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Improving Posture and Alignment Through Somatics

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Many of us spend significant amounts of time in a seated position in front of computers and interacting with our smartphones and other devices. The alluring world of the virtual universe, the latest news, text messages, photos, and online shopping tend to disconnect us from our physical sensations: submerged in the world of screens – for work, pleasure, or distraction –, we hardly notice whether the body is actually in a comfortable and aligned position. Back pain, neck pain, tightness in the hips and hamstrings, pain between the shoulder blades, constant tingling in the elbows, headaches, fatigue, lack of energy, and irritability are some of the possible effects of compromised physical alignment. These discomforts can become habitual: chronic pain and sensations of tightness might start to accompany everyday life.

Our interactions with technology and electronic devices is only one domain with potential consequences for the body. How we sleep, walk, sit, stand, run, talk to other people, write a report, grade students' papers, give a speech, paint an artwork,

sow, carry groceries, lift a box, chop vegetables or do any everyday activity can impact posture and alignment. What is “good alignment” or “proper posture”? How to obtain this posture and why is it valuable? What does it feel like to be aligned physically and does physical alignment affect other aspects of our well-being, such as how we feel emotionally and function mentally?

In what follows, I will explore whether mindful, holistic movement and dance classes can improve the awareness of alignment and teach us how to maintain this awareness in everyday activities, outside of a movement session. For example, as you are reading this article, what do you notice about the position of your body? Do you feel aligned? Do you notice any tightness or contraction anywhere in the body?

Somatics and Alignment

Somatics is a general term for a number of physical awareness practices that train participants to notice the range of their physical sensations.¹ Practices such as the Alexander Technique© and the Feldenkrais Method© are concerned with how movement happens in the human body and how we use the body to perform everyday activities. Practices such as 5Rhythms©, Gaga dance, and Nia©, to name a few explore sensations, energy, self-expression, creativity, emotions, mood, and kinetic responses to music, words, and images through dance, improvisation, and music. Somatic practices examine how physical movement influences cognition and how the mind and cognition impact movement.

SuryaSoul Spirit©, JourneyDance™, and the Tamalpa Life/Art Process©, among others, help practitioners tap into their soul or spirit through the body. The

Tamalpa Life/Art Process investigates the healing and creative power of movement in conversation with other expressive arts, such as writing, performance, and visual arts. Contact improvisation and Biodanza© explore movement, physical sensations, and a sense of gravity in improvised partner dance. What these somatic practices share is a constant listening to the body and the goal of deepening participants' awareness of how they experience their emotions, thoughts, inner voice, and interactions with the world physically, in and through the body.

The experience of alignment relates to the different planes of the body and the body's relation to gravity. The coronal plane splits the body into the front and the back halves. The median plane splits the body into the right and the left side. The convergence of these two planes is called the central plumb line. "Your central plumb line vertically aligns your body with that of the earth's gravitational pull," strength training expert Tammy Wise notes.² "It's the line that drops through the exact center of the internal cavity of your body, where your organs live, like the axis of your body from the north pole to the south," she adds. The body's physical alignment with gravity through this central axis or the plumb line is the foundation for an optimal, easeful position and functioning for the body's architecture, the bones and the muscles.

Some common problems with alignment include a hunched back, habitually lifted shoulders and shoulder blades, the head tilting to the front, a sunken chest, the hipbones falling to the front or to the back, and the shoulders moving to the front. In *Embody The Skeleton: A Guide to Conscious Movement* (2019), Mark C. Taylor emphasizes the need to experience and sense the skeleton for improved alignment:

“By sensing its bones, the body can refine its relationship to gravity and establish an easy flow of weight through the joints. When the skeleton is allowed to do its work, the soft skeleton of the fascia and other supporting tissues are able to release unnecessary holding. Muscles no longer need to provide support but can perform their roles as mobilizers of bone. With a sensate skeleton, the entire body is free to move in response to the invitation of the environment.”³

Alignment and posture are often tackled in somatic practices, especially in physical awareness practices such as the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method. The Alexander Technique, developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955), focuses on cultivating effortlessness and ease in the body and in movement. This practice is well known among musicians, actors, and performers who use their body as an expressive instrument and – as in the case of musicians who spend hours a day holding an instrument in a particular position – might need help with reducing strain and tension that accumulates in the body.

