “ugly frog” - exit progression #1



The “ugly cartwheel” - exit progression #2



One Hand Forward



The Entry- theory & practice

The second obstacle we'll probably encounter on our handstand journey is learning how to enter.

And as you're probably thinking, yes this is going to be something that we'll have to keep practicing over and over and over and OVER (I know it took me months to learn and now years later I'm still perfecting it!) But look on the bright side, it's also a great way to do a whole-body warm-up and some cardio so we're actually killing three birds with one stone here!

The first thing we have to figure out is if we're confident enough to try entering in the middle of the room without our friend Paul the Wall or if we are still in need of some support. Remember, it doesn't make you less than for using props, physical and mental safety always come first! So take your time, listen to your body and try not to judge yourself.

Fear can be a real bish (like we discussed previously) so it's understandable if you aren't quite ready to go out into open waters quite just yet. It took me almost a year to muster up the courage to kick up freestanding! This is something very personal and individual, so please feel free to take as much time as you need.

But in all reality it doesn't really matter whether we are at the wall or in the middle of the room/garden/ or whatever "the kick-up" entry should look similar. What we defiantly DON'T want to do in the beginning is to have expectations of kicking up and staying up in handstand. All this will do is frustrate us and drive us crazy.

Kicking our body up into the air and praying for a miracle won't do us any good. Instead, maybe let's try to focus on really being present and aware of our body. Try to go up WITH CONTROL for a second and then come back down as slow as possible. This is how the body LEARNS.

The calibration process of learning just the right amount of effort of the kick is hard! This alone will take our nervous system A LOT of time. If we kick too hard, we will fall over. If we kick too soft, we won't get our hips high enough. Our goal is to find that sweet spot right in the middle. This is where the center of mass (usually located around the bellybutton area) is right above our base of support (the shoulders and wrists). Try not to have too many expectations and maybe bring

some elements of FUN into it because like I said before, there will be many falls and fails along the way. But like I mentioned before, errors trigger learning, so all the mistakes we make are necessary if we want to grow!

Making mistakes is actually terrific because it increases activation of the neural circuits which increase alertness, making our brain PAY ATTENTION (bringing the neocortex aka watchtower of the brain online). Which makes sense, it's like when we're riding a bike or driving a car and we can zone out and start to daydream about what we're going to eat when we get home. That's because our body-mind already knows the mechanics of these actions by heart. But let's say we are getting on a two wheeler or behind the wheel for the very first time EVER. Now that's a whole other story! We are going to be very PRESENT because our brain wants us to LIVE and all those errors we'll make will be noted and remembered.

Also, thanks to repetition over time we'll start building something called "muscle memory" (well it's actually the nervous system that remembers not the muscles but same difference) and this whole process will become easier for us because it becomes more REFLEXIVE. So if you ever have a bad practice where everything seems to be going wrong and you feel like you just suck, remember, it's all our fails and falls that eventually lead us to victory and help us learn new things! SO expect and embrace those errors my friend!

Now, I could probably go on and on about a million different specific anatomical cues; where each body part should be, how many centimetres apart and how to perfectly line everything up to enter and hold the handstand "THE RIGHT WAY". But the problem with that is that there isn't only one "right way", everyone's different, we all have different bodies, dispositions, past injuries, backgrounds etc. so what may work for me may not necessarily work for you. But there are however a few of important things we may want to be aware of that may make learning how to enter and hold a handstand a bit easier and we'll discuss them in the following chapter. (More on the neuroscience of learning - [Click here](#))

Kicking- Up

Honestly I don't really like the phrase "kick-up" because it kinda implies that we have to KICK and use a lot of effort in the process.

This thinking can often cause us to do the move I like to call "crazy legs"- kicking hard and high then swinging legs everywhere and falling. To me it's more trying to HOP OFF from the bottom leg. And also try to remember to think UP, get those hips over the shoulders and make them stay there!

For now let's agree that we are not trying to hold a handstand here quite yet, we're just trying to get a feel for being on our hands and up in the air. Just focus on the base of support (our hands, elbows and shoulders = our handstands foundation) AND try to send the hips UP so that they can STACK on top of our shoulders, elbows and hands.

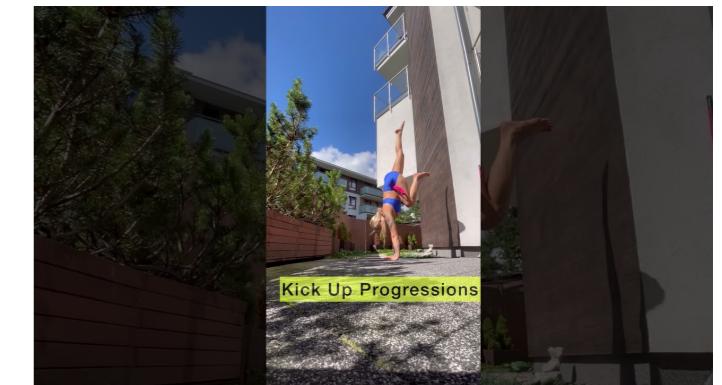
Chances are that before we learn to calibrate just the right amount of effort needed to kick up and get the centre of mass aka the hips in the perfect spot above the shoulders/wrists, we will probably make a bunch of "mistakes" along the way. But like we discussed, its all part of the game and leads to growth. If you're wondering about the optimal ratio between fails/ successes, a recent study showed that when making these errors we actually don't want to make the new skill that we're learning too hard and impossible. It should be about 15% errors and 85% non-errors for optimal growth and learning. Having this steady positive feedback loop will make it easier to progress! ([LINK TO study](#))

Remember, try to make it FUN and just be in the moment! Feel the body and what its doing while "kicking-up", being mindful and focused is a big part of balancing.



Kicking- Up at the Wall

Kick-Up Progressions



The Frog Hop

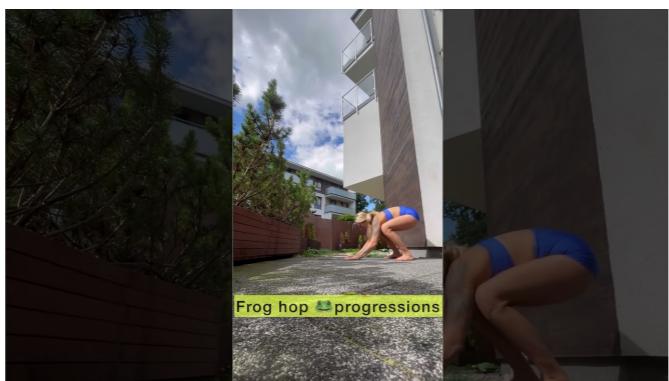
Another way to enter is with both feet together kind of like a frog, hence the name =)

This entry may be problematic for some because it requires some shoulder and hip mobility in order to get our hips STACKED UP above the shoulders.

But at the same time, others actually find this shape easier to stack and find balance in. So it all really depends on our anatomy (as usual). If our hips are pretty “open” and we feel comfortable squatting in a malasana (yogi squat pose) there’s a good chance this frog handstand shape will click for us too. I was one of those weirdos =)

Another thing that may seem hard at first for some is that we have to hop both feet at once. This can be scary at first, but in all actuality we gain some power since both feet are hopping at the same time. We may even find that hopping with two feet we’ll be less lopsided and it may be easier to find balance. And last but not least with our legs bent we’ll have “less body” to balance AND you may find that the double thigh to belly connection can help tap into more compression strength(core, pelvic floor and hip flexor muscles). Learning to keep awareness in this area (where the the centre of mass is located) is important for our sense of balance.

The Frog hop - Entry Progressions



General Alignment & Stacking

STACKED

WIDE

HANDS & WRISTS

The first thing to keep in mind is that in general, the more we line up the hands with the shoulders the more our bones will **STACK** on top of each other and the less muscle strength we will have to use. This will also lead to “better alignment” however anatomy doesn’t always allow for this. Of course if you are used to and prefer having a wider distance between your hands and that feels better for **YOUR** body, go for it.

One thing that can get in the way of this “**STACK**” is somethings called a wide carrying angle, when the forearm sticks out excessively away from the side body, as this can make stacking shoulders over wrists difficult or even impossible. But don’t fret and try not get too attached to these alignment cues, you can still learn to handstand if your joints aren’t “perfectly stacked”. First and foremost listen to your body and try not to force things!

One thing that has helped me on my journey is to think of the hands as feet. Our feet do a great job of balancing all day long and our ankles are incredibly adapt to keep our whole body upright because we’ve been doing it since we were toddlers! So using this analogy it shouldn’t be surprising that your hands and wrists are not yet capable to do what the feet have been for **YEARS**. It’s a process that will demand progressive loading (adding more and more weight over time, longer holds etc.) so that our wrists and hands get strong enough to hold us up for longer. Besides getting stronger, our hands also have to become more aware and learn to do exactly what the feet do when we are standing and walking, meaning they have to learn how to **BALANCE**! But we will go into this with more detail in the next chapter.

Also, since we have not been standing on our hands since we were little, I’m assuming, there’s also a good chance that we may lack some mobility in our wrists (ideally 90 degree wrist extension). Luckily when we practice handstands we are also stretching the wrists actively, so with time they should begin to adapt. Just try to be mindful as to not push them too hard in the beginning, since they aren’t used to bearing so much weight.



