

Love Your Neck & Shoulders

Quick & easy things
you can do
to feel great!

Workshop
Reference Packet

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What we're moving away from:

- Relying on willpower & effort
- Micromanaging & controlling ourselves all the time
- Doing uncomfortable things because we think we *should*

Instead:

- Tune your muscles
- Align with gravity
- Communicate with and coordinate all your moving parts

Secret #1: Tune Your Muscles

When a musical instrument is out of tune, it won't sound good no matter the effort or skill level of the musician. It needs tuning.

Your muscles work in teams around joints. Muscles can get "out of tune" with some muscles in a team stuck short and other muscles stuck long. This can happen when you spend a lot of time in one position or engage in repetitive activities that do not take the joint through a balanced range of motion,

First Step: Slacken

Holding a muscle in a slack shape for at least 60 seconds is like pressing a reset button. It makes the muscle cells ready for a new idea.

To slacken, bring the end points of the muscle closer together without the muscle itself contracting or doing any work.

In the workshop, we looked at slackening 3 muscle groups: the pectoralis major, the rhomboids, and the levator scapulae.

Skeletal muscles have 3 possible lengths:

Too Short, Too Long, and Just Right. Both the too short and too long muscles will be tight. Our goal is to coax all the muscles back to Just Right length — supple, resilient, ready for action.

Slacken the Pectoralis Major

If you sit with your shoulders hunched forward, these fibers will get short. To slacken them, try this:

Put your right hand on the left side of your ribs.

With your left hand, put a little internal rotation on your right upper arm and pull the elbow a little closer to the mid-line.
(Preferred, left hand holds right arm above the elbow. Also fine, hold below the elbow.)



What is important is that the right shoulder comes a little closer to the sternum (the vertical bone in the center of the chest) *without* the muscles in the front of the shoulder doing any work. Make sure the slackening side is completely relaxed.

Do not pull so far that the muscles in the back feel a big stretch.

After at least 60 seconds of hold, release and repeat on the other side.

Slacken the Rhomboids

If you sit with your shoulders hunched forward, these fibers will get long. To slacken them, bring your shoulder blades closer to each other without the muscles in the upper back doing any work.

Here are some suggestions:



Clasp your hands together
behind your pelvis.



One hand holds the other
elbow behind you.



Hold the back of a
chair and lean
forward.

Slacken the Levator Scapulae

These are located on top of the shoulders. If you spend a lot of time with your shoulders creeping up toward your ears, they will be short.

Here are 3 good ways to slacken them:

Lie on your back, put your hands behind your head and open your elbows out to the sides. (Put pillows under the upper arms if it feels like a strain to open the elbows all the way to the bed or floor.)



Straighten one arm out to the side and rest your hand on an object such as the back of the sofa, a chair, or the seat in the car.



When upright (sitting or standing), clasp your hands together and rest them on the top of your head. (Your hands will need to do a bit of work here because the muscles of the shoulders need to be completely relaxed.)

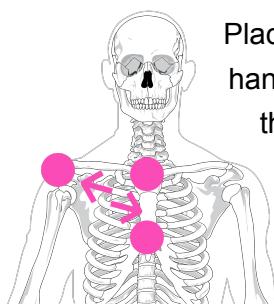


Second Step: Cue Muscle Length

Muscles do what the brain tells them. To make sure your brain is clearly communicating, you can do a very gentle hands-on technique to indicate whether you'd like the muscle to get shorter or longer.

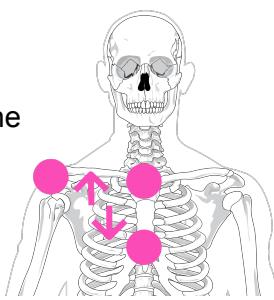
Pectoralis Major & Minor

Imagine a triangle with one point at the outside corner of the shoulder, one point at the top of the sternum, and one point at the bottom of the sternum.



Place the fingertips of both hands together on the center of that triangle and pull sideways out to the outside corner and the straight line along the sternum.

Take your hands off when you reach the end points and return to touch in the middle and pull out again.



Bonus: You can cue the pectoralis minor by pulling apart vertically within that same triangle.

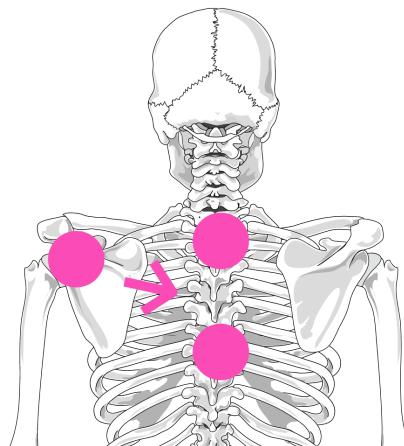
The goal is to ask pec major & minor to get **longer**.

Rhombooids

You could ask a friend to do this on your upper back or you can do it yourself by putting a spoon in each hand.

Keep one hand / spoon still on the spine.

Place the other hand / spoon on a scapula and pull toward the spine.



