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## Posture or Posturing: Myths and Reality

By Stacy Barrows

"Don't slouch."

"Sit still."

"Don't hunch your back."

"Stand up straight."

"Stop fidgeting."

At some point in almost everyone's teen years, a well-meaning parent or teacher tells us to correct the way we're standing or sitting. The advice comes with no explanation. And yet, perfect sponges that we are as teens, we file the criticism in the back of our memory so we can dredge it up later in life. Usually, it's in front of a mirror, when we look with astonishment at our stooped shoulders, sagging gut, and bent over-spine. What we do next is so classic that it's parodied in nearly every comedy about a character undergoing a mid-life crisis -- we suck in our gut, throw back our shoulders, and arch our back, as if to proclaim: "I've still got it." Got what? Good posture? Think again.

We manage to hold that ridiculous stance for several seconds and then collapse from fatigue, pain or lack of air. It is not a posture meant to make you feel comfortable. It is a posture for posturing... nothing more.

It is a pose based on notions of "good posture" that are more myth than fact.

• **Myth #1: Good standing or sitting posture needs to be straight.** This advice never helped anyone learn proper alignment or avoid injury. If it had, we would all be perfectly symmetrical Eliza Doolittles, because we've all been beaten up with it. When "straight" is how we think of proper alignment, we park or fix ourselves in position. The reality is that optimal posture isn't straight or fixed; it's dynamic, so we're ready to move in any direction without first having to adjust.

• **Myth #2: Good posture is hard to achieve or maintain.** Have you ever noticed how children support themselves in a sustained position during play? They move around a lot. They wiggle. They fidget. Their posture while they sit or stand is fluid. They do this not because their bodies are younger or they have more energy, but because it takes more effort to remain static. Similarly, good adult posture doesn't take more effort; it takes LESS, and you don't have to work hard to maintain it. According to [Feldenkrais Practitioner Ralph Strauch, Ph.D.](#), "Good posture emerges as a by-product of fluid, aware movement, rather than something to be achieved through effortful striving."

• **Myth #3: Good posture means never slumping.** If you never flex into a slump, you'll never experience your body's full range of motion. You'll limit your ability to move in certain ways. As you read this blog, notice how you are sitting and slowly slump downward through your full range of comfortable motion. Then, simultaneously press through your feet and through your pelvis to lengthen into your full height. Repeat this, and each time you do it,

make the movement easier. Finish at a comfortable height and notice how you become taller when your full range of motion is restored.

• **Myth #4: There are only two types of posture: good and bad.** Fear of "bad" posture leads many people to lock their body in what they think is "good" posture and avoid moving entirely. The problem is not "bad" posture, it's about being stuck in ONE posture -- a position that we can't easily move out of at will. Instead of thinking of posture as good or bad, it is more helpful to think of it as "efficient" or "inefficient." Efficient posture gives us the ability to move spontaneously and efficiently in any direction. Inefficient posture does not.

### **Facts about efficient posture:**

- Efficient posture not only helps you avoid pain and fatigue but also offers better musculoskeletal support for internal organs. Healthy, aligned bones help us breathe with less effort, free our organs to function properly and promote better circulation throughout our body.
- Whether it is efficient or not, most posture is a matter of habit. People rarely choose to stand or sit in ways that will eventually produce pain or fatigue. We don't become conscious of our inefficiency until pain or fatigue sets in -- sometimes hours later. The good news about posture being habitual is that we can learn efficient new habits to replace old, inefficient ones.
- Effortless, efficient posture is our birthright -- something our bodies are hard-wired to do. Because of this innate ability, and the brain's plasticity to recover from injury and slow the effects of aging, we can recapture lost movement skills and improve our posture and health well into our later years.

The key is to start now, and follow a few tips:

- Observe your posture during physical activities you really enjoy. You'll be surprised at how light and well-supported your body feels. This conscious awareness of your own fluid movement gives you an opportunity to relearn ways of moving efficiently and with less effort.
- Reverse your movements. Doing this gives you a chance to practice and sense the smaller parts and patterns to your movements. Doctor of Science Moshe Feldenkrais felt that if you could easily reverse a movement pattern, you have learned to do it well. So try this drill: Start to sit down, and then pause and reverse your movement to rise up to stand. Did you hold your breath? Return to the movement and repeat it several times, consciously reducing any unhelpful tension. Breathe slowly and regularly. Finish with sitting and notice the posture you are in. Not only is it a good skeletal support, but it is ready for action!
- Improve your movement awareness. Kinesthetic aids like [foam rollers](#), [SMARTROLLER](#) and [SITS](#) can build your awareness of posture and movement by challenging your body's sense of its position in space. When properly used, such sensory motor "toys" are designed to reacquaint you with your original ability to efficiently support yourself through your pelvis and feet -- the key to a more dynamic posture.
- Learn new movement skills. Take a [Feldenkrais®](#) Awareness Through Movement class (ATM). In the class you explore how to move gently while paying attention to the details and quality of your movement. Such classes help you improve your posture by refining your kinesthetic sensibility. Many [neuroscientists](#) support this method of self-improvement. Think of ATM classes as a way to hit the reset button on your posture.

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