Eleanor Taylor, a licensed teacher of the Alexander Technique and a voice coach, defined the Alexander Technique in an interview as “a method that helps people find more ease and use less effort in everything they do.” This increased sense of ease can be applied to how one sits, sleeps, plays tennis, prepares a meal, or dances. “It is a practical technique for living. It helps people become aware of habitual patterns of tension, stress, and strain – all things that weigh on us in life,” Taylor said. In the words of John Gray, “The Alexander Technique is a process of psycho-physical re-education: by inhibiting automatic habitual responses it allows you to eliminate old habits of reaction and mis-use of the body and, through more

reliable sensory appreciation, brings about improved use and a more appropriate means of reaction.”⁴

The relationship between the head, the neck, and the torso is of primary importance in this technique, as it influences the whole body. “The Alexander Technique helps to alleviate pain. A lot of people have pain every day. Back pain, joint pain,” Taylor noted in the interview. For example, the technique teaches the participants how to have easeful inhales and exhales. Easeful breathing helps to arrive in the present moment and reduce anxiety. “We’re not ruminating about what has happened already or what is happening next,” Taylor remarked. “In the Alexander Technique, we learn to think in activity, think as you do your activity,” Taylor commented.

Whenever we are doing something or simply sitting, walking, or lying down on the bed, we can always pay attention to what is happening in the body. For example, when the shoulders are habitually high, causing upper back strain and neck and headaches, Taylor recommends asking what is happening in the neck. “Psychophysical unity,” a term often used in the Alexander Technique, refers to the idea that the practitioner will connect the mind to the whole self to bring about change. “We’re bringing up on a conscious level the wishes we want to come true, such as ‘I wish for my neck to be more relaxed.’ These have to be meaningful wishes – you have to want them,” Taylor explained.

The Alexander Technique and other somatic practices develop awareness of what is happening in the body: what is it that we are constantly, often subconsciously and habitually “doing” with the body. For example, one might be

constantly using the upper back muscles to elevate the shoulder blades and hold the bones there. To ease the tension that might build up in the upper back and the neck, one would have to learn to “let” the muscles of the upper back can “go” so that the bones of the shoulder blades can experience gravity and “drop” down. “We don’t notice the habitual. What is habitual to us feels right because it is familiar. If we continue to ignore it it’ll speak louder,” Taylor noted in the interview.

A shift happens when we gently start to bring awareness into the compromised area of the body and feel like we have choices. For example, instead of bending the cervical spine to look at a smartphone, one could keep the spine vertical and use the arm to bring the phone in front of the face. Taylor notes that instead of adding physical exercises she often asks her clients to un-do something or to stop doing something.

In the Alexander Technique, the term “inhibition” means learning to say “no” to what has become an instinctual physical response, a habit or a pattern. Some physical habits are easier to change – one can learn how to pick up the phone differently or sit differently. Learning to sense when a muscle is in a habitually contracted state, in a state of tension or “holding” is a more subtle skill. Patience is key in developing such physical awareness. “Slowing down is the fastest way,” Taylor noted, to indicate that it takes time, constant noticing, and frequent adjustments to alter physical patterns and habits that impact the body in subtle but ultimately powerful ways, causing distress, tightness, potential injury, and misalignment.

Strength Training and Experiencing Anatomy

Strength training provides multiple opportunities for drawing participants' attention to alignment and posture. In strength training exercises, participants are often in a standing, lying down, or a seated position. Compared to improvisational dance practices, for example, the body in strength training classes performs fewer different types of movements and is in more static, controlled positions, which can make it easier for the participants to notice and sense their posture. Strength training often involves working with outside objects, such as weights, TheraBands, bars, or gym machines, which is another reason for a heightened sense of physical alignment: the joints, the bones, and the muscles need to be in a safe relationship to the weight or the resistance and gravity.

Since muscular holding patterns – which cause tension, aches, and misalignment – concern the relationship between the muscles and the bones, working with the muscles in strength training can educate participants to notice the sensations of contraction, tension, release, expansion, and lengthening in the muscles.⁵ Somatically attuned strength training can help participants learn how to release muscular tension and find a healthy posture.