ELBOWS

In general if we want to have a stable base of support (our arms) then we want the elbows to be locked out, which means all the way STRAIGHT. This again circles back to the idea of STACKING we talked about earlier, when we line up the humerus bone (top arm bone) with the Radius & Ulna (forearm bones) we will have a steadier BOS (base of support, the thing that we are balancing on).

It can sometimes be scary in the beginning to lock the elbows out, thinking that by keeping them bent will be safer and it'll be easier to come out of handstand if something goes wrong. Unfortunately bent elbows won't only make it harder to stay balanced since our foundation is so unstable, but we'll also have to use more strength since our bones won't be STACKED on top of each other.

Since we're all built differently, not everyone will be able to go into this full elbow extension (straightening) but we can't fight and win with our anatomy. This can make learning how to balance a bit tougher but it can be done and there are ways you can work with this as well as find exercises to maybe help you increase your elbow mobilization (if anatomy allows).

On the other side of the spectrum are people with elbow hyper-extension (well relative hyperextension, absolute hyperextension is an injury and is painful) Many people with relative hyperextension have the appearance of the arm straightening beyond 180 degrees, but this is just their natural end range or lock-out point.

Some teachers/coaches (especially in the Yoga world) will argue that we have to avoid this type of movement at all costs because it will lead to injury, others say that since it's how our bodies are naturally we should embrace it and find ways to strengthen the joints and the muscles around them (working on bent arm strength and straight arm strength). I personally think it's never a good idea to scare people by telling them NOT to do something because they'll hurt themselves.

Cultivating fear around our



Wide carrying angle of the elbows

Sometimes it can look like someone has hyperextension in their elbows when in all actuality it may be a wide carrying angle of the elbows. This wide angle when looked at from the front or side in handstand, may look very similar to what hyperextended elbows may look like.

I myself actually have a pretty wide carrying angle (see picture above) and I found through trial and error that when I turn my hands out slightly I feel way more stacked and my arms feel better muscle engagement all the way up to the scapula. So if you are wondering no, having this wide carrying angle has not made handstanding more difficult for me =)

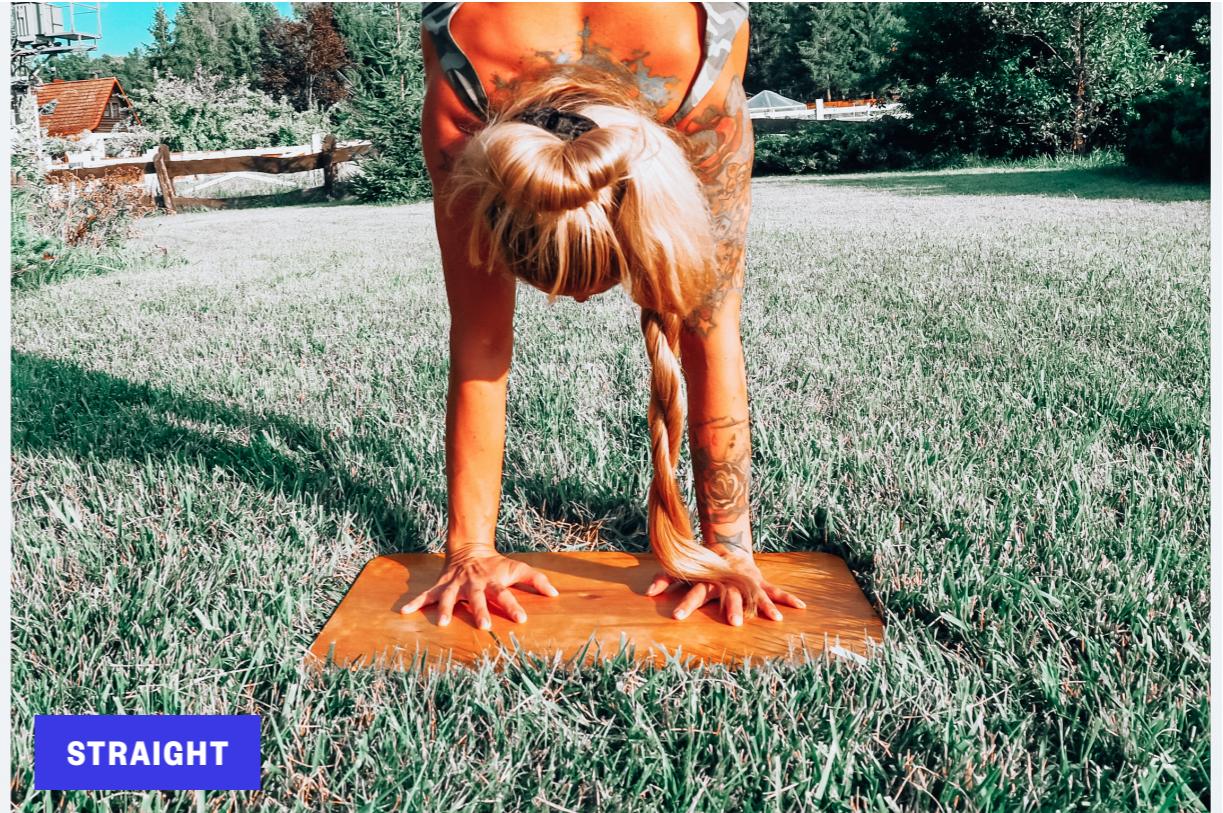
There also exists something called progressive overload, which means letting the “workload” start off small and then gradually get harder. All movement can be scaled so that if we can’t yet do a chest to wall handstand for example, we aren’t forced into doing it, instead we can maybe start with a “plank” on the wall or a “down dog”. So if our elbows do hyper extend the best thing we could do for them is gradually introduce them to more and more weight in this manner so that they get **STRONGER**.

Using these type of progressions over time gives the tissues in our body time to adapt to the complete range of motion. When the elbows get put in these sorts of progressive demands, not only do the muscles and their attachments get stronger, but also all the tendons and ligaments. This strengthens and gives support around our whole joint and allows for controlled movement through full ROM (range of motion).

It’s also important to note that bending the elbows, no matter if it’s a conscious choice or because of anatomy, will have a big impact on the rest of the body and the overall handstand shape. Everything is connected, so if the elbows start bending chances things will start happening down the kinetic chain. So maybe our shoulders will begin to close or we may even start bending in the low back bringing us into a banana back handstand (there will be a whole chapter dedicated to this).

So long story short, It’s always a good idea to be aware of what’s happening and to listen to the sensations coming from our bodies. And as a general rule, whether our elbows hyperextend or not, if we feel pain while doing something then it may be a sign to back off a little, however pain does not always mean injury (muscle skeletal damage). New research on the topic of pain science has shown this, so there is no point in fear mongering about it. Pain and injury aren’t mutually exclusive and you can have one without the other, but you can also have both.

With all that being said, it doesn’t mean pushing past pain is a good idea either. Also having a good balance between practice and **REST** is just as important as the practice itself and can make all the difference when it comes to injury prevention.



Shoulders

Ideally, in a handstand we want our shoulders to be **STACKED** on top of elbows on top of wrists.

We also want them to be as flexed as possible, meaning we want our arms to go straight up overhead. However this isn't always possible for everyone and there can be many reasons for it, the most common being a lack of ROM in the shoulders.

The shoulder joint (glenohumeral joint) is the most mobile joint in our body which should in most cases work to our advantage. So if you are lucky enough to obtain full shoulder flexion of 180% then anatomy is on your side and you should be able to **STACK** your shoulders without a problem.

However, if you can't access full ROM two things may occur, either your shoulders will start to lean a bit forward over the wrists in a planche type shape or if you manage to line your shoulders up with your elbows & wrists the construction of the handstand will give in somewhere else down the kinetic chain to maintain balance. The place this usually happens in is the low back, creating the infamous curved banana shaped handstand. (It's all physics really, our bodies will be looking for the ideal way to distribute weight so that the base of support (our hands) are lined up with our bodies center of mass).

The good news is that even if you lack shoulder flexion there are many mobility drills you can work on that should help you over time. But if it's an anatomical issue (like hard bone on bone compression) that you can't easily change, don't worry because **YES** you can still learn to handstand! Your handstand may be a little curved but that's ok! Did you know that that was actually the original desired handstand aesthetic back in the day? (Until the influence of modern gymnastics came along anyway)



Then there's the other side of the coin,

maybe you're someone who is extremely flexible in the shoulders and when you hear the cue to "open the shoulders" you go way past that 180%. Well, then we might want to focus on keeping them slightly closed and maintaining that straight line from the shoulder to back so that we don't hang on our connective tissue, instead using the muscles actively.

