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The Posture of Health: Gravity, Oxygen and You, Part II

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It's said that you can't escape death and taxes. The influence of gravity and oxygen on every aspect of human life must be added to that meager but significant inventory.

This is Part II of a three-part series on the interaction of gravity, oxygen and you. The intent of this series is to help create a conscious awareness of how you do what you do when you do it. Unfortunately, the average person goes through a daily routine oblivious to the how, what and when of most habitual function. Individual posture is a prime example of this unconsciousness. The purpose of posture is to organize the three components (head, thorax and pelvis) of the erect body with respect to the forces of gravity. Common sense tells us that if a single structure has three centers of gravity, sympathetic integrity between all three is basic to the functional efficiency of that unified structure. In other words, if your erect balance is not efficiently aligned to minimize gravity's antagonism, you are wasting precious energy keeping your body erect.

In Part I we discussed the hypothesis of how posture and our individual responsiveness to gravity influences everything we do, from breathing to hormonal production. Gravity and oxygen are the common denominators of our individual life force. A discussion of gravity, posture and breathing is not easy, however, because they are things about which the average person gives little or no thought.

In Part I, I asked if you were aware of breathing or holding your breath while reading and listening. Not only does breath holding make your posture rigid, it also causes metabolic and biological chaos throughout the body. If you stop breathing for any other purpose than what is innately required for successful execution, you lose control of the outcome. In this writer's opinion, breath holding is one of the most insidiously self-destructive habits we human creatures have.

For example, any learning is enhanced when accompanied by some kind of structural movement. The most basic movement known to humankind is the movement of breath. You actually inhibit your ability to remember what you hear and read if you stop breathing. All of these seemingly insignificant unconscious activities in which we all indulge are defined as how we do what we do when we do it. Most specifically, they relate to how we use our body with respect to gravity.

Jaw flexing, teeth grinding or teeth clenching are other unconscious self-destructive habits, because they adversely affect your postural balance. Consciously program yourself to keep your teeth from touching with your jaw and tongue relaxed. For some of you this will be difficult; you may experience enormous tension in the tongue and jaw muscles. This particular dysfunction is so epidemic that it has been given the intimidating name temporomandibular joint syndrome (TMJ). It has been speculated that TMJ is the second-most-common human complaint, behind lower-back pain. One might say that breath holding and TMJ are the Siamese twins of superfluous effort. Such wasted energy leads directly and invariably to frustration and failure. For this reason it is strongly advised that you remain conscious of your jaw and breathing while you are listening, visualizing or

doing.

Why dwell on these two very human problems? Because whenever the average person attempts any new or unfamiliar experience, both of these habits emerge into full reality. For this reason I will be constantly reminding you to continue breathing and to monitor your jaw. For all human creatures, gravity and posture are inescapably synonymous because they determine the efficiency of how we breath and use oxygen. Is it too far-fetched to speculate that this efficiency might easily determine our quality of life from beginning to end?

Before we begin a detailed examination of a few postural exercises that can help unify the innate forces of gravity, oxygen and breathing to benefit your individual health and well-being, let's take a reality check of how your own individual postural habits have influenced your body. Seated in a chair with your eyes closed, place the palm of one hand directly over your sternum, and the back of your other hand in the small of your back. Now, lift your chest as high as possible and notice what the small of your back does. For the average person, the lower-back curve will move in, becoming more pronounced. Repeat the procedure again, only this time, allow the curve in the small of your back to move out against your hand as your chest rises.

This is the innate movement your body makes when taking a deep breath. With your chest up, your lower back open and your eyes closed, take a long, deep breath through your nostrils only. Notice what happens. Both hands should move out slightly as air enters your lungs. When your lungs feel filled to maximum capacity, slowly exhale, again through your nostrils, without allowing either your chest or lower back to move from the expanded position. In other words, deflate your lungs without your rib cage collapsing. This exhalation is accomplished with no movement other than the relaxation of your lower abdominal muscles as air is released. This reality check allows for a conscious perception of how your body innately responds to the movement of breath. Please keep this in mind as we go through the postural exercises.

Our first posture is called the Rag Doll, because that's what you look like while seated in this posture: a limp rag doll with no skeleton. Sit down, preferably on an armless chair, with your head down between your knees and your arms hanging on either side of your legs. Point your feet straight ahead, approximately shoulder-width apart, and close your eyes. You may have to sit further forward on your chair to find the proper leverage. Experiment with your position on the chair and decide what feels best.

Inhaling in this position is a new experience. In this posture, the anatomical gravity center deep in your abdomen automatically flexes each time you inhale. Breathing only through your nose (we are born obligate nose breathers), inhale as much air as possible. As you breath in, your abdomen and lower back will expand out, lifting your upper chest and head slightly. Try not to assist your head movement in any way. Allow your head to hang down like a dead weight. Only the movement of your breathing should change your body's position. Remember to monitor your jaw and breathe only through your nose. When you reach maximum inhalation, exhale slowly through your nostrils, allowing your head and chest to drop down, totally limp. Properly executed, your head and arms will drop further toward the floor with each exhalation. If your breath is responding efficiently, you will notice that your body relaxes more fully to gravity's downward pull with each exhalation.