Break contact with the outer spoon, return to the scapula and repeat several times.

The goal here is to invite the rhomboids to get **shorter**.

(The spine is not moving in this activity. That's why there is only one arrow in this diagram. Encourage the shoulder blade to move a little bit in toward the spine and down toward the hip.)

Sternocleidomastoid

The SCM makes a connection between the skull behind the ear and the top of the sternum. This muscle gets short with a head forward posture.



Invite it to get **longer** by placing the fingertips together in the middle of the muscle and pulling toward the endpoints. Take your hands off, return to the middle, and repeat several times.

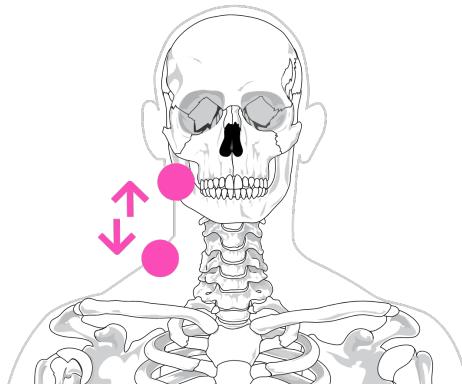
You will notice an improvement in your ability to turn your head right and left, and also your ability to comfortably position your head over your spine.

Scalenes

These are located on the sides of the neck. We are going to invite them to get **longer**.

This is easy to do using just one hand. Bring the thumb and fingertips together and place them in the middle of the side of the neck.

Pull apart so that the fingers move up toward the ear and the thumb down toward the top of the shoulder.



Take your fingers off of your neck, return to the middle. Repeat several times.

You will notice an improvement in your ability to tilt your head side to side.

Bonus Tip:

It can be really nice to use stainless steel spoons or forks to do any of these muscle length cues. It is also pleasant to use a spoon to trace figure-8 shapes on the skin — especially along the base of the skull. If your cutlery isn't stamped "stainless steel," check to see if a magnet will stick to it. If it does, you're good to go.

Third Step: Stretching and Strengthening

You can also cue muscle length with good old stretching and strengthening.

Make sure you choose the activity that moves the muscle in the right direction (don't make a long muscle even longer). Ideally, slacken first before doing these.

Pectoralis Major

If you've been sitting with hunched shoulders, then you'd like to stretch the front of the shoulders.

An easy way to do this is to hold onto a wall or door frame and lean forward.

Only stretch an amount that feels comfortable, hold for a couple of breaths, and release.



Rhomboids

If you've been sitting with hunched shoulders, the upper back probably needs to get shorter.

One option is to hold a stretchy band in front of you. Use the muscles in your upper back to stretch the strap by pulling the shoulder blades closer toward the spine.



You can also hold onto something in front of you such as the steering wheel in your car or a door frame. Pull on the object to bring your shoulder blades closer to the spine.

Anytime you are sitting or standing, you can ask the muscles of the back to draw the shoulder blades just a tiny bit in toward the spine and down toward the hips. When a muscle works, it contracts / shortens. You can ask these typically long fibers to shorten up even without an object to pull against.

Secret #2: Align with Gravity

In this workshop, we primarily looked at **how to align while sitting.**

One big tip is to make sure that your chair supports you having your spine in a neutral shape:

- pelvis in a slight forward tilt
- lumbar spine with a slight in-curve
- back of the pelvis slightly behind the back of the ribs

Make sure your chair height allows you to sit with your feet flat on the floor (if your legs are short, get something under your feet).

Your knees should be slightly lower than your hips (if your legs are long, put something on the seat of the chair to raise you up).

If you are sitting in a straight back chair, put a ball, cushion or other support behind your ribs (not behind your waist).

Imagine that you have pockets on the back of your pants. When you sit down, take your sit bones back so that you come completely off your back pockets.

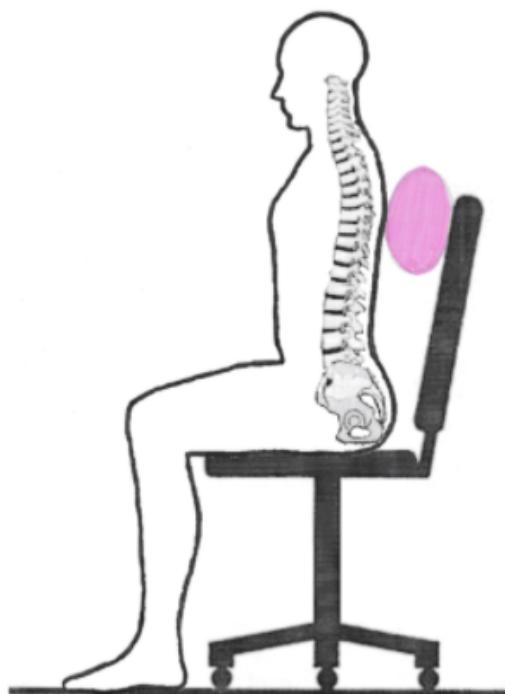
Very likely, this will cause you to feel that your back is too arched. We'll fix that.