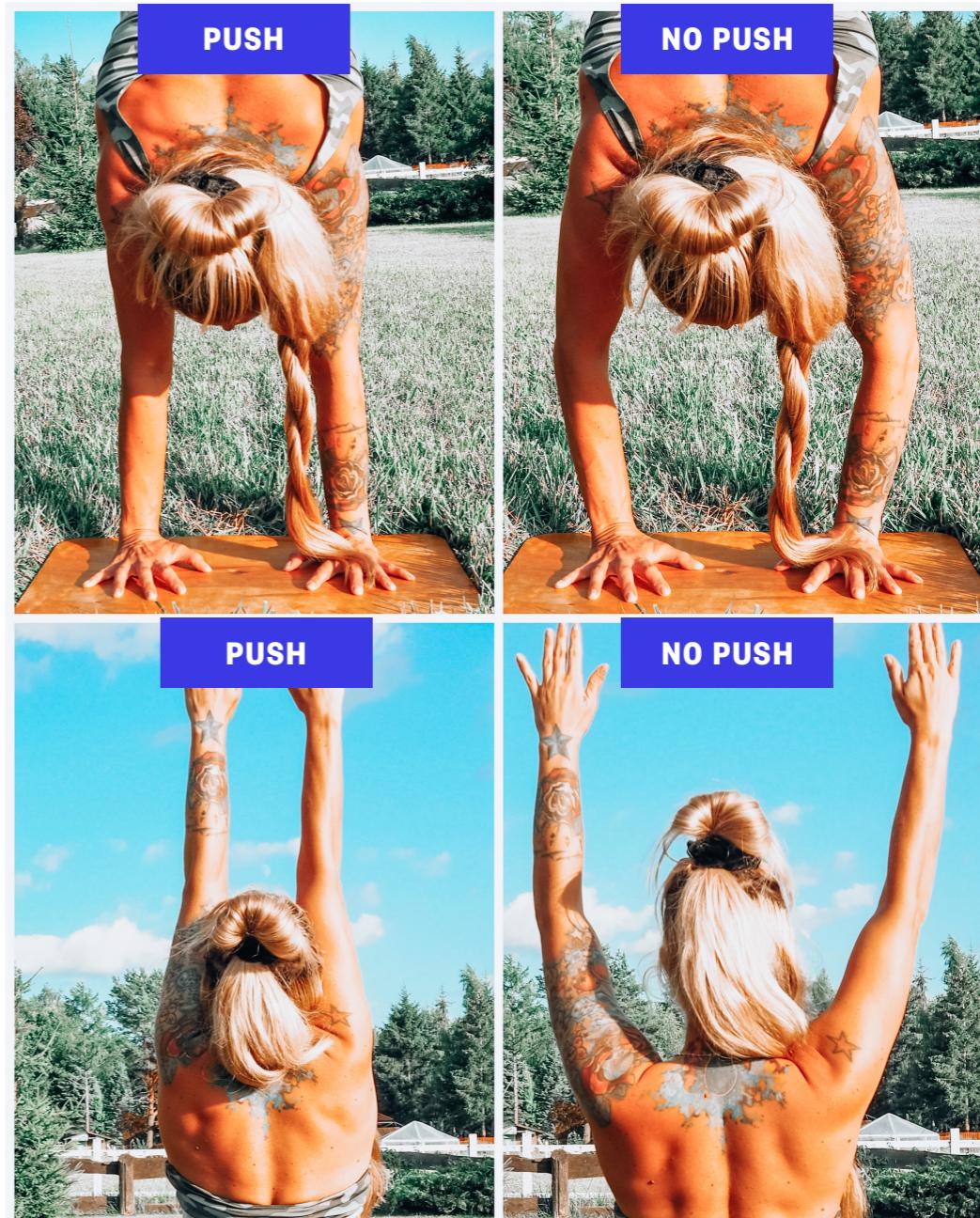
To keep our shoulders in flexion overhead we need to actively **PUSH** the ground away, shrugging, elevating and growing tall through the shoulders. This is done by the help of our scapula, by what is called scapular **ELEVATION**. This small little action will not only help keep our shoulders straight but we may also find more stability and less wobbles. This "push" can also protect our shoulders by keeping the muscles around our shoulder joint **ACTIVE** instead of just "hanging out" on our connective tissues.

In the beginning, we will most likely have to be pushing (elevating scapula) a lot more intensely because our ANS (autonomic nervous system) will just be starting to figure out this movement and basically fighting for survival (that's what it felt like for me when I first started learning how to balance for sure!). But as we practice and progress we won't necessarily have to push as hard to remain balanced, hopefully, instead there will be a lot more micro adjustments going on in the hands and the movement will become a lot more subtle.

With practice our bodies will become more familiar with being upside down, with all the sensations and it'll become easier to find that sweet spot in the middle where we don't have to use so much force and strength. This is what balancing is all about, the eternal chase of the dragon between underbalance, overbalance and finding that sweet spot of "resting" in the middle. Of course in the case of entry (whether it's kicking-up or pressing) it is a different story and more effort of the shoulders will be required.

So **PUSH** and keep **PUSHING** will probably be the most common cues you'll hear if you were to take one of my handstand classes =) If you think about it, it makes perfect sense. Our hands and arms are the foundation, we need it to be **STABLE** not **WOBBLY** so in general the more actively we push and elevate the more stable our foundation will be.

The last thing to keep in mind about the shoulders is what to do about **ROTATION**. In general we want to try to avoid internal rotation, as this can lead to instability in certain muscles that we need. But with that being said however, I like to just try to stay neutral in my shoulders. So not trying to rotate them



anywhere because external rotation is what happens naturally in the shoulders when we bring our arms over head.

You may be sitting and reading this right now and thinking "WOW, that's a lot of shit to do and remember while being upside down"! And yes that is **VERY** true =) Thats why its like I said, there's really no use in memorising all these anatomical alignment cues in the beginning, this is something that will come over time and with practice. Just like reading a book about car racing won't make you a professional car racer, reading about alignment and the mechanics of a handstand won't make you a great hand balancer, only practice will! It's something you have to **FEEL** in **YOUR BODY** because it's quite a subjective and individual matter really. So you'll just have to get a **FEEL** for it yourself while you're upside down!

Scapula

The scapula (shoulder blades) help support and keep our shoulders and arms stable.

The trapezius is the main muscle responsible for the important **PUSHING** action in handstand, in other words it's the main ELEVATOR of the scapula.

Depending on who you ask and which field you're learning handstands in, the answer to what to do with your shoulder blades will probably be different. One thing is certain that we want our scapula to be in elevation (going up on our back), this is what happens when we lift our arms over head and **PUSH** up.

Often as beginners since we are fighting for our lives with gravity while upside-down there will probably be a tendency to have a slouchy depressed shoulder, instead what we want to do is intentionally **PUSH** the ground away forcefully. Over time this **PUSHing** won't have to be a forceful because we'll gain body awareness and know when it's ok to relax the body a bit more into neutral.

Besides going up and down (elevation & depression) the scapula can also come together (retraction) and move away from each other (protraction). The camp is a bit divided here on whether the scapula should be protracted or in neutral and some people in #YogaLand go as far as to say that we should even retract the scapula in poses where arms are over head (like handstand, down dog, forearm stand etc.) Have you ever heard the cue "shoulders back and down" in a Yoga class? Well probably, there's this myth that if we elevate/ shrug/ widen/ lift up the scapula towards the ears, that we'll cause unnecessary tension. This is however is FALSE, our shoulder blades were designed to move in ALL THE WAYS!

So in my humble opinion I think that what our shoulder blades are doing will vary depending on the situation and our intention. Like which handstand shape we're in (straight or backbend), if we are staying static or if there's dynamic movement, if we are kicking-up or pressing into handstand amongst many other things. So in general, I'd say we want to keep our shoulder blades in slight protraction and elevation. Now let's take a quick moment to thank the lovely

ELEVATION



DEPRESSION



PROTRACTION



RETRACTION



muscle responsible for this - Serratus Anterior, which causes the scapula to be attached to the body which giving us more overall strength as well as stability.

"Ribs in" or "armpits towards each other" are two cues that are often used by teachers and coaches to get those shoulder blades hugging around the sides of the ribs in this slight protraction (serratus anterior activation). Like I've said before, it's good to keep in mind that everything in our bodies is connected and that if our bottom ribs start splaying out this will probably start causing other problems higher up on the ladder, like the lumbar spine (lower back) starting to curve or the shoulders closing.

Honestly I didn't really know that my scapula existed until I started taking my handstand practice more seriously, they just weren't something I thought about when I moved. So if you are like me, it may be hard in the beginning to even feel what they are doing but with time this body awareness will grow, I promise! So in general, what we want to do is focus on **PUSHING** the ground away and lifting the shoulder blades (shoulders to ears) while either pulling the bottom ribs in or bringing armpits towards each other. I keep saying it but I'll say it again, I know this is a lot to remember but with practice and repetition you won't have to think about all these moving parts anymore because your body will do it reflexively! Our nervous system is cool like that =)

Pelvis

The pelvis plays a huge role in the shape of our handstand

Especially if we are talking about the straight handstand shape, something I have found to be extremely helpful is learning to shift from an anterior pelvic tilt (curve in low spine) to more of a posterior pelvic tilt (flat low back). This will help connect our low body with the top and activate more muscles around our centre of mass (mainly pelvic floor muscles, core muscles, hip flexors and glutei).

So if we are trying to get into this posterior tilt in a straight handstand, two visual cues that may help are thinking of either “rotating the pelvis” or “tucking the tailbone”. The goal is to try to lengthen the torso and flatten out the low back. This is a small subtle movement but it really goes a long way. It not only helps to activate the pelvic floor muscles but also the lower abdominals, amongst others. This rotation of the pelvis can also help bring awareness around our center of mass (belly button region) which is a highly efficient place to start our movements from.

Since this is a subtle movement it can sometimes be difficult to do while upsidedown, so practicing it standing upright first can be easier on our brain. Try putting your hands on your hips and tilting your pelvis forward (anterior tilt) and backwards (posterior tilt). You can also try this standing with your back on the wall, see if by rotating your pelvis you can get your low back to flatten enough to touch the wall. You may notice that when you rotate into posterior tilt not only does your back flatten but you also encourage both the activation of the pelvic floor muscles as well as the lower abdominal muscles, hello core strength!

