



Unfolding

Expand body movement → improve thinking → enjoy life more

The Moving Mind
Feldenkrais Centre

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Articles from the original print based newsletters of Ralph Hadden - reformatted but not edited.

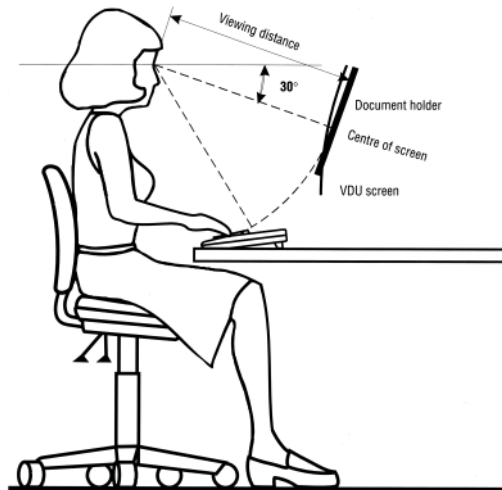
Surviving Chairs, Part 2

The chair at work

In my last newsletter (October 2003) I raised concerns about the health hazards of the widespread use of chairs in our modern world. Surviving Chairs part 1 - "Sit on the ground with me" considered an alternative to the many daily hours spent in chairs. (Thanks, by the way, to the many readers who conveyed feedback and comments.) In Part 2 I turn my attention to the role the chair plays in the working lives of many- the chair in the office - and consider how we can survive and flourish in chairs in this environment. – Ralph

All across Australia thousands of office workers spend many hours each day sitting at their desks, working on phones, paperwork and computers. Most will suffer from stress, muscle tension in the neck, shoulders and low back areas, eyestrain, fatigue and loss of concentration. Some will experience severe pain and even long term injury.

These problems, I believe, can be lessened or completely prevented with the use of a few simple, easy to learn techniques which I outline below. But perhaps we should start with information which is already widely available: the occupational health and safety guidelines, disseminated in offices throughout the world. Surely these sensible tips will help. But there's a problem...



What's wrong with this picture?

This is a standard diagram, depicting correct posture for the office worker at their computer station. Versions of this figure regularly appear in office health and safety guides and the position is widely accepted and recommended as the healthy, ergonomically optimal way to sit for work.

Nothing wrong with this diagram, surely! The worker has an erect posture, straight back and neck, head correctly angled, the eyes can gaze forward at the screen, the arms and hands are suitably positioned for the greatest mechanical advantage. A sensible, correct figure which the office worker can use as a model for proper



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posture, resulting in less strain and maximum comfort and efficiency.

But there is a problem with the diagram, a fundamental flaw. Very simply, despite it being sensible and obvious,

Nobody does it! Nobody sits that way!

Throughout the office world office workers routinely fail to sit in the prescribed manner. (Alright, alright, I admit, there are a few people who sit “correctly”, but they are a tiny minority.)

Every office worker has, presumably seen a version of this diagram, they understand what is required and then, for most of their working hours the majority proceed to sit in all sorts of ways that violate the standard, correct posture. Or they may sit “correctly” for brief periods but for the majority of their time at the desk they sit “incorrectly”-this can easily be verified by observing any workplace (as I have done over many years in a wide variety of offices.)

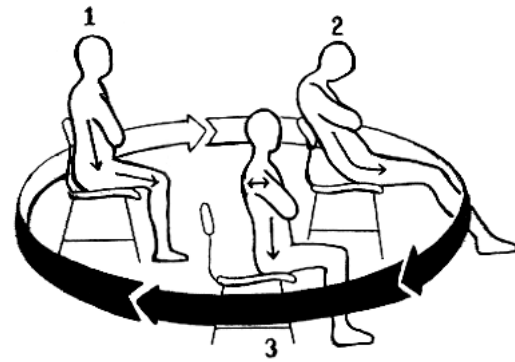
I hasten to add I am not finding fault with the office worker- these are perfectly decent people, doing what they need to do to get their job done and to look after their health as best they can. The fault is not in the worker, it is not even in the diagram itself - it is in the *assumptions behind* the diagram. This perfectly sensible and correct model for posture is routinely, ubiquitously ignored- and that’s the problem!. The diagram is ignored because it is static, lifeless, the position is difficult to maintain and no information is given on the skills needed to hold this position. As a result the diagram, rather than inspiring correct activity is discouraging, demoralizing.

