

HEALING CHRONIC BACK PAIN

7 STEPS TO PERFECT POSTURE

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Mark Frobb M.D.

OrthoWellness Publications

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*... to those that suffer and
the therapists charged with their care*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every practicing physician is a product of the mentors who have graciously expended energy in sharing their knowledge and experience in the healing arts, and I have been fortunate to count many throughout my 30-year medical career. This personal foundation of medical knowledge not surprisingly can cover a vast landscape of contributing teachers, in my case, from experiences with my father who practiced for 40 years as a country practitioner in Northern Canada, to my association with Dr. Christiaan Barnard, the world's first heart transplant surgeon from South Africa.

The treatment management of Chronic Back Pain is as much of an art as it is a science. With the complexity of the etiology leading to its onset, and the mix of myofascial and neuropathic pain presentations, it is not unreasonable that the best practitioners are those that have the widest variety of treatment approaches in their therapeutic armamentarium.

As one of my mentors once put it; "If the only tool you have in your bag is a hammer, everything will start to look like a nail."

In pursuit of this syllabus of continuing education, I have had the privilege of training in a renaissance era of manual medicine with opportunities of participation in hands-on treatment workshops with the giants of Osteopathic manual therapy, including Drs. Janet Travell, John Menell, Philip Greenman and John Bordillion, as well as the renowned physiotherapist from Australia, Robin McKenzie.

The adjunctive study of Traditional Chinese Medicine, with an entirely new set of mentors including Drs. Steven Aung, Joseph Wong, Sona Tahan and Linda Rapson along with over a decade of study in Taijiquan, the accompanying exercise companion to Traditional Chinese Medicine, has added an entirely new dimension and paradigm shift to my understanding and treatment of Chronic Back Pain.

The footnotes, articles and references that are accumulated during the writing of a book eventually fill multiple filing cabinet drawers and it is difficult to credit all the great contributors to medical science as the knowledge base evolves from decade to decade in the understanding of complex medical problems.

In the writing of this particular book however, I would like to acknowledge reference to the excellent anthology prepared by David Yosifon and Peter N. Stearns on the cultural history of posture. Although these historical facts are cross-referenced extensively in public archives, it is access to this type of documented research that assists authors in covering vast tracts of time quickly, saving innumerable research hours. It is to these authors and others who have tirelessly researched and presented the multitude of tidbits of facts that comprise the body of knowledge on a subject that I wish to express my thanks. It is only because of these efforts that the vanguard practitioners of today can assimilate and create new models of therapy in treatment of complex medical problems such as Chronic Back Pain.

In creating the title of the book, the word "healing" is used advisedly. The 16th-century French surgeon, Ambroise Pare wrote "I dressed the wound, it was God who healed it." 500 years later, this succinct observation is no less true. A therapist's role in the treatment of chronic back pain is a mere smoothing of the obstructions along the path to recovery. The healing remains within the realm of the body itself.

And lastly in the preparation of this book, I would like to graciously thank my editor, Donna Grant who spent so many hours interspersed within her exceptionally busy life honing my words to achieve needed clarity and my incredibly talented artist wife, Donna Mendes for her drawings which "instilled life into the words", conveying the kinesthetic images to the reader.

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Using Personal Empowerment in the Treatment of Chronic Back Pain

1

Only 3% of all causes of back pain can be attributed to a significant pathological process, even when drawing upon the most advanced medical investigative tools available today. Within this very small group are included the pathological diagnoses of tumors, fractures, infections, spinal cord and nerve root pressure syndromes, abdominal or pelvic organ diseases, rheumatoid and other autoimmune arthritic disorders, and various other systemic diseases, which may produce back pain.

The overwhelming 97% of back pain sufferers remaining have what is widely discussed in the medical literature as "non-specific back pain". Back pain specialists accept the term "non-specific back pain" as a clinical diagnosis, representing a clinical syndrome whose foundation probably stems from a multidimensional musculoskeletal health problem.

The most common feature in examination of patients presenting with "chronic, non-specific back pain syndrome", is an aberration from normal postural alignment. This association is so common that one might almost be tempted to call chronic, *non-specific* back pain, chronic, *postural* back pain.