In my somatic strength training classes, I constantly guide the participants to notice the position of their head, ribcage, pelvis, and the feet. Aligning the centers of each over the other can help us imagine and sense the “plumb line” and experience evenness, ease, and balance in the whole body. For example, in a calf raise, I ask the participants to keep the feet hips width apart, move the weight of the torso onto the center of the ball of the foot, stabilize it there, and gently lift and lower the heels.

There is movement – the body is not completely static – but the movements are small and we are not moving in space. The attention is free to move around in the body while we lift and lower the heels.

I ask the participants to imagine and sense their skeleton. I guide their attention to the upper and middle back and encourage the shoulder blades to drop or feel heavy. While doing the calf raises, I ask the participants to feel the weight of the bones in their arms and hands and enjoy the fact that the hands can simply be, without the need to hold, type, scroll, carry, or do anything. I ask them to sense the abdominal muscles in the front of the body, lifting up from the pubic bone to the bottom edge of the chest and supporting the placement of the torso. I guide them to notice a slight contraction in the gluteus muscles, providing support for the torso and the spine. I encourage them to feel a relaxed lower back and an easeful spine. I ask them to check with their inner eye the placement of the pelvis, ribcage, and the head to see if they can find a position for any of these that feels “lighter,” “better,” and less effortful. The participants often notice that their heads are dropped: the neck has bent forward and is no longer holding the crown of the head over the rest of the spine in a vertical position.

Any of the strength training exercises can be used to check in with alignment. The familiar exercise of a biceps curl – bending and extending the arm from the elbow – can become an exercise in alignment if we tune in with the rest of the body and ask where we are holding and releasing tension. The entire body becomes available for feedback, information, and sensation. Paying attention to alignment during strengthening exercises one practices noticing posture and the state of the

body while doing something else (in this case, a biceps curl). Outside of the classroom, in the absence of the words of an instructor, whether we are able to maintain and shift posture and alignment depends on the ability to constantly check in with the body and to notice sensations on our own.

Silvia Spitta, Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature and a participant in my strength training classes, commented in an interview:

What I have slowly – and perhaps most imperceptibly learned from you, is to pay attention to my alignment. When I sit and slouch to notice that and then almost naturally my body wants to sit up. And when I stand, to feel my shoulders creep up and in response to tighten my upper core and feel an upward movement of my chest and ribs, which immediately allows my shoulders and back to relax down and my neck to be more stretched and my head to sit more comfortably. So, over many classes, I have learned a form of constant noticing of tension and/or misalignment and to feel how much my body likes being more extended. Thus, to need and search for extension in my body.

The participant has started to notice and make changes to cultivate more ease and physical alignment in her daily life. Alignment and posture are not static phenomena: we can stand in stillness and feel aligned vertically but ultimately, in life we need to move about and act, with the body in various, constantly changing positions. Maintaining awareness of posture while we live life is key to finding ease and alignment in different kinds of positions that the body is in.

Paying attention to and introducing changes to how we hold and use the body can help with chronic pain and physical discomfort but it can also benefit mood, vitality, and self-confidence. “I don’t like the way I look on photos. I look crunched and much older than I am. I want to look my age! Also, my back is constantly hurting,” a man in his 40s told me as we were getting ready to discuss his posture. I asked him to perform some daily activities and movements – walk about, sit down, type on a computer, pick up his phone and write a text message.

I gathered information about his posture and alignment, both visually, through my eyes, and on a kinetic level, through what I felt in my own body as I watched him move. His head and face were tilting forward and the back of the neck was crunched, the chest and the sternum sunken, and the pelvis and the pubic bone jutting forward. The body felt constricted, tight in the chest, the back of the neck, and the abdomen. I noticed how my own body began to collapse in the front of the torso as well.

We explored the position of the pelvis, ribcage, and the skull – to see if these three units could fall into an easeful relationship to one another over the feet. We moved these parts of the body, used gentle touch to increase knowledge of anatomy, talked about the position of the eyes and the gaze, and came up with some stretches, exercises, and awareness techniques to start creating new habits in how he was using or holding the body. While he was seated on the ground, the legs to the front, doing a “back row” with a TheraBand, squeezing his back and moving the elbows past the ribcage to the back, I gently moved my knee between his shoulder blades to

give an impulse for the sternum to move forward. “This feels unusual,” he responded.