Static, lifeless

The picture could be called correct if it was a “snapshot” of a moment of the worker’s activity. But it isn’t, it implies the worker basically holds this position all day - lifeless, static. This is not a model for a real person, alive, mobile, attending to many tasks, changing positions, looking in many different directions - at computer, desk, colleagues, that spunk from accounts, the view out the window (if you’re lucky enough to have a view)- bending twisting, reaching, smiling, grimacing, complaining, faking, boasting, laughing,...

Difficult to maintain

The normal office worker may be able to hold this position for a few minutes, but soon they will begin to tire, the urge to shift or slump grows and eventually any sane person gives up and slouches, leaning back or folding forward to lean on the desk.



This diagram from Galen Cranz’s *The Chair* illustrates what she describes as “the inherent instability of the seating posture.”

No information

There are ways to maintain an upright stance, but certain skills and an amount of inner awareness are needed. The guidelines provide no clues to these requirements.

Discouraging

The end result is discouraging and the diagram is about as useful as the parent who leans across the dinner table and snarls at a startled youngster “Stop slouching, sit up straight, you’re a disgrace!”

(An article in the Herald-Sun by Evonne Barry [Healthwatch, 3rd April, 2002] includes the words “Don’t slouch in your chair or slump your shoulders” and a paragraph later again says “Don’t slouch over your work”. It’s true, you shouldn’t slouch, but *how?* Lacking special skills any normal person will soon tire of holding themselves upright, then will slump and can then count themselves a failure for not complying with the instructions.)

Yes, it is important to be upright when sitting and working, when you slump the spine is in an



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inefficient position, there is an unequal pressure on the intervertebral discs - long term holding this backward curve causes damage. I agree with uprightness, but *how* it is to be done is the issue here.

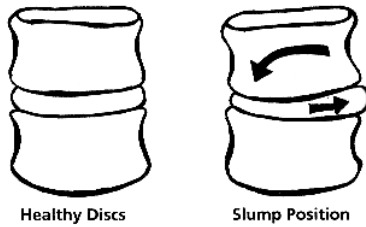


Figure 34. When we sit in a C-shaped position, the lumbar vertebrae force uneven pressure on the pulpy discs, which tend to slip out towards the back.

Diagram from *The Chair* by Galen Cranz

What to do

There is no correct posture.

Years ago I attended a workshop led by visiting Feldenkrais teacher, Mark Reese. He posed the question "What is good posture?" and invited class members to have a go at demonstrating what they thought to be good posture. A young man went first. He began just standing normally, casually and then took up a "good posture"- it was immediately apparent to the rest of us in the class that he looked stiff, strained, unnatural. When he stopped doing "good posture" he returned to looking more natural and at ease. Several others tried and in each case it was the same- when someone took up what they thought of as good posture it was a position of strain, the neck tightened, the chest lifted, the back stiffened- "good posture" was effortful and impossible to maintain.

Moshe Feldenkrais argued strongly against the concept of "good posture" ("you're not a post") - he proposed instead the term "acture", defining it as a position of *readiness for action*. In Moshe's terms correct posture was not something fixed rather it was changing and dynamic, enabling efficient, effective action in any direction. This

position was infinitely variable depending on what you wanted to do- chop wood, win a fight, make love, dance, sing, work at a computer, intimidate, placate, reassure, charm...and so on.

This sort of good posture requires more subtle skills and a practice of self awareness. It is not achieved by the imposition of commands to "stand/sit up straight, pull your shoulders back, hold your back straight, chin in, chest out!" (Commands imposed externally by parent / teacher / O.H. & S. guidelines or imposed internally by your inner parent.)

So we approach the concept of sitting correctly in the office chair by thinking of *readiness for action* - so that you perform effectively, efficiently at your desk, hence reducing strain, fatigue and injury and maximizing ease, alertness, productivity and enjoyment.

We need a "correct" posture, (or "acture") that is dynamic, alive, enhancing and achievable, *not* one that is static, lifeless, discouraging and impossible. To do this we need to think in terms of action rather than position.

