



Posturing a Better Body!

How many times have you (as parents) told your children to stand up straight, or you (as children) heard it from your parents? More, I assume, than you can count! With every good intention in the world, we know how much fatigue, stress, and life can get in the way of standing up straight. Not only does it make for a healthier body, but it also has many social standard assumptions.

Social Standards

Oft times, people who possess poor posture are assumed to be lazy, depressed, lacking confidence, fatigued, uninterested, unengaged and introspective. Seems to be a long list of assumptions with only nonverbal communication, that may not even be intentional from the person themselves, but assumed by the observer, right? How many of these may be true, and how many times have you had poor posture and none of these are proper explanations, or there is more to the story?

It can affect our life with regards to work communication, leadership ability, job interviewing, first impressions in relationships (whether social or vocational) and so much more. One who stands looking down at the ground, or looks like they are hiding something, is assumed to have personality traits based on this observation that sadly can be covering up a wonderful, happy person inside!

Legitimate Reasoning

The behind the scenes story may have more to it than simply laziness. Oft times people have poor posture for a good explanation (not that it cannot be overcome, but reasoning is there) such as:

- desk job with minimal break freedom
- adolescent posture at desks in school
- intense reading/writing only to be done in a chair-desk situation
- Scoliosis
- Other spine orthopedic or curvature problems
- Rib issues or breathing-related pain/difficulty
- Recovery from breast, heart, or chest surgery
- Recovery from back or abdominal surgery (history of laying down for a long time on end...)
- Embarrassment of chest size (too small, too large, recently altered by surgery/cancer)
- And more...

Don't judge a book by its cover...

In an unfortunate world of judgment, everywhere from magazines to internet, concepts of beauty from social media, to peer pressure in social circles. Legitimate reasons aside, if you are simply suffering from lazy muscles, or are recovering from poor posture as a result of a medical condition, there are ways that you *can* help yourself to make it better!

Solutions

Here are some solutions, and who they are appropriate for, as well as the how-to!

1) Strengthening. Posture struggles are often a result of weaknesses in one or a combination of the following areas

- mid-shoulder blade area
- Spine extensors, from head to sacrum
- Glutes
- Deep neck flexors
- Back of the neck/head extensors
- Abdominals/core

All of these can be strengthened through repetitive motion activities as well as isometric holding (use the muscle with no motion). A few examples are planks, neck holds off the end of a table, rows, swiss ball exercises with arm motion while laying on the ball on your stomach, and more! Formal exercise programs such as Pilates and Yoga are wonderful at combining core stability with flexibility and alignment as well. Try 1:1 sessions first, to make sure that you are performing moves properly, as opposed to walking into a group class where the number of students may be too large for the instructor to keep his/her eye on you all of the time.

2) Soft Tissue Work. Manipulating the tissue of the neck, back, shoulder blade area, pecs, chest and rib cage is very important in allowing for permanent change to muscle resting tension, as well as spine alignment. A good massage therapist will not only relax the muscle for the time being, but allow a more permanent change in structure. A Physical Therapist is your best bet, trained in a combination of joint mobilization, soft tissue work, scar tissue release, breathing mechanics, re-strengthening, and posture endurance training. As an ancillary for relaxation, acupuncture and chiropractic are helpful in the realignment process and as part of the PT team.

3) Bracing. There are many variations of bracing that may help posture concerns. If the low back is painful, it may help the upper back and overall alignment to brace the low back, allowing a more vertical stance and decreasing levels of pain. Shoulder retraction bracing (often called a posture bra) is also an option, decreasing the shoulders from rounding forward and helping the mid-scapular (shoulder blade to

spine) muscles in knowing where they should be. These also take tension off muscles that may be overworking to compensate for poor spine and head position.

4) For Women, Proper Bra Fitting. I know this may sound trivial, but to those who are ashamed of breast sizes that are too small, a proper bra sizing may help with confidence. As well, if one breast is misshapen, it may also help with balance, and then there is no more “hunching” to hide. If larger breasts are your concern, sometimes these can be concealed to a point with a properly fitted bra. As well, the strap width and pressure disbursement is very important to pay attention to, as straps that are not wide enough may dig in to shoulder muscles and cause overuse and tension in compensating muscle groups.