On a different level, beyond the physical, I recommended that he notice sights, objects, people, experiences, and places that give him a sense of uplift or joy in the heart. “Let the heart and the sternum move toward these people, objects, sights, places, and experiences,” I noted. My intent was to find both physical and emotion-based ways to create subtle shifts in the body and the posture, so that the sternum and the heart center would come more forward, toward the front of the body rather than the back. During the next few weeks he was sending me messages about what he is noticing about his posture – “I notice that people look at me differently on the street. I’m noticing that if I look at the horizon, like a hunter-gatherer, rather than to my immediate vicinity, I feel much better.” When I saw him a month later, he looked visibly different. Instead of tightness, his body was communicating confidence, radiance, and openness.

Somatic Dance and Alignment

In ballet training, long, reaching lines of the body, the comportment of the head, and the straightness of the torso and the spine are essential. In somatic dance classes – and in any type of improvisational dance and movement class – the focus is not on outer perfection of lines and shapes. The participants are free to choose their own steps, tempo, and form of expression through dance. A variety of diverse movements at different speeds and levels and in different directions is one of the aims of improvisational dancing. Is it possible to pay attention to alignment if the

body is in constant motion, bending to the sides and to the front, reaching high and low, jumping, and twisting?

In Nia dance, a somatic practice that blends easy-to-follow choreography and free dance, one of my goals is to develop participants' awareness of the body so that they can learn to sense what physical positions and movements feel good, vitalizing, energizing, or calming. We might focus on isolating certain body parts by physically exploring their range of movement. For example, during a free dance, I might encourage the participants to ask, "How can I move my pelvis? Do I notice tightness or feelings of looseness in my lower back? Do I feel differently when my hipbones circle toward the left side as compared to the right? What is my range of movement? What kinds of movements emerge – circular, angular, diagonal, chaotic, structured, slow, fast, big, or small?"

We might then explore relationships between different body parts – where is my pelvis in relation to the feet? In relation to the ribcage? In relation to the head? We engage in what I call a "somatic play" where we move spontaneously and without inner or outer judgment. Through somatic play and exploration participants develop curiosity about the body – movements become stimulating both physically and cognitively – and they hone their abilities to sense the body from the inside out.

Jane Kornbluh, a participant in my Nia dance classes and a practitioner of somatic techniques, noted in an interview:

I used to think of alignment as something we need to do to our skeletons but alignment, as I understand it now, is more like an internal micro-improvisation continuously performed by all the members of our anatomical

community, not just bones, but muscles, organs, glands, fluids, and connective tissues, also. For this reason I believe a somatic dance class, with its emphasis on exploration, is absolutely one of the best ways to learn about our alignment, experiencing it and shifting it by bringing it out into the open and letting it move us through space. Alignment is found in movement and is changed by movement, too. I know I am “aligned” when I can easily move without too much advanced preparation, that is, when stillness and motion are not such separate states. As soon as I stop and try to stack myself up correctly, I lose that sense of being at ease, aligned and ready.

We might think that good alignment means a straight back, the head high over the spine, shoulders back and down, the chest wide and open. However, a “perfectly straight” stance does not mean that the person is tension-free: someone with an outwardly “perfect posture” can still experience a considerable amount of tension and tightness in the body. As Kornbluh points out, being aligned might mean that one is able to move easily without advanced preparation.

We know we are aligned when we notice that we feel better physically: certain elements of chronic pain or discomfort are starting to decrease or disappear. Alignment brings with it sensations of ease: “I feel good. I feel spacious inside. I feel enlivened and awake. I feel ready to respond to both life’s challenges and pleasures,” we might hear ourselves saying inwardly.

Tips for Movement Breaks from Screens

- (1) If you feel comfortable in your environment, put on some music and do a short free dance to give the body a break from being in one position and to rejuvenate cognitive abilities. You can dance to your favorite songs or surprise yourself with different genres and types of music. You do not need a lot of space to move – movements can also happen on a vertical plane, lifting the arms up or bending the body toward the thighs or reaching with the arms and the torso to the sides.

Try out different tempos and rhythms as well as shaking, pushing, grabbing, slicing, smoothing, scooping, pulsating, skipping, and gliding motions. Try not to judge the movements and let them unfold – all movements are “good” and “perfect” movements as long as they do not cause pain and discomfort. Even one or two songs of free dance will make a difference in how you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally.