Another thing you can experiment with after rotating the pelvis is activating the glutes and thighs, think as if you had a block or water bottle in between the thighs. This activation can help turn our loose wet noodle into a nice stiff al dente noodle and can be easier to balance. How hard you

POSTERIOR PELVIC TILT



ANTERIOR PELVIC TILT



occurs, just like with other body parts we've talked about before, with time and practice there should be less muscle contraction if we want to me more efficient and stay up longer in our handstand.

Placing emphasis on “small” movements like this can really make a huge difference in your handstand practice, when the whole body works in an integrated manner things start to feel so much lighter! Of course this all takes time, I know I sound like a broken record, but if you practice regularly it will become more like driving a car in automatic down the freeway with music blasting =)

Core

Yay core! Another controversial topic in the world of handstands.

In the fitness world many coaches claim that core (especially “deep core” TVA and pelvic floor muscles) are absolutely necessary while doing a handstand. Then in the yoga world many teachers claim it’s all about the Bandhas (energy “locks” located in the “deep core” region) that give us the power necessary to hold inversions. And then we have many handstand coaches who say that core isn’t all THAT important since it’s a compound exercise. I don’t want to go down this rabbit hole but in my own humble opinion and from my own experience I’ll say that we do need **SOME** core strength and awareness around your center, sometimes more and other times less, but I don’t think you need to have abs of steel or whatever to hold a handstand =)

SO if for example we are pressing into a handstand or doing some sort of dynamic movement we will definitely be needing more core strength than if we are just holding a static shape. But even though having major core strength isn’t necessary to hold a handstand we definitely don’t want to be loose as a noodle either. Imagine trying to balance a cooked noodle on your hand versus balancing a hard uncooked one, which one is easier? Also, this is where the center of mass (our “center” and the heaviest part of the body) is usually located and we want to be aware of this part of the body, so we want the muscles there to be active and attentive.

As I mentioned in the pelvis section, when we rotate into posterior tilt we encourage the pelvic muscles to activate, which in part will encourage the TVA muscle (transversus abdominis muscle) to engage properly since they activate together. Some say that the TVA muscle acts kinda like a corset, pinching in our waist making us nice and “tight” at the waist”. A cue that may help in getting a feel for this would be to “gently pull the low belly in and up” or “hollow out the belly”.

In all actuality the core isn’t just the abdominal muscles, the word **CORE** in general is more of a fitness buzzword and not one part of the body. If you were to google it right now you will get many different definitions and not one of them is “the right one”. Different people have different definitions of it so it can be quite confusing. But even though we may not know what the core is exactly, we do know what it’s not, it’s not just the stomach muscles. It’s also the pelvic, hip, and maybe even some back muscles. Everything is connected and if we want to be efficient in our handstand training we must look at the body as a whole with many moving parts. SO yes use the core, learn how to activate it, learn how to “control” it, but at the same time I don’t think there’s a point in doing a million hollowbody holds everyday.



With all that being said however, we may not need a core of steel but

if we have no body awareness whatsoever or have below average core strength, it may hinder our handstand progress and we may want to consider doing some direct core training. Or if we are more advanced trying to progress in a specific skill which involves more core strength (like a handstand press entry), then some targeted core exercise can also benefit us. But more often than not it can be safe to assume that our body has intelligence and naturally responds to different stressors.

Since we are able to stand up right and walk around it's most likely that our core is stabilising us along the way. This can be easily demonstrated in the exercise from the Mindset chapter where we stood on one leg with our eyes closed.. As soon as that leg lifts there is a big chance that our core will probably start doing it's magic, that's what it's there for! In fact, our whole nervous system is there to support us and it is pretty good at instinctively activating what needs to be activated to help us keep balanced, alive and healthy. Maybe try to trust it sometime!

SO in general, in the beginning we may need to focus our attention more on our core to feel stable, but as we progress we won't necessarily have to continually overanalyse or think too much about contracting certain muscle groups because they will do it automatically as our nervous system learns how to BALANCE. Balancing is a constant back and forth between contracting certain muscle and relaxing others in order to keep our centre of mass over our base of support (bellybutton region over the hands). Where do you fall on the scale? Do you think you could benefit from some added direct core exercises? You be the judge!



Balance

Before we go into the mechanics of how to balance, let's take a look at some of the science behind it first.

The vestibular system consists of two primary structures of the inner ear: the cochlea, responsible for our hearing, and the vestibular apparatus, responsible for balance, spacial orientation and stability. I won't go into too much detail about how this system works but it's worth mentioning that it works hand in hand with our visual system (the eyes) and the proprioceptive system (body movement sensory and muscle).

Since it's inside our skull, the brain doesn't really know where our body is located in space, so it has to rely on these systems to stay "balanced". What happens is, there are these little calcium balls located in our inner ear and depending on which way we move our head the balls roll in different directions helping our brain orient and compensate to shifts when it comes to gravity and where we are in space.

So if we are standing still or moving around on a regular surface there is no need for these systems to be on high alert. The little balls in our ears roll around gently and our eyes stay calm and relaxed gazing softly. And it's not only our eyes that stay relaxed, did you know that when we look at something far away (like at the horizon) this has an extremely pleasant and relaxing effect on our whole body/mind? (lots of neural chemicals get released into our body)

The opposite is also true however. When we narrow our vision to a single point of focus, like looking intensely at our phone or in-between our hands while hardstanding, this causes heightened alertness and hyper focusing on detail. So if we are walking on a narrow surface like a tightrope or just starting to get upside down for the first time, things inside our body start to change and kick into high gear to help us remain balanced!



FOCUSED GAZE



It all has to do with how much focus and alertness we need in the skill that we are performing.

Our bodies are smart like that when it comes to optimising energy. SO if we are standing still with our head upright, our body is used to it and can be relaxed. However, if we are doing something novel like learning how to handstand or balancing on a higher surface, our body will need to have a particular reference point from the outside to mark the position of our body in space. What this means is that by focusing our vision on a particular spot or object, our brain will have a static reference point that's easier to concentrate on. This causes us to be more alert and in the moment which allows adjustments to be made accordingly to help us keep from falling, in other words it helps us in BALANCING.

This is why usually, when we are just learning how to handstand it helps to look at one spot in-between the hands, without moving our eyes around too much. Having a fixed gaze will increase our attention, focus and help our nervous system do it's magic. As we progress however, it may be more efficient to try to relax the gaze and even experiment with different head positions as novelty and play will keep us happy and help us progress (like we talked about before). But in the beginning it may just cause unnecessary chaos, but don't take my words for it, experiment with it yourself!

The yogis have known about the importance of our gaze for a long time and call this directing attention by focusing the gaze on a specific point "drishti". Where our attention goes, energy flows and where and how we look matters, we can either relax our body with our eyes or bring on more alertness. This brings me back to the exercise we did in the Mindset chapter, was standing on two legs was different from standing on one leg? How did closing the eyes and removing the visual system change your ability to balance?

So long story short, where and how we look matters! Try to gaze at one point in between the hands without moving the eyes around too much =)

The Hands

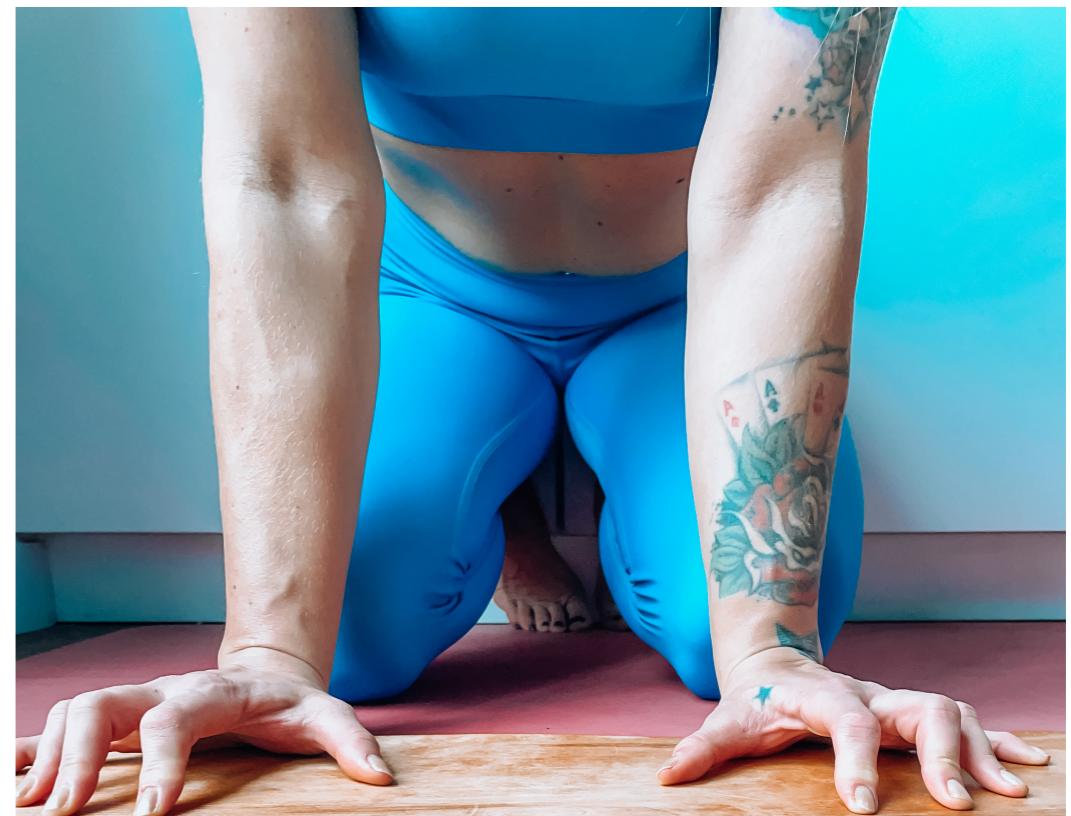
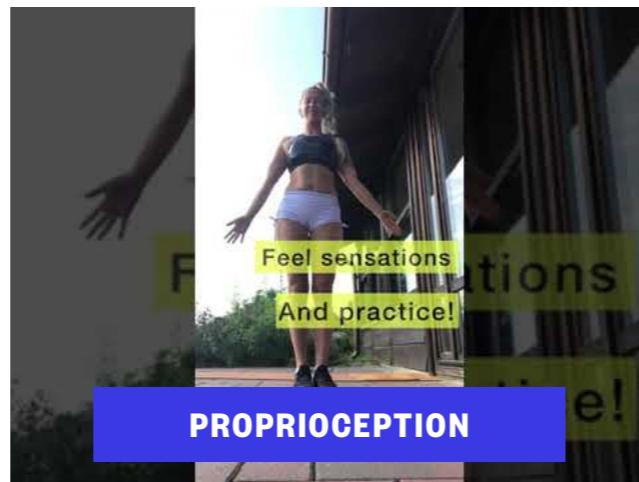
Proprioception, otherwise known as kinesthesia, is your body's ability to sense movement, action, and location.

