

Posture:

Listen to the wisdom of your grandmother and your physical therapist – and live more pain free for it.

By Ken McAlpine

(reprinted with permission from the author, featured in the June 2001 issue of “Southwest Airlines Spirit” in-flight magazine)

It may seem odd to pay to be insulted, but I will tell you that if you absorb those insults - nay, gather them in like sweet children and keep them forever close to you - it is well worth the price.

“You’ve got wonderfully flat feet,” says Tracy Fober. “And your right foot turns out.”

Fober’s gaze moves up my leg.

“You hyperextend your knees. It’s a lazy way to stand.”

Stepping up beside me, Fober traces a finger down my spine. Perhaps this is a gentle peace offering, a consoling gesture.

“Mild kyphosis,” says Fober.
“Hunchback.”

Fober is a physical therapist, a strength and conditioning specialist, and, given the graceful way she stands, aware of her position in space. She is employed by Nutrifformance, a spiffy, state of the art fitness facility housed in a sparkling St. Louis skyscraper. Before a Nutrifformance client lifts a weight or jogs a step, Fober gives them the same thorough and painfully objective 90-minute postural exam I am now undergoing. Some clients are rehabilitating injuries. Here Fober practices physical therapy in the traditional sense - deciphering their musculoskeletal peculiarities so that they can safely strengthen the injured body part.

I am the first trickle in what Fober hopes will mass into a new, forward thinking fitness wave – active, healthy folk going to see a physical therapist so as to avoid misalignment, pain and injury in the first place. Like most good ideas, this one is simple. Few of us are perfectly aligned. You wouldn’t race in the Indy 500 with

your wheels out of alignment. What sort of duck-splayed, pancake-footed fool would run eight miles in a pair of shoes purchased off the discount rack?

Thankfully, Fober doesn’t ask me this directly. Instead, she grasps my shoulders and regards me kindly, like some long lost hunchbacked relative.

“Most people are completely unaware of their posture,” she smiles. “They just don’t pay attention. It’s amazing any of us even end up halfway perfect. Your musculoskeletal health is important. But how can anyone address their problems if they don’t know about them?”

How good is your own posture? Better now that you’ve straightened up in your seat, but, odds are, still sadly misaligned.

“The posture of the average American?” says Dr. Shirley Sahrman, professor of physical therapy at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. “Poor and needs serious attention.”

Sahrman is a friendly woman with a bright sense of humor and an upbeat manner, perhaps because she knows she will never be out of work. Outside her office an adult workforce presses its collective foreheads against computer screens, slouching teens make James Dean look like a Marine, and diligent exercisers sweat to hone thick chests and washboard tummies – all throwing themselves symmetrically out of whack and one step closer to pain and injury.

“I know I’m going to stay busy,” says Sahrman. “Believing that your body can be treated in any which way and that you won’t pay for it in the long run is totally naïve.”

Poor posture can lead to inflexible joints and overly flexible joints – did you know that slouching when you sit will, over time, lengthen your back muscles, throwing a kilter their supporting role? Poor posture also causes chronic neck and upper back tension, knee, back, shoulder, hip and foot pain, recurring injuries and permanent disfigurement, not to mention people snootily writing you off as a slumping loser.

“If you realize that musculoskeletal problems are one of the main reasons people go to physicians, you realize it’s not a trivial problem,” says Sahrman.

Here is the happy – and ironic – punch line. Most postural woes – and their spinoff aches and pains - are easily erased. Sahrman recently examined a young medical student who was a postural train wreck. Ninety minutes later, he was a different man – and the diligent self-enforcement of his revised alignment eventually eliminated the nagging hip pain he had suffered when he ran.

“None of his problems were permanent,” says Sahrman. “He just didn’t know posturally where he should be. For most people it’s pretty simple. Just a few simple exercises and a few simple guidelines and they can turn their posture around.”

Posture’s simplicity is also its bane.

“You don’t hear much about posture because it’s not sexy,” says Fober. “There are no special gadgets, and it doesn’t burn calories. It’s just your grandmother nagging you to stand up straight.”

How simple can it be? Pestered by low back pain? Performed your last stretch when Nixon was president? Spend most

of your day sitting? The hamstrings and quadriceps in your legs are probably wound tighter than Scrooge's purse strings, and they're yanking at the muscles in your low back. A few simple quad and hamstring stretches – five minutes a day - can make low back pain a memory. Positive results can be more immediate. Stand up straight, as if you're trying to touch the top of your head to the ceiling. Your chest lifts, your spine aligns – much smooths out, from breathing to moving.

What isn't simple is sticking with postural improvements.

“It does take conscious effort,” says Sahrman. “The hardest part about posture correction is you can't just do ten repetitions of an exercise and then just go back to your good old habits.”

Postural misalignment and imbalance are subtle matters too, and, as Fober points out, “what's invisible now, can lead to problems later”. See the man with the expansive chest, honed to perfection by a bench press barrage. An impressive sight indeed, but your average beachgoer

can't see how those lovingly culled pecs are tugging the weaker muscles in his neglected upper back forward, presenting him with current neck and shoulder pain and, down the line, the distinct possibility of some serious shuffleboard stoop. See Middle America, in its frenzied pursuit of a flat stomach, banging off dozens of crunches – torqueing the rectus abdominis muscles tight and pulling the ribs, trunk and spine forward – potential stepping stones to back pain and injury. Three sets of 15 crunches, three times a week, says Sahrman, is enough.

Being fit and active doesn't absolve you from postural problems and their related pains.

“Actually poorly aligned exercisers are in more danger of getting into immediate trouble,” says Sahrman. “People who aren't doing anything, their problems catch up with them in older age.”

My own exam, while humbling, proves valuable. My mild kyphosis, says Fober, can be easily remedied simply by standing and sitting up straight, and strengthening

my upper back. Attention to my gait and a better pair of shoes – the woman misses nothing – possibly outfitted with orthotics, should erase the knee pain brought on by my flat, pronating feet. The calf and hamstring pulls that periodically halt my running are caused by inflexibility - five minutes of leg stretches a day should do the trick. I have good abdominal strength – and a strong trunk is critical to good posture - but I shouldn't let vanity lead me to crunch myself into problems.

“Just be aware,” smiles Fober.

Retooling yourself is as simple as that.