

Good Posture Flows from Self-awareness

by Ralph Strauch

Most people think of posture in terms of alignment -- *proper posture* means sitting or standing up straight, with your chest out and your shoulders back. That's what we were taught as kids, after all. And we were taught to achieve this posture through effort. *Proper posture*, defined this way, is difficult to maintain. Some people manage to do it with tension and effort; others just give up and resign themselves to a life of "bad posture."

But is this the right way to think about posture? Should good posture really be hard to achieve and maintain? As a *Feldenkrais Teacher*, my answer to those questions is a resounding "NO!" The criteria by which we judge posture should be *ease and lack of effort*, rather than skeletal alignment. Good posture should grow organically out of our innate sense of ourselves as we move through and function in the world. A relaxed, aware body will align itself easily and naturally in gravity, so that body mass balances lightly on the skeleton with a minimum of muscular effort.

Muscles are not meant to support weight directly, but to align the skeleton to support the body in gravity and to generate the forces necessary for movement and interaction with the surrounding environment. A good natural balance produces a skeletal alignment (posture) that may seem similar to that prescribed by *proper posture* as described above, but that is maintained in a very different way. *Proper posture* is produced by continuous effort, *natural balance* can be relaxed and effortless.

Three interlocking factors contribute to postural problems -- poor balance, unnecessary effort, and lack of self-awareness. Lack of self-awareness is widespread in contemporary society. Few people are aware of how poor their balance is or how much unnecessary tension they carry. Habitual tensions in the ribcage and neck pull the head and torso forward, worsening balance. Poor balance adds tension, as muscles contract to support off-center weight. Excessive tension serves to reduce awareness, closing the cycle of mutually reinforcing feedback among the three.

The key to improving posture lies not in effortful adherence to an external ideal of *proper posture*, but in increasing self-awareness, which leads to reduced tension and improved balance. The *Feldenkrais Method*[®] of somatic (body) education, developed by Israeli scientist Moshe Feldenkrais, DSc, provides excellent tools with which to accomplish this.

The *Feldenkrais Method* uses gentle touch, movement, and directed attention to increase self-awareness and help you to return to the easy, fluid movement and balance that are your natural birthright. The *Method* is taught in two forms. In group *Awareness Through Movement*[®] lessons you are verbally guided through gentle movement sequences which help you learn to move easily and efficiently. Individual *Functional Integration*[®] lessons add the element of touch as a teaching tool, and are more responsive to your individual situation and limitations.

As you learn to move with greater awareness and fluidity, your body will naturally align and balance itself in gravity. Good posture emerges as a byproduct of fluid aware movement, rather than something to be achieved through effortful striving.

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