Some critics might regard this statement as presumptuous if the attempt is to imply that the postural changes were causative

Personal Empowerment ...Treatment of Chronic Back Pain

Chronic back pain is one of the top 5 reasons for doctor visits in North America

and, therefore, predated the back pain. A different argument might presuppose that the observed postural changes were a result of deliberate changes to postural alignment, made by the afflicted patient, in a naturally adopted pain management strategy used to find the most comfortable position to improve a pre-existing back pain syndrome.

This may very well be true in the initial stages, but persistence of this altered dysfunctional postural alignment, as we will see, will lead to loss of core strength and postural balance, which produces the end result of chronic back pain in any case, making a moot point of the entire argumentative exercise.

With each passing decade since the 1950s, the incidence of chronic back pain syndrome has become increasingly more endemic in industrialized countries and is now ranked within the top five most common reasons for visits to physicians' offices in North America. When one thinks of all the technologically advanced investigative and treatment costs related to heart disease, cancer and the many chronic diseases like diabetes, it comes as a shock to find that the total medical dollars spent on investigation and treatment of the lowly chronic back pain syndrome ranks in the top six of health care costs. When considering the resultant absenteeism and extra secondary costs to trade and industry, this economic burden extends far beyond the direct medical costs.

The Financial and Personal Cost of Chronic Back Pain

Aside from the financial burden, there are immeasurable personal costs associated with chronic back pain as individuals attempt to cope with their disability, struggling through the activities of daily life in which many find their enjoyment markedly compromised. Because of its epidemic proportions, significant injurious impact

Personal Empowerment ...Treatment of Chronic Back Pain

on life and associated expense, any solution that will impact upon this trend and reduce disability associated with chronic back pain will have a tremendous potential for improving population health standards and freeing up valuable health resources.

As the many suffering individuals pursue their personal search for this Holy Grail, many billions of dollars are spent annually as back pain sufferers trek from therapist to therapist, looking for the solution to their suffering. Rarely is a solution predictably found with any given modality of therapy, with treatment response significantly marked by idiosyncrasy, a medical term suggesting that what works for one person may not necessarily work for the next. In fact, what worked the first time for an individual may not necessarily work the next.

The Revolving Door of Chronic Back Pain Treatment

Many chronic back pain patients will go through this revolving door of treatment scores of times as they live through the cycle of exacerbation and remission marking the natural history of chronic postural back pain. Desperate but hopeful as they hear stories of success from friends and acquaintances who swear by their current therapist, they try yet another treatment modality in their search for the magic bullet that will make the problem go away.

Even if we do find someone who can help us out of our current "bad stretch" of back pain, we can unnervingly find ourselves tied to a particular therapist as we struggle to maintain the tenuous balance in this unending battle with the chronic back pain syndrome. With this loss of empowerment, it is easy to attach uneasy power to this person whom we think holds the key to making us feel better, worry-

Billions of dollars are spent annually as back pain sufferers search for the Holy Grail of pain relief

Personal Empowerment ...Treatment of Chronic Back Pain

ing about holiday scheduling (both theirs and ours), always fearful that something will go wrong.

Does Posture Play a Role in Chronic Back Pain?

Everyone has heard that one of the keys to improving back pain is correction of posture. Most of us even have a vague idea of what good posture is. We are reminded of our parents' exhortations to straighten up and walk tall. Perhaps even some of us are aware of privileged childhood classmates who were shipped off to elite finishing schools where the final touches in body carriage, manners and other societal niceties were entrenched and embodied.

Most probably, however, we took these exhortations with a grain of salt, carried on in our own way and thought little of it again. Perhaps it is time to revisit this issue of posture. All the medical evidence suggests that ergonomically erect posture plays a key role in the treatment of chronic back pain. In fact, regardless of what other therapeutic modalities we may bring to bear in treatment of chronic back pain, unless effort is made to correct the faulty posture, little lasting progress will be made in alleviation of this common, disabling pain syndrome.