Gently press your sit bones (ischial tuberosities) down into the chair.

Place the ball / cushion behind your ribs and move your ribs back.

This combination should bring you into a very comfortable final position in which your pelvis is in a slight forward tilt (off your back pockets), your low back has a little bit of an in-curve, your abdominal muscles are lightly toned, and your upper back is resting comfortably against a support.

Ideally, the shoulders are back, the head is free, and breathing is free and easy.



Rotation of the Upper Arms

If your upper arms are internally rotated (palms of the hands face the wall behind you), this will bring the shoulders up and forward.



Don't start typing (or any other activity) like this.



Instead, take just a moment to externally rotate your arms (palms face forward).



If you are going to type, bend at the elbows and rotate your lower arms from the elbows to bring your fingertips to the keyboard.

Starting with the upper arms in a little external rotation will help keep the shoulders comfortably back while you type.



When you are standing or walking, it is enough to rotate the arms so that the palms of the hands face your legs (no need to rotate them all the way forward). Doing this will help to keep your carriage more upright and allow your arms to swing easily.

Keyboard Height & Angle

You cannot ergonomically use a laptop.

Either the screen is the right height for your eyes and neck, making it too high for your hands...

... or the keyboard is the right height for your hands, meaning the screen is too low and you strain your neck over time to see it.

If you spend a lot of time using a laptop, invest in a separate keyboard and / or monitor.

Place the screen at eye level in front of you.

Place the keyboard close enough so that your upper arms and elbows are alongside your torso (not reaching too far forward).

And place it low enough that your wrists and fingertips are slightly lower than your elbows.

The keyboard itself should slope a little away from you. DO NOT use those plastic flaps at the back of the keyboard to make it higher along the numbers row than the space bar.

If you bend your wrists backwards while you type, you make yourself vulnerable to carpal tunnel and other wrist issues and you generate more tension for your neck and shoulders.



Arrange your workstation so that your wrists will be in a neutral shape.



Secret #3: All Your Moving Parts

Non-habitual Movements: Eyes & Neck

You can improve communication between your brain and muscles by asking yourself to do non-habitual movements — activities that require new neural pathways to accomplish.

Here are a few ideas to separate the eyes and neck (close your eyes if you begin to feel dizzy or nauseous,):

- Keep your eyes focused on something in front of you while you turn your head right and left
- Keep your nose pointing straight ahead while you shift your eyes right and left
- Turn your nose to the right while you shift your eyes to the left. Turn your nose to the left while you shift your eyes to the right. Repeat.

Are you breathing continuously as you do these? If not, slow down, maybe pause at the endpoints and breathe.

You can do this same activity taking the eyes and chin up and down and also moving along the diagonals.

Another option is to lie down, close your eyes, turn your head slightly to the right, shift your eyes slightly to the left, and stay there for several breaths. You can repeat to the other side, up and down, along the diagonals.

How you use your eye and neck muscles are some of your earliest habits. This work can be surprisingly deep. Be gentle with yourself and practice in small chunks of time.

We reached the end of our time together before we reached the end of my material for this section.

One of the key activities in *All Your Moving Parts* is doing non-habitual movements. Opportunities abound for doing this. Here are a few suggestions:

- Use your non-dominant hand to hold the sponge when you wash dishes, brush your teeth, use your computer mouse.
- Hold onto the railing and try walking up and down stairs sideways so that you use different muscles.

What we didn't have time to cover is how to use gestures to organize movements.

I'll just tease you here with the mention of this possibility and invite you to come back for more events to see what else is possible.

Thank you!

I'm so glad you joined us for the *Love Your Neck & Shoulders* workshop in October 2022.

You'll have lifetime access to the replay recording.

The *Love Your Hips* workshop will run in early November.

Requests have been coming in and there will be other workshops in this format focusing on the hips, low back, feet & ankles, hands & wrists.

I hope you can join us for the next one!

All the best to you,

Paula James

Resources & Tools

We briefly discussed how to sit more comfortably in a chair.

If you are looking for a ball to support your upper back when sitting, try searching for:

Stability Ball

I recommend one in the 9-11 inch range.

Don't get one that requires a pump with a special needle to inflate — too impractical for using on the go.

Pain-Free Life Formula

I'm excited to make 5 spots available in the personalized, structured program, *Pain-Free Life Formula*.

This 3-step program provides a personalized approach to relieve pain and movement limitations.

You will get a personalized assessment. We will meet weekly for 15-20 minute sessions to give you small, practical, actionable tips to bring immediate, incremental improvements.

No overwhelm. We'll add one small piece at a time.

Reset Muscle Length & Tone

+

Start Positive Cascades

+

Upgrade Your Autopilot

=

Pain-Free Life

Value: \$2,500

5 Spots Available at: \$997

Schedule a call to discuss how small adjustments can add up to big changes for you:

<https://calendly.com/artofmovingwell/pain-free-life-conversation>