Sometimes called the sixth sense, proprioception gives us the ability to move through space without constantly thinking about the next step. What does all this have to do with our hands? Well, remember we are trying to turn our hands into feet and demanding a lot of new things from our body.

So now let's maybe try this standing balance exercise in the video above. Notice, do you feel how when the body weight shifts forward, we have to push into the toes to send the body back to equilibrium (the sweet spot in the middle where we are balanced). And if the body starts to shift backwards, we have to push weight into the heels of our feet to send the body forward back into equilibrium. It's like being on a see-saw. The same thing happens in a handstand only the anatomy of the feet and hands differ, our feet have heels that stick out and help us balance but our hands don't.

So just like when we're standing on our feet, when we're in handstand and our body starts shifting too far forwards past our wrists, we can put some pressure into the tips of fingers to send our body slightly back to find the "stack" (equilibrium). This is called the correction of OVERBALANCE. It gets a bit trickier when our body weight starts shifting backwards in the other direction past our base of support (our hands). Since the "heel" of our hand isn't as pronounced as the heels on our feet, pressing it into the ground alone won't always help us get our body back to center. What I've found that often helps in this is also lifting the fingertips a little off the ground until we get back to our center and GRIP with the whole hand once again.

The part of the hand that we should be putting our weight into is the FIRST KNUCKLE AND THUMB REGION. And by GRIPPING I mean that the whole hand should be making contact with the ground. (Like in the bottom picture). In the top picture the first knuckle is lifted which gives us less stability. The more we spread our fingers and the more they are connected to the floor, the bigger our



FIRST KNUCKLE IS LIFTED, NO WEIGHT IN THE CENTER OF THE HAND



WHOLE HAND IS GRIPPING, WEIGHT IS IN THE CENTER OF THE HAND

So learning how to balance is this constant dance of over and under balance, gripping the ground and relaxing the hands over and over again.

It's an interplay of the vestibular system the brain and muscles, everything is firing and wiring and moving constantly to correct balance. But it's a slow process for our nervous system to learn how to respond to all this novel stimuli, so we can't expect it to happen in a week or month so don't believe the hype of all those gimmicky "learn to handstand in 30 days". Our hands and arms from an anatomical point of view make pretty shitty feet and legs but with practice and body awareness they will learn over time!

This is why doing static handstand drills at the wall where our body is LEANING ON THE WALL, WILL NOT translate into learning how to balance. Doing these static holds will strengthen our bodies, expand body awareness, maybe lessen the fear factor and teach us "correct alignment" (for our body), but it won't translate into our ability of holding a freestanding handstand. In order to learn how to balance, as scary as it is, we will have to move away from the wall at some point and just DO THE DAMN THING!

OVERBALANCE

CENTER

UNDERBALANCE



Balancing different shapes

The straight handstand is actually a pretty advanced shape.

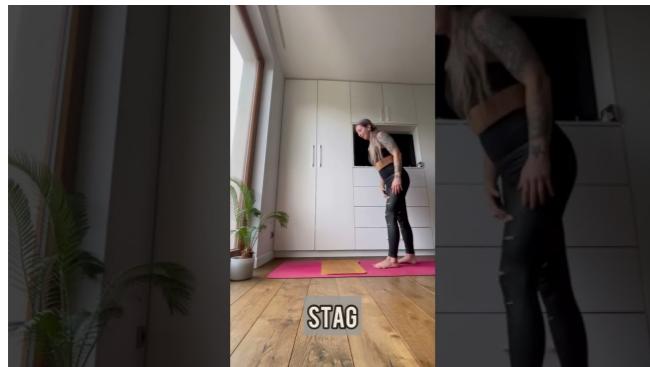
So in the beginning, I'd recommend using our body type to our advantage and trying out different handstand shapes.

Meaning if we are naturally “backbendy”, then we may find that doing a handstand shape that involves a curve in the low back a bit easier to balance than a straight one.

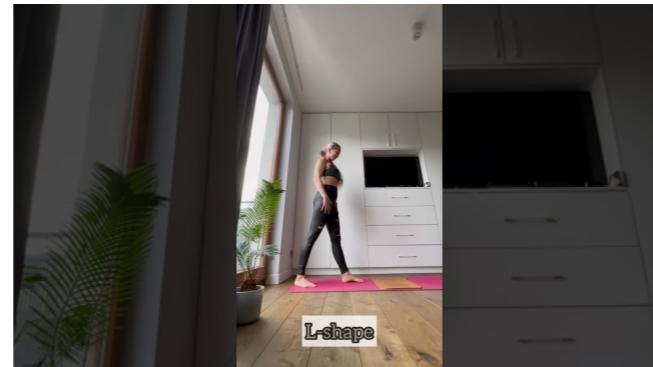
If we are more “stiff” in the low back then a straighter handstand shape may feel more natural for us from the beginning.

Why make life harder than it already is? Let's use nature to our advantage!

BALANCING - BENDY SHAPES



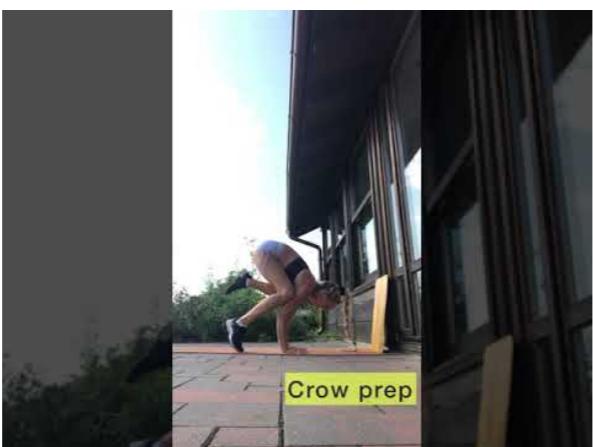
BALANCING - FLAT LOW BACK



CROW POSE VARIATIONS



CROW POSE - LEARNING TO BALANCE



Arm Balances

Practicing arm balances can be a good entry way into moving away from the wall and learning how to balance on our hands. Plus we're a lot closer to the floor so for many people it may be a bit less scary!

The arms may be bent in most low balances, but the hands are doing the same thing as in handstand.. BALANCING! SO if we feel our centre of mass is going too far over the base of support (meaning our body weight is going too far past the hands) in order to stay balanced we have to push into our fingertips to send the body back. And if the opposite is true that our centre of mass is going too far back behind the base of support(our body weight is going too far behind the hands) then we need to push into the heel of the hand.. Does this sound familiar? Yes, it's the same thing as when we're balancing in a handstand.

Besides helping us get the hang of balancing, low balances are also a great way to strengthen the shoulders, they're FUN and they build confidence! I will never forget the first time I did crow pose, I felt like I was defying gravity and that accomplishment alone made me feel like I could do anything! This also brings me back to the topic of growth mindset and the dopamine reward system that we discussed in the chapter on GOALS.

Learning these low balances can be a great milestone on our journey to handstand! It defiantly was that way for me, each new pose I learned made me stronger physically and mentally! I started believing in my self and that distant goal of "LEARN TO HANDSTAND" was coming closer and closer.