- (2) If standing up and moving about are not possible in the space, I recommend putting on some music and dancing in a seated position. You can move the spine and the ribcage side to side and create gentle twists. You can reach the arms up or to the sides and move the joints of the arms. You can also create “flicks” with the fingers or dance with pounding fists or do grabbing or pointing

motions with the fingers. You can let the head dance and move freely to the beat of the music or tap the feet and lift the thighs.

A lot of movements are possible in a seated position. If the concern is that other people in the space might be bothered by these movements you can explore doing smaller movements that are barely noticeable – such as moving the ankles or lifting and lowering the shoulder blades. Or be an inspiring example for others and do not hold yourself back!

- (3) Stretches are another good option for introducing a break in the working day. In a standing or seated position, bend sideways with one arm over the side of the head, or put the hands on the lower back and bend the spine gently toward the back to lift the chest and stretch the abdominals. You can place one hand on the side of the chest and let the other arm, at shoulder height, move toward the back to stretch the chest.

Another simple stretch would be to bend the body toward the thighs and let the back muscles rest and expand, inhaling deeply into the back of the ribcage. If possible, come onto the ground, on a mat, and rest for a few minutes on the belly or on the back and follow the impulses of the body to either move or surrender to gravity. Take some minutes to inhale and exhale deeply and relax the body and the mind.

- (4) Working behind the desk and the screens can also be broken up with a strength training exercise. Try doing twenty squats – it will wake up the body and create energy! Or do a set of 20 biceps curls with a TheraBand or a set of weights.
- (5) Taking a walk, going down and up the stairs, walking to a different room – any kind of movement activity that is possible will be a good opportunity to attend to the movement needs of the body.

Cultivate the habit of checking frequently whether you could improve your current alignment – it is a matter of taking a moment to check whether the shoulder blades are relaxed, the head is over the spine and over the rest of the torso, the abdominals gently and easefully engaged to position to ribcage over the spine. The goal is to create ease and relaxed awareness in the body.

Get to know what your particular holding patterns are (e.g. a slumped chest, habitually crunched abdominals, the chin jutting to the front, lifted shoulder blades, etc). Before you start your work behind the desk check take some deep inhales and exhales and see whether the pelvis, ribcage, and the head are “stacked” easefully one over the other.

Try to find a natural flow of checking in with the alignment – perhaps two or three times in an hour call the mind’s eye back to sensing the body. How do you experience the relationship between the pelvis, ribcage and the head? Are they easefully stacked one over the other? Can you bring the head back toward the back a little bit and move the chin back? Can you relax the shoulder blades down? Can you relax them down even more? Can some deep inhales and exhales relax them down

even more? Can you feel the spread from the left side of the chest to the right? Do you feel the sitzbones in the pelvis, touching the seat of the chair? In what position are your feet and your ankles? What parts of the body are touching the ground? Would an adjustment inside the body – or a movement, a stretch, a dance – make you feel better?

Conclusion

Paying attention to posture, alignment, and how one holds and uses the body is important because it helps reduce or eliminate discomfort, prevent or heal injury, create ease, and find more effortlessness in how one lives every day. We start to notice positions and movements that make us feel uncomfortable and begin making healthier choices for the body. A somatically tuned person will notice the moments when the body is subtly asking for a stretch, for a shift in the physical position, a change of activity, a vigorous movement, a dance break, or a few minutes to lie on the floor.

Listening to the body and adjusting one's physical habits can help us mentally and emotionally as well: we might feel more radiant, centered, more ready to counter challenges and look for solutions, and more present with the people around us. Practitioners of somatic techniques might transfer the notion of physical, postural habits to the mental realm as well and start noticing how their thoughts might be moving in habitual patterns.

Practicing inquiry and exploration of movements physically can encourage us to see that we have choices when it comes to thoughts and verbal responses: we can

choose to think and respond differently. As Eleanor Taylor noted in the interview, “We use the Alexander Technique in everything we do. It becomes a way of being, a way of thinking.” Checking in with alignment, noticing bodily sensations, and adjusting physical and mental habits is a daily practice. We live in relationship to gravity and in relationship to the body and the cognition every day: every day offers a chance to notice how we position ourselves on the earth and what it feels like to be aligned.

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