The Cultural History of Posture

2

F*rom a woman's claim of respectability to a man's ascendance in military rank, posture has played a key historical role in depicting our place in society.*

Posture in Ancient History

An artistic appreciation of youthful posture, as represented in Greco-Roman sculpture and ancient Egyptian and Asian art, presented the only tangible reference to posture prior to the mid-1700s. Little mention of it ever appeared in the medical writings of the day or any other literature, for that matter.

Good posture, however, has always been linked with a proper military bearing. Poor or languid postures were commonly associated with a lack of discipline and even a dereliction of duty in military ranks. Accordingly, the stance of "at attention" has always denoted alertness and a special sensory awareness of immediate surroundings. A physically demonstrable respect for ranking officials and officers is also commonly conveyed through posture. This military bearing crosses cultural boundaries and appears in almost all societies, wherever there are clear-cut divisions of rank.

In the Eastern philosophies of martial arts, good posture was identified as a necessary fundamental and preparatory stance

The Cultural History of Posture

to achieve success in combat. The ancient martial arts treatises that have survived from antiquity have dealt carefully and clearly with the teaching of perfect posture to the acolytes of the warrior classes. Because many of these early martial arts masters shared traditional roles as spiritual teachers, it was not unreasonable that the same tenements of proper posture would be adopted into meditative poses—practices that have survived into the present day.

Posture in the 1700s and the Victorian Age

In the secular organization of society prior to the mid-1700s, little attention was paid to proper posture. Leisurly slouching and a relaxed decorum generally marked the social settings depicted in art. Attentiveness to posture began to change, however, as cultural authorities of the day—Lord Chesterfield being one of them—began writing extensively on social interaction and manners, making specific reference to posture and "body carriage". For the next 150

years, considerable attention would be addressed to postural presentation, and its cultural effects would be widely seen in architecture and design, art, dance and general social interaction.

Published caricatures presented failures of society in hunched and slouched postures

The emphasis on formality and bodily dignity would be seen as a means to distinguish oneself from those who displayed an undisciplined lifestyle. Published caricatures would present failures

of society in hunched and slouched postures, suggesting poor posture as a key contributor to a lack of success and perhaps even a cause of moral degradation.

The standard of the day would be the adoption of a proper posture, constituting a demonstration of a good and moral character. It implied a disciplined lifestyle, the ability to overcome physical weakness as well as the ability to control unbridled human desire. In some circles, these rules may have been so unfairly enforced that a

The Cultural History of Posture

woman's claim to respectability could be easily questioned if her posture suggested a careless or lounging attitude without watchful attention to proper body carriage.

The introduction of Darwinism in the early 19th-century contributed further to this popular support of erect posture, with educational charts demonstrating the continuum of ape to man, carefully commemorating increasingly better posture in each of the developmental stages. This resulted in an increased fervor for posture, with a cultural emphasis on proper posture both in child-rearing and school settings.

A rapid change in postural standards was viewed as “the beginning of the end”

Comfort was not in the lexicon of posture vocabulary, and seating arrangements were almost always deliberately designed with backless benches. Sitting-room furniture generally encouraged careful posture, with wooden and stiff-backed chairs adorned with light upholstery more for fashion than comfort. Even the rocking chair drew frowns from the "posture police" because of its relaxed qualities, which encouraged more of a lounging position. Its proper position in the hierarchy of seating would find it quickly relegated to the nursery and bedroom, where it was reserved for the exclusive use of nursing mothers or the aged and invalid.

These postural norms were also reflected in clothing styles, particularly in women, where elaborate undergarments—especially corsets—reflected constraint and formality. In men, the styles promoting a proper posture were equally mirrored with stiffly tailored formal coats and vests that insured upright postures both standing and sitting.