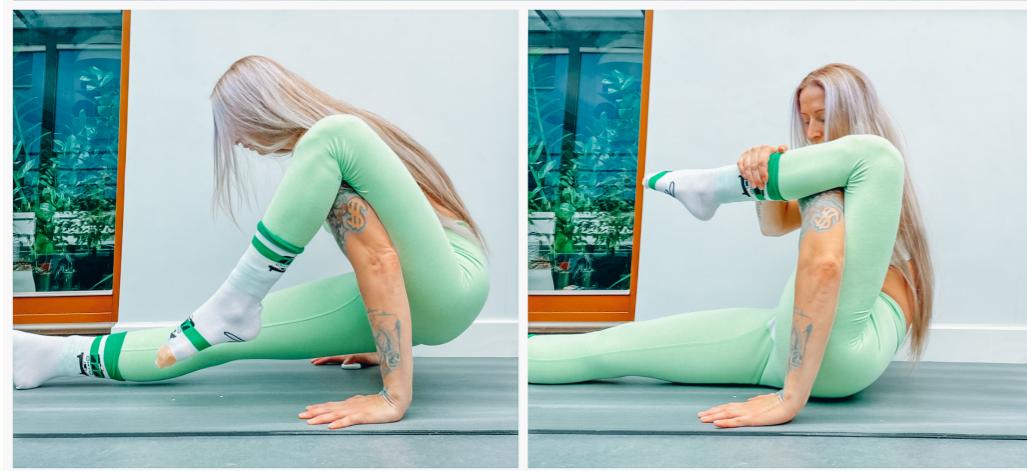
I think Crow Pose is a great place to start when it comes to learning low balances and I often teach it.

More arm balances to try:

ELEPHANT TRUNK POSE VARIATIONS



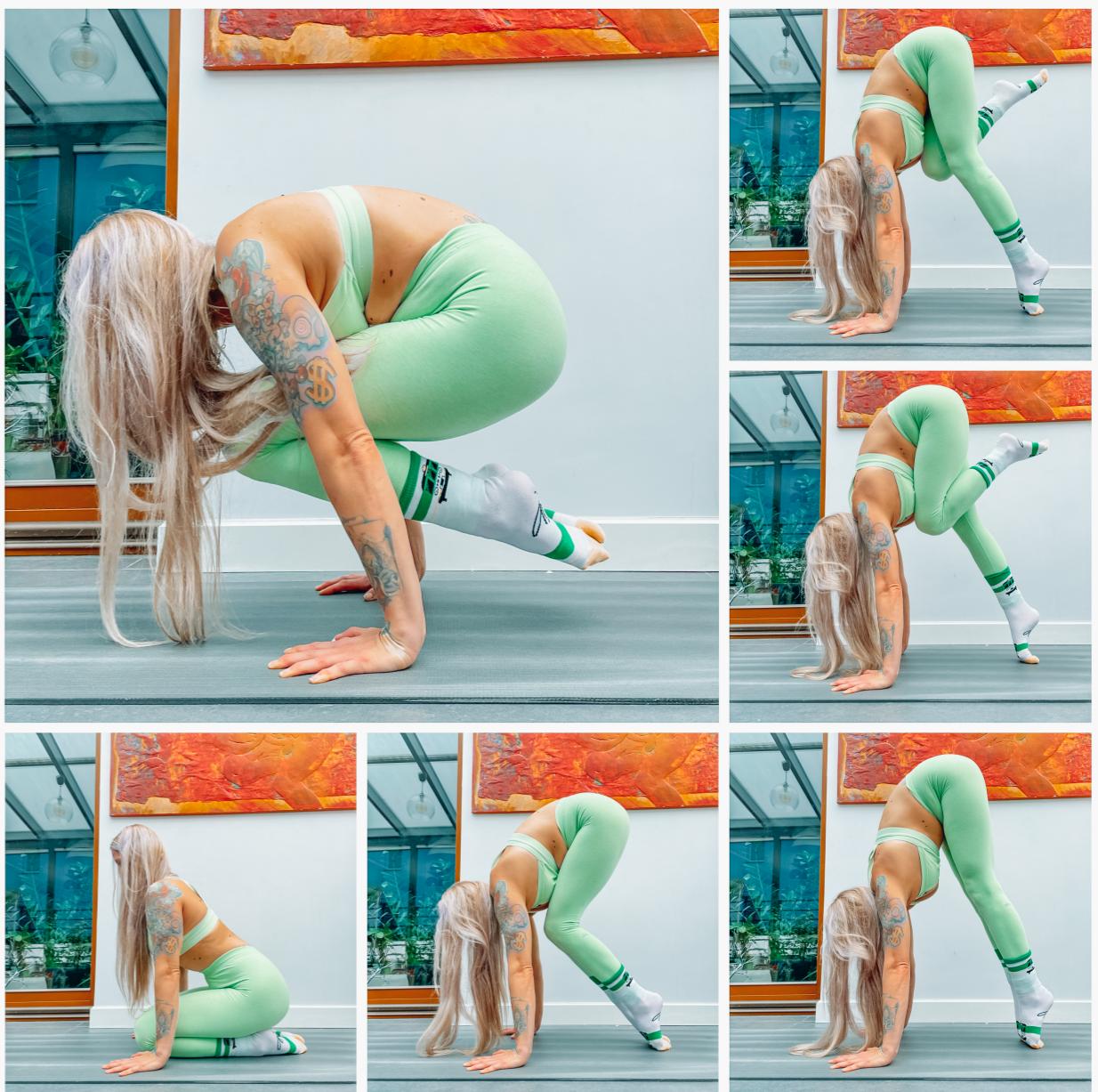
L- SIT VARIATIONS



FIREFLY POSE VARIATIONS



LOLASANA VARIATIONS



The Banana Back

A banana back is a curved handstand which often gets a really bad rep

in the handstand community as it's not as "aesthetically pleasing" as a straight handstand, but it's actually where a lot of people start because it's a more natural position for the body. Ask any person who's never held a handstand to try and kick up and see what shape they make with their body, chances are it will be curved!

This is actually how my freestanding handstands looked in the beginning. And even though it wasn't pretty, the curved shape made it easier for me to stay up on longer on my hands to learn those subtle rocking movements like a pendulum. This my friends is the art of BALANCING.

And FYI, old school hand balancers actually performed all their handstands with curves in their back! Like the godfather of hand balancing himself, Professor Paulinetti who basically invented the one arm handstand (and the one arm Planche), and he did all of this with a curved back! So the straight alignment that's preferred today is purely aesthetics.

Another reason why curved handstands are demonised is because there's this myth that doing curved handstands will hurt your back, but I think it's just like anything else in life. If you're smart about your training and don't go far past your load capacity you should be safe. Like. Said previously, I'm also not a fan of fear mongering and scaring tactics because I believe our bodies are pretty robust and not that easy to "break".

STRAIGHT

CURVED



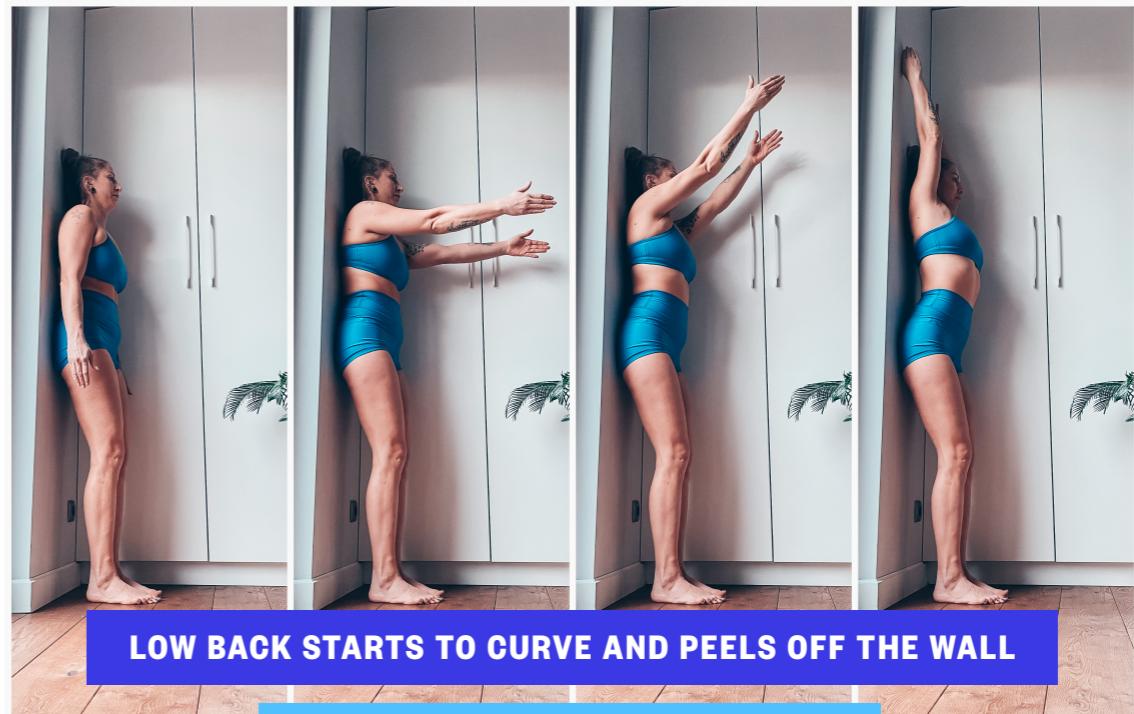
Let's not forget that the spine isn't straight and has natural CURVES.