The chair

Seat firm and horizontal (or maybe with a slight forward tilt), not sloping backwards (a backwards tilt makes sitting upright quite a struggle)

- Set the height so that there is a 90 degree angle at your hips and knees (or slightly higher)
- What is the best chair? This is a whole other topic, for another time, but suffice to say you should be able to set the height to suit your size, set the seat horizontally and the seat should not be too soft. If you have a fancy, high tech ergonomic chair *make sure you know how to set it*, and tinker with the settings from time to time to find what suits you, realizing that what suits you may change. For the last word read Galen Cranz's wonderful book, *The Chair*. (Norton, New York 2000).

Sit on your sit bones

These are the ischial tuberosities, 2 knobs of bone projecting from the base of the pelvis You can feel these when you're sitting by reaching a hand under your bottom (better wait till no-one is looking). If you can feel your weight resting on



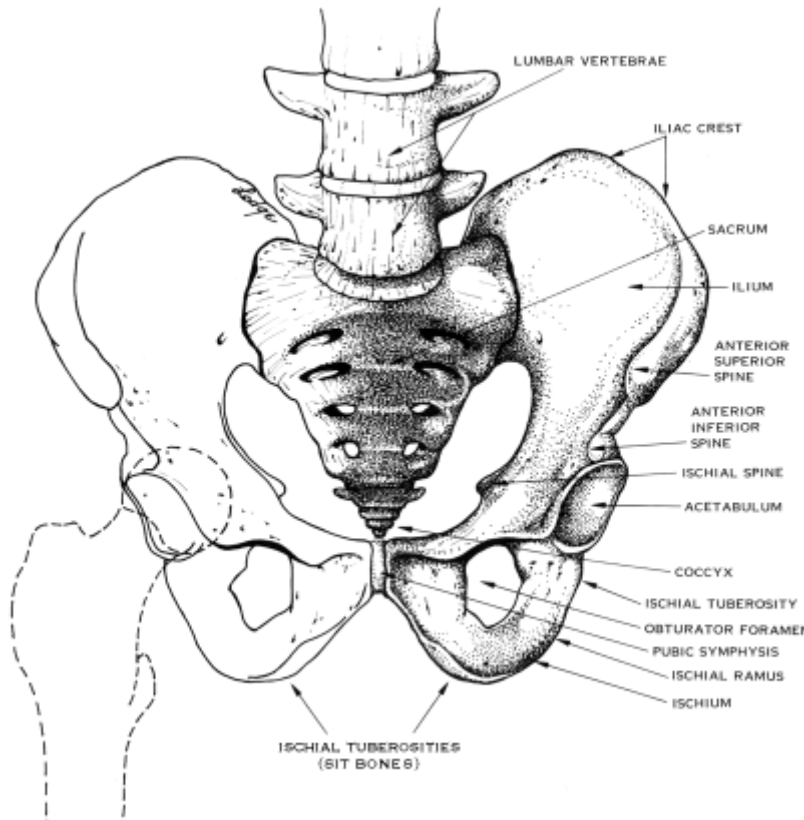
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these sit bones, then you are well positioned, on a solid, bony foundation. This means your skeleton is supporting you and your muscles do less work.

its own way to come easily erect. (If you are too self conscious to do this in your office practise it at home, then while at work imagine the movement.)



Reach in all directions

Reach out with your left hand, your right hand, reach down / back / sideways / high / low; so that you develop a tendency to sit so that you could move in any direction required. Developing this tendency will automatically position your body in a natural, easy, erect posture.

Use the whole body

Long periods of chair sitting lead to overuse of the arms and neck and underuse of the trunk. Practise involving the pelvis and trunk in your activities - for example if turning to look at something to your right, turn the pelvis, chest and shoulders to the right as well, so that your neck has less work to do.

Practise sitting without back support (then sit right back)

As often as possible sit at the front of your chair, on your sit bones, away from the back support. This will feel strange as you have a lifetime of being accustomed to the support of a chair back. It will take some getting used to - try it for short periods - but it is worth it as it develops the habit of upright sitting, on the skeleton, without slouching back to lean on the chair back. Let your pelvis roll forward so your lower back arches and your abdomen bulges forward. When you tire of this (and you will) shift all the way back in the chair so that your back is snug up against the back support so that you can easily maintain an upright position.