The Cultural History of Posture

The Dawn of Modernism in Posture and the Declining Reign of Emily Post

With the beginning of the 20th century, some "chinks in the armor" of the postural proponents would begin to become evident—especially in North America where, culturally and economically, the New World was taking its place as an up-and-coming leader. The growing resistance to formally constrained posture in social

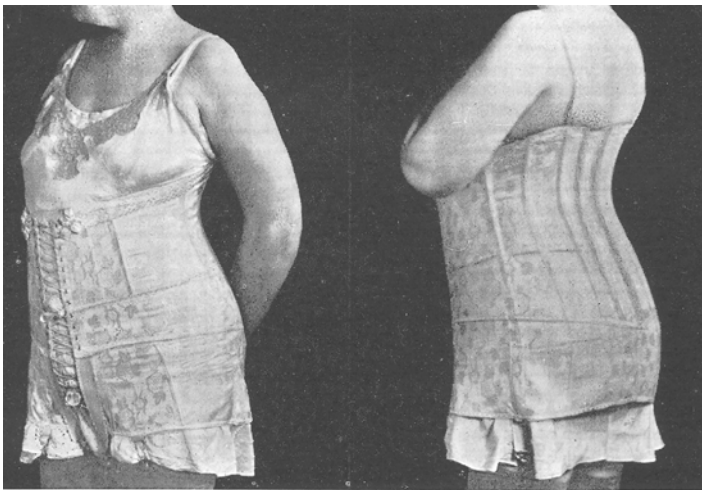


Illustration from Mail Catalogue--- Circa 1900

settings would become so widespread that, within a short decade, home furnishing factories (as illustrated in the advertisements of the American Sears catalog) were now promoting the sale of a wide selection of richly stuffed parlor seats. This rapid change in postural standards was viewed with alarm by many of the cultural

gurus, as the beginning of the end. This arrogant challenge to the elegant propriety of the Victorian era even resulted in changes in architectural language, with "parlors" becoming "living rooms".

These changes dictated that the newly relaxed physical environment could no longer control the posture of the guests. The goal of the new socialite hostess would be to provide an easy, pleasant atmosphere, rather than the encouragement of stiff and formal restraints as imposed by the old-fashioned parlor.

The loss of corseting and other constraints standard in women's clothing, and the introduction of more freedom of movement in men's suits, allowed for greater relaxation of posture and quickly reflected in fashion, the new cultural transformations.

The Cultural History of Posture

These revolutionary trends were embraced not only in North America, but Europe as well, with a growing acceptance of relaxation in social settings. Reclining—if not sprawling—could be seen in the many parks that were constructed at the beginning of the 20th century. With the introduction of the radio, the evening listening sessions promoted informal settings with bodies plopped in deeply upholstered chairs and sofas, arms and legs draped over chair arms and end tables, or simply spread out on the floor amongst cushions.

There would be fundamental changes in popular dance styles, with rigid, elegant waltzes transplanted from Europe replaced by new dances including the Cakewalk, Charleston and Jitterbug, especially influenced by African-American, Caribbean and other regional dance genres. Even classical ballet performances would lose some of the rigid postures and stiffness while continuing to preserve the grace and bodily control inherent in the art.

These changes were not universally accepted, with many established icons opposing the dissolution of Victorian standards. Emily Post, in response to these radical changes, published a series of etiquette manuals beginning in the 1920s. Seating at the table was a particular focus of proper posture and, like most of her Victorian predecessors, Emily Post wanted no compromise in erect posture. She was particularly firm in the instruction of children, insisting that they "be prevented from developing a careless attitude in seating that all too readily can generate into flopping this way and that."

With the postural changes rapidly overcoming society, Bancroft, Post and other contemporaries would form the American Posture League in 1914, in an attempt to preserve the norms of the Victorian standards. Much like the "Just Say No!" anti-drug campaigns of the 1990s, the campaign was very simple. Good posture, it was taught, reflected good living habits and bad posture reflected a mark of poor personal values.

The Cultural History of Posture

The American Posture League, directed by leading orthopedic physicians of the day, physical education specialists and efficiency engineers, would enjoy a 30-year lifespan, surviving into the 1950s, yielding considerable influence and contributing widely to education. Amongst its activities, the League would contribute significantly to the research, development and publishing of educational literature designed to teach Americans the importance of postural self-discipline. Scientists committed to the ergonomics of posture would even contribute to the ergonomic design of public seating, designs that survive into modern-day architecture.

The return of war in the 1940s resulted in a resurgence of interest in posture, as militarism encouraged erect posture and school children were re-infected with the desire to mimic the heroes of the day. This was especially true when children were told that the posture training they were practicing every day, was derived from the very same programs instituted in the Officer and Cadet Armed Forces training camps. Posters in classrooms across America exhorted students to hold themselves high and proud and help win the war against tyranny.