5) Self-Myofascial work and Stretching. It is so important to remember to “un-do” what has been done in a day. If you know that you need to be focused on that keyboard and computer, or school desk, then “reverse” the stress by stretching the overworked muscles. Here are some tips:

- Lay backwards over a swiss ball, allowing your spine to extend and open over the ball. Move arms overhead for a great rib and diaphragm stretch as well as armpit opening, important for lymph nodes and posture
- Foam roll- lay over a horizontally-placed foam roller. Roll up and down from upper back to lower, or simply find some spots and “hold” for 10-15 seconds while taking deep breaths.
- Pec Stretching- it is really important to make sure that the muscles that work to pull us forward are stretched. We spend almost all of our time with our arms in relative “front” of our body, very little with them straight down our side, and almost no time with them behind us. So, stand in a doorway, one foot in front of the other for stability, arms out to the side with elbows bent at 90 degrees, and lunge forward, opening up your chest. Hold for 15-30 seconds, repeat as needed throughout the day.
- Neck Stretches. Our neck is usually busy holding our head up from bad posture, or from leaning forward to read, type, or play with our portable electronic devices. Take time to do some Chin Tucks (stand, make a double chin, hold and repeat). Also, take time to turn head from side to side, and to bend the neck L and R, stretching out those overused Upper Traps from stress and fatigue.

6) Desk Set-up. Make sure that your desk is ergonomically set up right, monitor at eye level, keyboard within reach and arm weight supported, mouse comfortable, chair at a good height for foot support and back in a good position. There are many websites that will offer details on the best ergonomics for you. As well, even in bed, sit properly if you are reading or typing. Get a supporting bed-table, lap pillow, or reading stand.

7) Carry Less, or carry it better. We seem to be the society of bags lately. There are stores specifically for bags and pads for electronic devices, money, wallets, backpacks. Sling bags, and suitcases. We carry it all with us, without thinking about how it effects our life.

- For the student, remember that you can carry less in your backpack by only taking what you need- books included, or buying/renting an extra set of the heavy ones. Socially, two straps may not be preferred, but neither will staring at the ground when you walk in 15 years!
- For the traveller, put it on wheels! There are so many styles of computer bags, carry-ons, suitcases, and garment bags that have wheels, great ergonomic handles and are even stylish. One shoulder should not bear the weight of the whole 4 day trip!
- Purses. Ladies, make it a cleansing experience to clean out those purses! How much weight are you carrying that you really don't need? As well, remember to switch shoulder-carrying sides, or even get a hand-help every once and a while to give the old upper traps a break!

8) Wear proper shoes. Shoes and the position of the foot are two of the most important aspects of posture. An ill-fitting shoe will alter how you stand, bear weight, disburse weight between the two legs and more. It will also alter hip and back position, which is the base for the spine to be stacked on (preferable vertically in alignment!). So, respect yourself and throw away those floppy flip-flops. Invest in a good pair of shoes for work, play and exercise. Get orthotics if need. Visit your local podiatrist for an evaluation. Wear those Uggs with limitation, if you need to at all, as there have been many research studies and articles done on the lack of foot and ankle support present (just look at the wear patterns and hear the scuffing sounds of lazy feet....) And most importantly, place health over fashion. You want to be healthy for longer, so that you can experience more fashion, right?

9) Have Confidence in Yourself. The best thing that people can do in life is give themselves an instant 2-3" height "raise" by standing tall, being confident in your walk, and most of all, loving who you are, for you. This will go much further than any gym program, trainer, therapist or device that you can buy. Confidence is wonderful.

I hope this helps everyone to know that you can help to prevent those who love you from patting you (lovingly) on the back and saying "stand up tall" or "someday you won't be able to stand straight anymore." It is beneficial for so many health reasons, social reasons and overall to make "you" the best "you" that is possible. Here's to a taller life, one posture inch at a time.....)