

- As a massage therapist, it's evident clients need help with either their neck and shoulders, or their low back—or all of the above. Most people have a tendency to blame these things on sleeping habits or sitting at a computer all day. While these things may be contributing factors, it's really the tension we hold subconsciously all day, every day, that eventually snowballs into real pain. The thing is, everyone has these same basic issues.

As massage therapists, what can we do to help break these chronic tension habits? How can we address and heal these subconscious holding patterns? Creative visuals are effective, in addition to stretching, movement and, of course, massage. Here are some tips I provide to clients to take home with them after a massage.

1. **Be brutally honest about your posture.** You may think it's pretty good, but if you are having neck-and-shoulder pain, headaches, issues with arms and hands, or if a bump is forming at the base of your neck, something needs to change. Breathing problems could even be related to curled-in chests. Don't blame it on your bed or your genetics; you didn't inherit a bad posture gene, you inherited the habit. The pain is there to show us where our body needs attention and maintenance. Listen to it and use it.

It's impossible to be completely honest about how your posture looks just by seeing yourself in a mirror. Each of us subconsciously adjusts our posture when we look in the mirror. To be truly honest about our posture, we need to accidentally see a side view of ourselves in a window or reflective surface of some kind as we're walking by. That is where you'll see the real truth.

2. **Stop thinking about your shoulders.** Change your focus. Instead of concentrating on your shoulders, work on keeping your chest up and open. Your body will look better, function better and be more comfortable in the long run. You may even be able to breathe and digest food better.

Make sure to pop your chest up, not out. Visualize a string attached to the top of your sternum, pulling it up, and another string on the top of your head. Use your abs to help. When doing this, be careful not to create a curve in your low back.

3. **Activate your abs.** Use your core to help keep your chest up and open while allowing your arms and shoulders to simply relax back to where they're supposed to be. This exercise is ideal to practice while sitting at a computer, and it helps keep you from curling in. It's also effective while moving and working out. If you are doing any type of upper-body lifting in your workout, make sure your abs are tight and your chest is up as high as possible. If you don't, you will work incorrect muscles and make your neck and shoulders worse.
4. **Stretch your pecs and arms.** Stretch your arms in every direction: up, down, out, across the body, above your head. Do what feels good.
5. **Arm circles.** This is a simple exercise to help with neck-and-shoulder tension. Arm circles stretch and work the muscles at the same time. Make sure you activate your abs and get your chest up as high as you can, first. Use your thumbs. If you point them like

your hitchhiking while you do your circles, it helps keep your arms straight for a better stretch.

6. **Shake it out.** Unless the pain you're having is related to an actual injury, the worst thing you can do is protect or baby it. Unless the muscle is torn or has received some sort of impact, the only thing to blame is our subconscious holding habits and repetitive actions. I realize when we first feel pain in the shoulders, arms and hands, our first instinct is to protect it and stabilize it. It hurts because it's stuck, and it's no longer receiving the flow that it needs.

Start shaking gently, then build up to shaking them as hard as you can, for as long as you can. Then stretch. Don't wait until you have time to do yoga or an extended stretching session. If it's stuck or sore, shake it out, move it, stretch it right then and there.

7. **Turn your hands up while you run, or slightly forward while you walk.** It pops your chest up and open. When you do any sort of extended walk, jog or run, pay attention to your form and moving correctly, rather than how far you go. While you're moving is the best time to work on posture, form and body mechanics. If we change our patterns while we move, our muscles retrain themselves much faster.
8. **Define posture.** The definition of great posture is, getting out of our own way, leaning back, relaxing and letting our skeleton do its job. It's about only using the muscles that are necessary for each movement we perform.
9. **Pay attention to low-back pain.** Believe it or not, low-back pain is usually caused by tension in the hips, glutes and upper legs. First, stop locking your legs together. Stretch your legs in every direction you can. This includes quads, hamstrings, iliotibial bands—everything that attaches in the hips. Muscles stretch better if you warm them up with shaking first.
10. **How do you walk?** Another contributor to low-back pain relates to how our feet hit the ground when we walk. Most of us turn our feet too far out when we walk; some people turn too far in, but it's less common. Either way, most of us also walk or run while putting all of our weight on the outer (lateral) edge of our feet. When we do this every day, the musculature on the outside of our legs becomes overdeveloped and creates a huge pull on our sacrum, causing low-back curvature and pain.

Work on lengthening and strengthening your inner (medial) leg muscles. Every time your feet hit the ground, the entire palm of your foot should touch. Think about keeping your feet straight and putting your weight more in the middle, or core. If you do this, you will see a difference in the musculature of your legs, as well as experience less low-back pain.

11. **Keep your hip joint straight and get your belly weight off of your hips.** It's important when you do this to not lock your knees. Visualize pulling the front of your body straight up from the arches of your feet to your sternum. In traditional Chinese medicine, it is taught that yin (feminine) energy runs up the front of the body, while yang (masculine) energy runs down the back of your body. Visualize your body moving up in the front of the body with each inhale, and down the back of the body with each exhale.

It takes listening to our body, diligent work, honesty and patience to address postural issues and habits. The more we can help our clients maintain their posture on a daily basis, the more we will be able to help them with our massage work. These exercises are also ideal for self-care.

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