During this period of revival, parents were expected to reinforce the evils of posture slumps in their children. Even pediatricians

Posture programs became a regular part of institutional education, from kindergarten to higher learning

were caught up in this renaissance of posture training and, with the economic introduction of household cameras, photographs were introduced into medical records, serially recording postural changes of their patients from toddlers to school-age children and into early adulthood. This practice would even be adopted in university and colleges where both male and female entrants would be serially photo-

graphed from their freshman year onward, charting any changes that might suggest deterioration in posture and, thus, the need for intervention therapy.

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The Posture Clinic was soon to follow, where a child might be referred for correction of what was observed to be a change from the normally accepted postural charts, by a school official or physician. These postural charts were universally displayed in physicians' offices, schools and other institutions and organizations where children were grouped together.

Posture programs were a regular part of the institutional educational curriculum from kindergarten into higher learning. The Department of Physical Education issued regular "posture bulletins" to institutions within their jurisdiction, and grading on children's report cards specifically commented on postural attainment.

Posture and the Age of Dr. Spock

In the early 1950s, Dr. Benjamin Spock's classic work on children changed generally accepted attitudes in parenting. It would be suggested that overzealous parental nagging constituted a counterproductive child-rearing philosophy. The new psychological teaching would advise that posture problems might be the manifestation rather than the cause of developmental problems, perhaps harboring other elements or difficulties, including psychological problems and lack of self-confidence. Proponents of the new psychological theories suggested poor posture in itself could occur as a result of too much criticism at home or school, or be a reflection of difficulties with achievement or an unsatisfactory social life. The new child-rearing manuals and established experts now recommended that parents should restrict themselves in remarking on a child's posture. Poor posture would no longer be a matter for discipline of any sort; now the influence would be on making children proud of their bodies. Posture, good or bad, did not enter into this discussion one way or another.

Past theories that a healthy child would perform their activities more successfully if they resembled an alert soldier, became derided as an aesthetic ideal, which held no basis in fact, and was

The Cultural History of Posture

quickly labeled as a yesteryear cultism. No longer was posture considered a reflection of character or personal adjustment.

Postural aids have rapidly developed into a multi-billion-dollar industry

Even within medical circles, there was a tendency to move away from the thought that posture could affect function of internal organs or cause changes in spinal alignment resulting in back pain. On the other hand, this was the same medical cohort that was suggesting that cigarette smoking was an excellent way to control appetite and nervousness. As one might expect,

many of these extremist views reflected the inevitable swinging of the pendulum.

Even the new gurus of etiquette, like Amy Vanderbilt, while admiring wistfully the yesteryears of Victorian posture, were forced to admit the inevitable: "Today, with fewer and fewer uncompromising chairs being manufactured, we are more or less forced to lounge as we sit." Judith Martin's *Miss Manners*, published in the early 1980s, however, applauded the changing culture and humorously noted the fact that, for the first time in a longtime, a less formal posture could no longer be punishable by hanging.

More recently, we find an increasing supply of "postural aids" being marketed for the treatment of back and neck pain—from lumbar supported seating to mattresses with "deep down firmness for luxuriously relaxing support" to contoured neck supports and pillows. From humble beginnings this market quickly developed into a multi-billion-dollar industry, with consumers hungrily seeking easy solutions to the ever-increasing incidence of backache and neck pain.

The Renaissance of Posture Today

Not surprisingly, toward the end of the 20th century, we began to see a second renaissance in posture training. The broad recognition that core strength training and proper posture are the predominant treatment / prevention fundamentals for the vast majority of back and neck pain, provides the impetus behind this current posture renaissance. It also most certainly reinforces the fact that, of all the variety of treatments for back and neck maladies, without the strengthening of the core musculature and the correction of postural alignment, there remains little hope of correcting the cause of the common backache.

With the realization that normal postural alignment is the single most important factor in the prevention and maintenance of a healthy back, we have now come full circle in the evolution of our attitudes toward posture.