So as long as we don't do too much too soon, push past our limit and are aware of core engagement, with practice we will build up the necessary strength and flexibility (as much as our anatomy allows) to move on to more demanding alignment or shapes. And just like Rome wasn't built in a day, we won't learn to handstand with "perfect" alignment in a day either, it's a process and it takes time, body awareness and PRACTICE. SO we really gotta try to take in all those small wins and learn to enjoy that journey, since the refinement process can last our whole life! Try to make handstand practice playful and introduce new things to your trainings, it will be a lot more pleasurable that way!

So what are some things that can cause this infamous curved handstand aka "banana handstand"? Well most often closed shoulders can be the culprit behind it. Holding a straight handstand demands at least 180 degree overhead shoulder flexion, in other words straightening of the arms all the way overhead and locking them in place with the help of the scapula. This lets us stack our bones up on top of each other making the straight line more of a "resting pose", when we find that sweet spot in the middle and almost feeling weightless for a split second or two.

If we're lacking the necessary shoulder flexibility the shoulders tend to start leaning a bit forward (in a Planche type shape). This in the long run, can put unnecessary strain on the shoulders as well as can throw off alignment for the rest of the body. "Proper alignment" in straight handstand has a lot to do with how our pelvis and shoulders line up with each other, so if one of these is lacking necessary mobility it's going to negatively impact the others position. But relax, it's not the end of the world, we can still hold a handstand even if our shoulders aren't that open. Unless we are going to the Olympics in a gymnastics competition there's no need to worry about the perfect alignment of a straight handstand. Besides, with time and practice and with the help of different mobility drills our shoulders will start to open up! (well as much as our anatomy allows anyway).

You can test your shoulder flexion easily by putting your back against a wall and raising your arms over head. If you are able to do this without your ribs flaring out and/or your lumbar spine (low back) curving and peeling off the wall, then you have



pretty open shoulders and achieving the elusive straight line will probably be easier for you. If not, you will most likely compensate for the limited ROM (range of motion) by throwing some other body part out of alignment.

So if having a straight handstand is our goal, we can move towards it but like I mentioned above, sometimes there are things in our anatomy that we just can't change (like bone or joint shape) but I don't think that that should be a reason not to do handstands. You may have to work a little harder, but with practice and learned body awareness I think that anything is possible!

SHOULDER mobility & posture



Shoulder flexion VS Lumbar extension

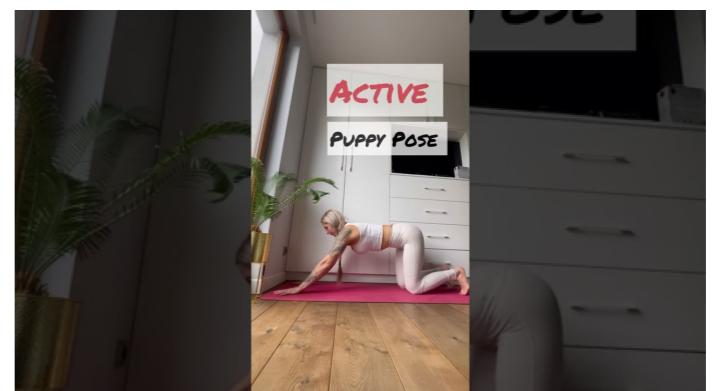
The main goal in the “shoulder openers” in this chapter is to avoid the lumbar spine compensating for poor thoracic extension and shoulder flexion. If our shoulders are “tight” our body will naturally want to bend in other areas and the most mobile part of the body that this usually happens in the lumbar spine (lower back).

We can be doing this unknowingly in shoulder opening drills and then further our tendency to do it while in handstand which only leads to more of a “banana back” shape. So if you are a very back bendy person, maybe keep an eye our for this because if you we are bending at the low back, we are missing the point of the drill and we’re just doing a backbend.

When bringing the arms overhead (shoulder flexion) notice if your low back starts to curve and if your ribs start to flare out, if they do consciously try to tuck the low ribs down and tuck the tail bone under elongating the lumbar spine. Then PUSH through the shoulders and bring the scapula into ELEVATION(up) and slight PROTRACTION(spreading them apart). This action brings our thoracic spine into a slight flexion (rounding) which is the position we want in a straight handstand.

One of my favorite drills to get more flexible shoulders is PUPPY TO CAT pulses. This is isn’t a complicated exercise however, if we aren’t consciously focusing on keeping the work in the shoulders, it’s easy to start letting the ribs flare out and the low spine extend.

SHOULDER “OPENERS”



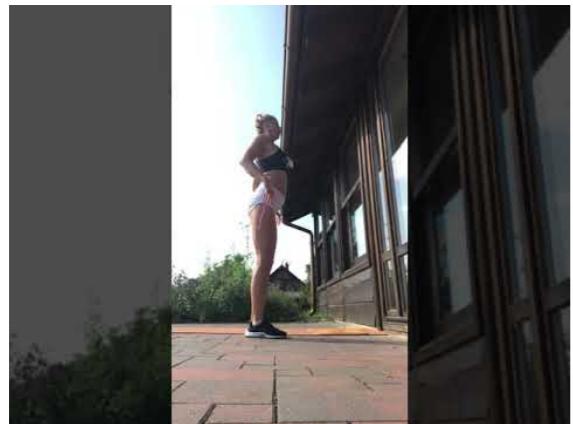
An added bonus side effect of practicing handstands

An added bonus side effect of practicing handstands (no matter which shape) is that we are also actively working on our shoulder flexion while upside down! But there's one shape in particular that I consider to be the greatest "shoulder opener", the tuck handstand (if practiced properly).

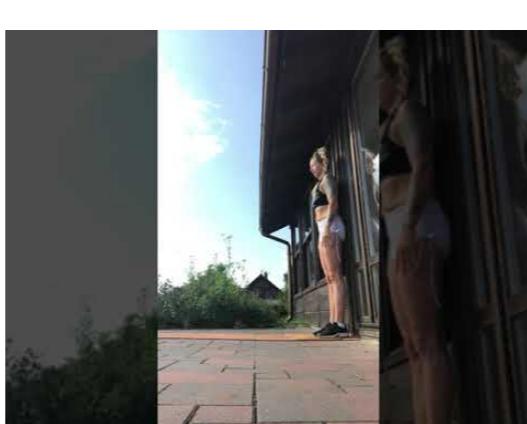
In this tuck, try to focus on the shoulder flexion (straightening) and not letting the lumbar and thoracic spine compensate and extend too much. It may naturally feel easier since the low back is very mobile, but we want to keep the work in the shoulders for this exercise! (Don't get me wrong there's nothing wrong with going into spinal extension in handstand but this brings us into a whole other category of hollow back and back bendy shapes which are fun but these are more advanced shapes and not the topic of this chapter)

One way I like to think about this handstand posture is that it's kind of like as if someone punched us straight in the gut. Instead of the chest and bum sticking out, our tummy goes in, the thoracic spine (top of the back) rounds and the pelvis goes into a slight posterior tilt (bum flattens aka tucking of the tailbone). It's not a pretty sight while standing, but it'll get you the "desired" straight handstand aesthetic.

HANDSTAND POSITION & POSTURE



SHOULDER MOBILITY TEST



TUCK WITH FOCUSED ON
SHOULDER FLEXION

TUCK WITH BEND
COMPENSATION
IN THE LOW SPINE

Wall Work

A great way to get acquainted with what it feels like to be upside down and at the same time get stronger is working with a prop like the wall.

Walls are great because they're free, we usually have at least one at home, they're pretty strong and reliable! And not to mention in the beginning when we're learning how to kick up and fighting with gravity for our lives, thinking of alignment will probably be the last thing on our minds, but with the support of the wall it can become easier!

Training with the wall gives us the stability, support and builds confidence. Thanks to this we can reduce the fear of falling and in return it'll be easier for us to implement technique as well as all the detailed alignment cues necessary to eventually get that straight handstand (or whatever other shape we may be drilling).

In other words, without the fear factor it may be easier to create new neural pathways in our brains as well as the necessary neuromuscular patterns in our bodies so that with time it will become a natural reflex, and we won't have to think of all the millions of things we have to do with our body because they will just happen on their own!(Just like walking or driving a car!!!) Like I've said before and I'll say it again, it's a process, it takes time and it will be different for everyone because we're all different!



