

Aligning Up: Good posture is about a lot more than just standing up straight

by Sibylle Preschat

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When it comes to poor posture, I've got it. A number of old injuries, endless computer work and the fact that I express anxiety through tight muscles all mean that I regularly turn into a pretzel. Dreams of alignment send me in search of body magicians, practitioners of Mitzvah, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais and Pilates.

Knowing yourself can bring you closer to the right stance.

After a week of releasing and rejigging and discovering all the weird ways I hold my muscles and joints, I conclude that it's shocking that there's no public support for those seeking to find a comfortable and healthy way of living in their bodies. The majority of people in this culture are disconnected from their physical manifestation, and it's just plain unfair that the remedies aren't available to everyone. Let's get some of these techniques into the public schools and covered by OHIP so we can fend off the diseases and painful ailments that plague us later in life.

FELDENKRAIS: This is where I made my biggest gains in changing my stance from the inside out.

The system, developed by Moshe Feldenkrais, a physicist seeking to heal an old knee injury, aims to locate your own personal distortions and then re-educate the neuromuscular system so it can release ineffective or stressful

habits. Using the gentlest of touches, my practitioner pointed out all my bad habits. Suddenly, my bones developed a correct relationship to gravity, and sitting and standing became effortless.

Almost a day later, as I sit and type this, I still feel a difference in my functioning. Of course, to really cement the new patterns in place I'll have to go back and do more private sessions or group classes. My Feldenkrais practitioner charges \$95 for a private session and \$12 a class if you pay for a whole term.

ALEXANDER: This method is definitely not a quick hit. And at \$50 a private session it's also not easily affordable. If you have a pressing physical problem, however, it may be worth it. Stories abound about Alexander helping people recover from serious injuries and illnesses.

The method, invented by Frederick Matthias Alexander, an elocutionist who kept losing his voice, depends more on the conscious mind's intervention than does Feldenkrais. The mantra is "release the neck, let the head lift up and out, lengthen the spine, release the torso."

Very useful -- but I'd need a lot of discipline to keep at it. My biggest enemy would be my "hurry up" approach to life. When am I willing to take five seconds to release my neck? I did appreciate my practitioner's insistence that I open my eyes and keep myself engaged in conversation with him while attempting the technique. The idea, he said, is to

learn how to do Alexander anytime, anywhere, not just with one's eyes closed and focus internal.

MITZVAH: This system, developed by former dancer M. Cohen-Nehemia, aims for a proper relationship between the pelvis, spine and head. The key thing students learn is how to send a wave or rippling motion up the spine, which lengthens it and allows the head to freely balance on top.

As the head comes into balance, explained my practitioner, other postural problems tend to correct themselves. My session included table work, in which the practitioner moved and stretched me while "rippling" herself in order to "teach" my body the motion -- it's one you're not likely to discover on your own. Then I learned some exercises I could do at home. For hours after, my right hip and upper spine, two of my tense areas, felt much more fluid. I figure it will take eight to 12 sessions to get untangled. At \$50 a pop, that's a major commitment.

PILATES: My introductory session had the least "feelable" impact on my body's alignment. Given that I was spending a fair bit of time talking with my instructor (who certainly knew her anatomy) because I needed to learn many new moves, that makes sense.

And unlike any of the other methods described here, Pilates works by strengthening muscles, and it was clear to me it would do that very well. (The other modalities are more focused on releasing unnecessary and misplaced tension.) Strengthening, of course,

takes time. I got the most detailed grilling on my injuries here, which I appreciated, given the potentially strenuous nature of Pilates. The system was created by Joseph Pilates, who studied meditation and ancient Greek and Roman exercise regimens. The private session will generally set you back about \$62 -- and some places insist on it before they let you attend the cheaper classes.

EXPERTS "It's good to get understanding of why your shoulders are around your ears (often related to fear), your chin thrust in the air (you're expressing, "I'll rise above it all"), your shoulders rounded (can be related to depression) or your lower back hurts (usually related to sexual issues around holding back, holding on, holding tight, being in control)."

AUDREY FULLERTON
Psychotherapist, bioenergetic analyst

"Standing straight as most people practise it compresses the mid- and low back, cuts off breathing and puts excess weight on the balls of the feet, leading to dropped metatarsals. When the force of gravity goes through the bones, little muscular effort is required to maintain good posture."

MARION HARRIS Feldenkrais practitioner

"The pelvis, spine and head all move in a wave motion together. When your head balances on top of that, you come move into your centre, and misaligned areas start to fall back into a better and more efficient place."

MONICA BURR Mitzvah teacher

"Not all Pilates instructors have the background to deal with a back problem. Find out if yours is certified, how long they trained (there's a two-day training out there) and if there was a strong functional anatomy

component to the training."

MOIRA STOTT-MERRITHEW
Pilates instructor

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