Continue breathing in this posture until your body feels completely relaxed. This posture is particularly useful for anyone not willing or able to lie down on the floor. It was in this posture that I took my first complete breath. It is relatively easy to fall asleep in this posture if you maintain it for an extended period. For this reason, it is important that you find the correct leverage on your chair. Without the proper leverage, you might fall off the chair if you doze off. You may also feel lightheaded from breathing in this posture. This is normal and should give you no cause for alarm.

It is strongly advised, however, that you remember to consciously continue breathing regardless of what experiences you may have.

The next posture is the Basic Prone. Visualize yourself lying down with your back flat on the floor, your legs bent at the knees and resting on a chair. Flexing the knees changes the tilt of your pelvis. Moving your flexed legs further over your abdomen and closer to your head brings the small of your back closer to the floor. This position alone will lessen lower-back discomfort. Exaggerated neck and lower-back curves can cause lower-back pain, as well as many other dysfunctions. When you find the flexed knee position that allows the full length of your back to touch the floor, pull the chair closer to maintain it. Remember, monitor your jaw and keep breathing.

Stretch your arms straight out on either side, palms up. Notice the shoulder movement as you do this: the shoulders are closer to the floor and the palms of your hands stay up. Bend your elbows, slowly moving only your forearms along the floor until your hands are on the floor on either side of your head, slightly above your ears. Visualizing this posture from above, it would appear as if someone had just ordered you to "stick 'em up." This movement may cause one or both of your arms to involuntarily suspend above the floor because of excessive tension in your shoulders. If this happens, simply flex your elbows as far as possible before your forearms leave the floor. (We will discuss this problem more extensively in Part III of this series.)

Open your eyes and check your wrists. Are both wrists touching the floor? Close your eyes again and, as you continue breathing, try to consciously release that tension, allowing your wrists to relax down to the floor. If this doesn't happen, put a small weight on top of each wrist for approximately five minutes while lying on the floor and breathing.

After several minutes in this posture, your body will feel different because of less opposition to gravity. With your eyes still closed, get an impression of your head position. Open your eyes and look up at the ceiling. Are you looking straight up, or at a spot further behind your head? Most of us carry our head too far forward on our shoulders. Close your eyes again and adjust your head position by lowering your chin closer to your chest. See how many stacked fingers on one hand you can place between the back of your head and the floor, and then return your arms to their former position. Remember to monitor your jaw and continue breathing.

Breathe out, exhaling as much air as possible. When your lungs feel empty, begin breathing in very slowly through your nostrils until your lungs seemed filled to maximum capacity. Now, slowly breathe out, again only through your nostrils.

With each exhalation, silently say "Let's go!" If you are sufficiently tuned in to how your body is responding, you will notice that increased oxygen relaxes your muscles, allowing more air to enter your lungs with each inhalation. It is extremely important that you notice how your body responds when breathing. Your body relaxes during exhalation; now learn what it habitually does when inhaling. If the small of your back leaves the floor when you inhale, slowly bring your knees further over your chest. This will help keep the small of your back on the floor during inhalation.

Now let's work on that space between the back of your neck and the floor. Lace the fingers of both hands together and place them under the back of your head like a pillow. Remember the combination of movement and breathe like this: breathe in, keep still; breathe out, move. Breathing in gives strength and stability to the skeletal muscles of your body. Breathing out releases muscle tension, which relaxes excessive compression in your skeletal framework.

After a long, deep inhalation, and just at the beginning of exhaling, use your arms for support and lift your head off the floor as far as possible. Keep this position during the next inhalation, moving

your head further forward only when exhaling. Several exhalations may be necessary before your head is as far up in the vertical position as possible. Always go further than you think you can and remember to monitor your jaw and breathing.

Get sufficiently relaxed so as to keep your head up in the vertical position for at least three minutes, while breathing through your nostrils. After three minutes, return your head to the floor with your arms on either side as before. Lower your chin down on your neck as far as possible and check the space between the back of your neck and the floor. The space will be smaller because the muscles that hold your body's posture have released their habitual constriction, relaxing the excessive curvature of your spine. You feel better because of the increased oxygen in your blood.

This feeling of relaxation is because of an interesting phenomenon that occurs with the central nervous system. The three-minutes is extremely important because of a little-known innate capacity of the human body. When the two parts of the central nervous system, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic, are in conflict with one another for more than three minutes, a process called induction takes over, and one automatically becomes dominant over the other. The sympathetic is active when you are awake and alert. The parasympathetic is dominant when you are physically and mentally relaxed. Which one is dominant depends on who's in charge of your individual operation: unconscious habit or conscious awareness. If you are an habitual, unconscious breath holder, your parasympathetic nervous system has little chance of becoming dominant. Using postures that minimize habitual antagonism to gravity, together with deep breathing exercises, the parasympathetic nervous system invariably becomes dominant, providing unprecedented mind/body relaxation. One more reason to consciously monitor how you what you do when you do it.

Practice these procedures for 10-15 minutes twice a day. Not only will you notice an improved awareness of energy and flexibility, but you will also gain the wonderful benefits of all that increased oxygen in your blood.

Part III will introduce a third postural technique (there are a total of seven) and discuss how one transfers this awareness to an upright posture.

(*Author's note:* People with epilepsy should not attempt any of the above-described techniques, or risk suffering an epileptic seizure.)

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