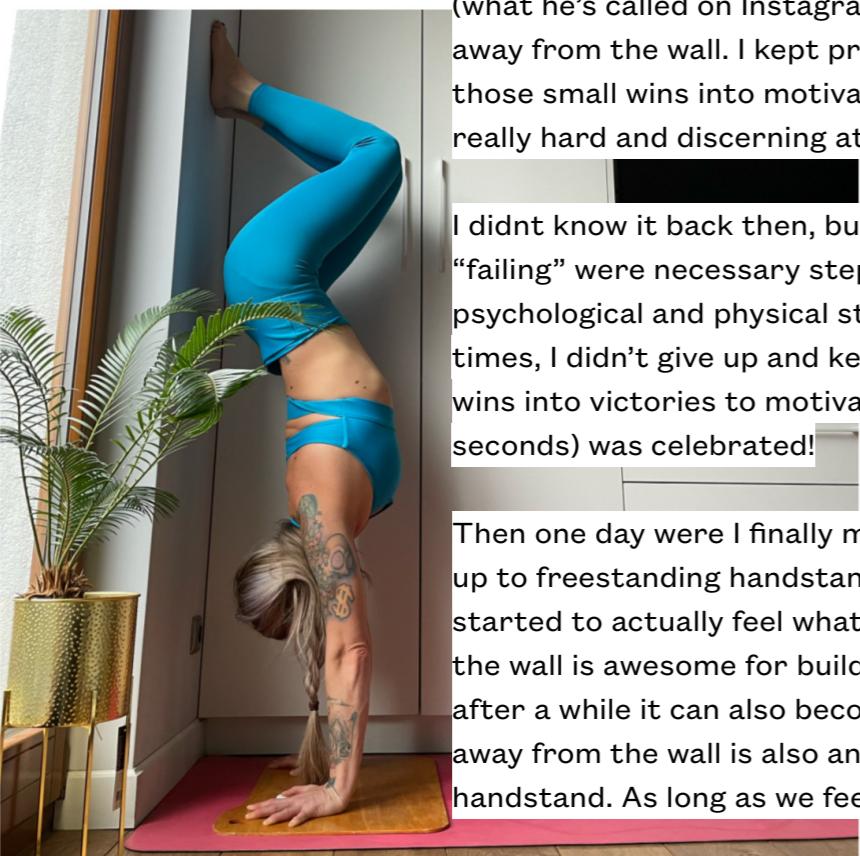


I spent a good year or so practicing only with “Paul the Wall”

(what he's called on Instagram). I was too paralysed by fear to try away from the wall. I kept practicing regularly and tried to turn all those small wins into motivation to keep going but I won't lie it was really hard and discerning at times.

I didnt know it back then, but all those countless hours of falling and “failing” were necessary steps in the process, building up my psychological and physical strength. Even though it felt impossible at times, I didn't give up and kept on going. I tried to turn all those small wins into victories to motivate myself, each short hold (even if it was 2 seconds) was celebrated!

Then one day were I finally mustered up enough courage to and kick up to freestanding handstand outside in the forest and that's when I started to actually feel what it was like to balance on my hands! Using the wall is awesome for building strength and learning alignment but after a while it can also become a crutch, so knowing when to step away from the wall is also an important step in learning how to handstand. As long as we feel strong and safe enough to do it!

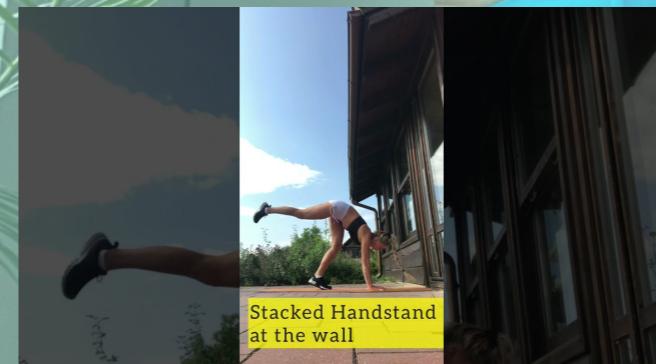


Back to Wall Handstand Drills

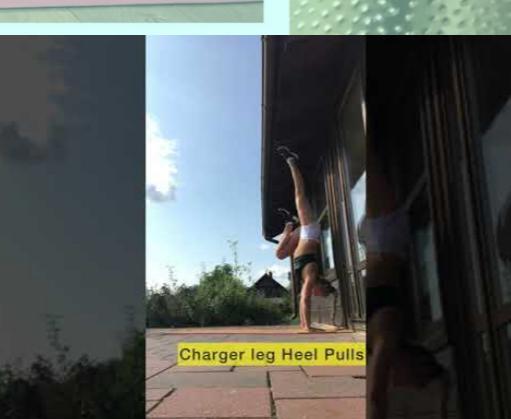
HEEL PULLS



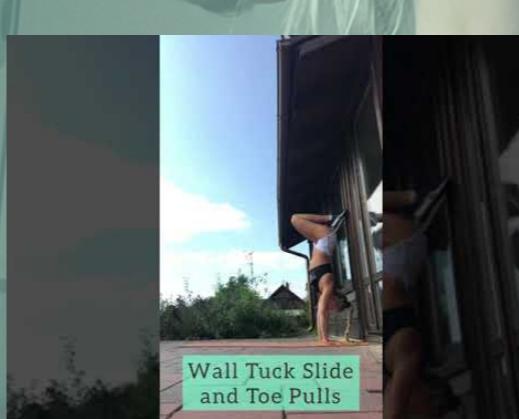
STACKED HANDSTAND



CHARGER LEG HEEL PULLS



WALL TUCK SLIDES AND TOE PULLS



Facing the Wall Drills

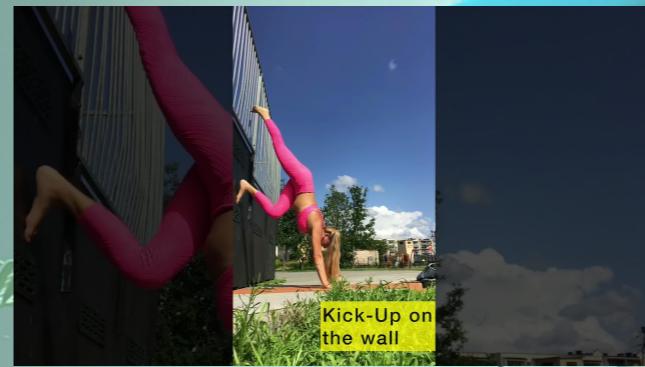
WALL WALK UPS



CHEST TO WALL PROGRESSIONS



KICK UP ON THE WALL



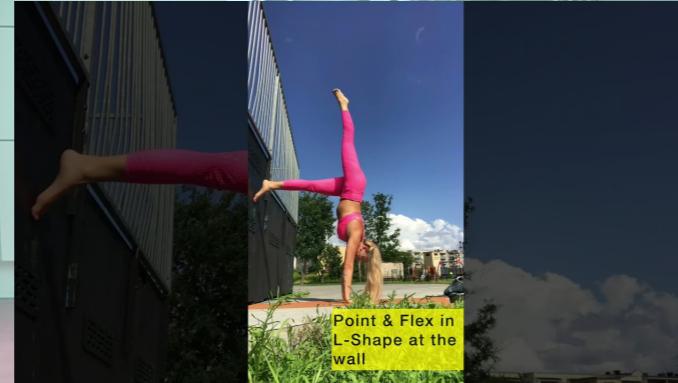
Y- SHAPE TOE PULLS



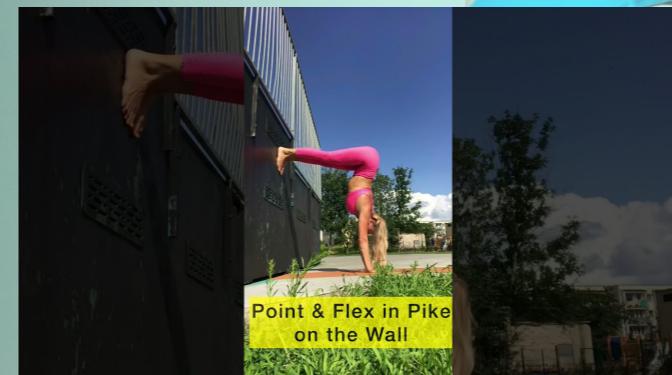
L-SHAPE WALK UPS



L-SHAPE POINT & FLEX



POINT & FLEX IN PIKE



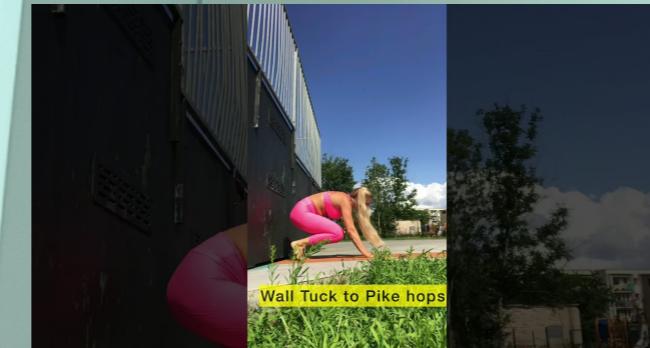
TUCK HEEL PULLS



WALL TUCK HOPS



WALL TUCK TO PIKE HOPS



TUCK SLIDES



THE 5 MAIN PARTS OF A HANDSTAND PRACTICE

30 minutes 2/3 times a week

The Warm-Up

7 minutes (always include the wrists!)

The Exit Strategy

5 minutes- ugly frog & ugly cartwheel progressions

Entry Practice

5 minutes - kick-ups and frog hops

(Do both legs!)

Balance

7 minutes

Quality over quantity, teach those hands how to be feet!

Strength & Alignment

7 minutes

Focus on alignment

BONUS IDEA~ Maybe instead of resting in between sets try to work on flexibility by either doing some active or passive stretches



Cool Down

Cooling down after an intense training **allows our body temperature, blood pressure, and heart rate to return to their normal levels.**

Stretching our muscles while they're still warm can also help in reducing the chance of muscle cramps and stiffness afterwards.

Also we know that most of our neural plasticity (learning) happens when we are sleeping, however new research is showing that it's not only in deep states of sleep but also states of wakeful rest can help in learning and enhance our memory! So even just 1 or 2 minutes of resting with eyes closed after a training session can prove to be beneficial.

So the next time you think of skipping out on that cool down, maybe stop and think again because it may actually help us in more ways than we think! ([Link to study](#))