Use the *Reach up to sit up* 5 minute Chair Exercise at the end of this newsletter

This exercise provides a natural, easy way to draw yourself into an upright position. Your body finds

Awareness

Pay attention to your own experiencing of sensations, notice when you are uncomfortable or straining and adjust what you're doing to be more comfortable. This is a skill that is developed in Feldenkrais lessons but anyone can start by simply paying attention. Practising attending to your sensations is the first step to more skill, grace and power in everyday living.

Take a break

I was working in a massage clinic a few years ago and gave a massage to a middle aged businessman. Knowing that he worked in an office I was surprised to find that he did not have a low back problem. I commented on this and asked did he know why he didn't have a problem (as practically every person I have worked on who works in an office does have a back problem). He replied, "Well, I'm not really sure

Figure 7



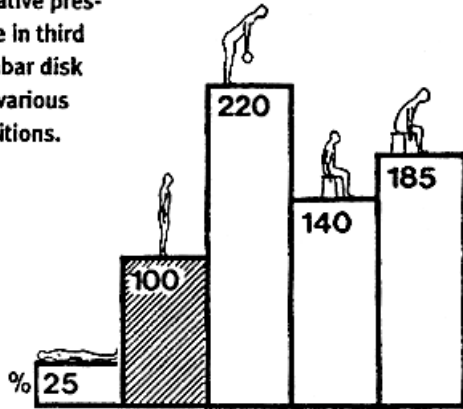
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but one thing I do know is that I can't bear to sit for very long. After a while I just have to get up and move around - it's just a habit I have."

Relative pressure in third lumbar disk for various positions.



The sitting position is not necessarily the most efficient position for resting the back (from *Dynamic and Task Seating* by Paul Cornell, ©Steelcase, Inc)

No matter how well you sit, long periods of sitting will take their toll. Here I agree with all the health and safety guidelines and articles which do recommend regularly taking a break:

- As often as possible get up and walk around. Stand up and have a stretch. Give your muscles and joints a change of position, get the blood circulating.
- Lie down on the floor, on your back with knees bent up (maybe you will have to wait till you get home to do this), let the floor support your back, taking pressure off the spine and giving your back muscles a rest. It needs to be a firm but comfortable surface, like a carpeted floor (a bed is usually too soft for the back to fully release). Try it for 5 or 10 minutes at time.
- Even when you can't get out of the chair you can stretch and move around while sitting.
- Have plenty of variety in your life's activities (as long as you are comfortable and enjoying yourself) - sit on the floor, walk, dance, sing, do yoga, swim, climb a tree, whatever you like. Best of all, do Feldenkrais!

Seems easy, but...

All this is more easily said than done and it would be foolish of me to criticize one set of

guidelines and then attempt to replace them with another set which also discourages and demoralizes. Please take my guidelines as simply suggestions, something to try out. Use what works for you, discard what doesn't (or come back another time and try again, maybe in a different way). This is in the spirit of the Feldenkrais method, each individual in their own way exploring, adapting and discovering what is useful to that individual.

Also it may seem strange that I am saying that you must train and develop special skills just in order to sit in a chair. But to sit well for 8 hours a day is not something that comes naturally and it won't happen automatically. You do need to intentionally take some time to learn, practise and improve. And it certainly won't happen just by seeing a diagram, or set of rules or by being told "Don't slouch!"

Of course I recommend Feldenkrais lessons as the best way to acquire these skills but there are many disciplines which can also be very helpful. I recommend the Alexander technique, Tai Chi, Aikido (and other martial arts- depending on what suits you and on finding a good teacher) or anything that helps you develop movement skills: dance, singing, yoga...find a good teacher and something you love to do (life is too short to spend many hours doing something that is supposedly good for you but is boring or unpleasant), something that suits your body type, personal preferences, lifestyle balance, timetable etc. (Start with Feldenkrais though.)

You can look and feel great

The benefits are invaluable and available to anyone – just try out my suggestions plus do some Feldenkrais and/or other disciplines. Shift out of your old habits and things will change. You will find that it is possible to work in an office for many years (or till that job in tropical paradise research comes through) and still be flexible, healthy, alert and dynamically alive! (And who knows, that spunk from accounts might ask you out!)



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