

The Importance of Structural Balance

“Change need not be negative deterioration (so-called aging); it may well be a positive evolving construction, a mechanism through which greater maturity - physical and psychological - may be achieved.” - Ida Rolf

We all recognize the need for cardiovascular fitness as part of a health maintenance programme, but not all of us realize how important it is for our general health, to maintain or improve our body structure.

We tend to accept postural deterioration, stiffness and restriction of movement as an inevitable part of growing older. Or maybe we believe that we just need to lose a few pounds and do a bit more exercise to get 'into shape'. We may think that bones have a fixed position in the body - but the position of the bones (including the spinal vertebrae) can change, according to the pull of our muscles.

Getting into shape is something much more subtle than fighting flab. Our body shape is defined by the muscles, which attach to the bones - our 'scaffolding'. Muscles are perfectly designed to exert opposing pulls on the bones to create movement, while others support the spine, ribs, pelvis and head in a well-aligned posture. Some, more superficial, are large and long, while others, lying deeper, are small; but each has a highly specific task and optimal length.

Chronic shortening and tightening of any muscle spells trouble. Muscles work in pairs, and if one tightens, its opposing muscle must grow loose and weak - one is too tight, and one is too weak, like guy ropes on a badly erected tent. Bodies function well when there is balance, symmetry and relationship between all the parts, but when the wrong muscles are called upon to do jobs they were not designed for, some muscles deteriorate and some become much too dominant.

Thus the spine may be pulled out of true; the lower back may become too hollow or too flat and the upper back too round (dowager's hump). The neck, instead of being a gentle vertical, slants forward. The pelvis may not 'sit' straight, with the result that one hip is higher and more forward than the other, and one shoulder may become higher and more developed than the other.

Shortening of any muscle anywhere in the body will have a rippling, distorting effect throughout the musculature, because all the soft tissue is inter-connected via the fascia: thin, sheath-like material which envelops every muscle.

Structural imbalances can be not only the cause of aches, pains and limited movement in the joints, but also organic, internal troubles. Tension headaches can come from a head that is habitually held too far forward, because nerve supply to the head is affected. Sinusitis may also arise from a poorly positioned head, because the sinus cavities are not well placed for normal drainage.

Constipation can be the result of degeneration in an important muscle called the psoas, which connects the lower back to the legs and is involved in walking. When it is ineffective the lumbar nerve plexus fails to be activated properly, and this can affect food absorption and elimination, as well as nerve supply to the kidneys and adrenals.

Poor posture can be responsible for a host of conditions, from panic attacks, palpitations, lack of concentration, depression and chronic fatigue to sleep disturbances, sugar cravings, blurred vision, tinnitus, menstrual problems, loss of libido, infertility, impotence, lowered immunity - and more!

Our digestive system, reproductive system, respiratory system and nervous system each needs its own allotted space in the body and plentiful blood supply to function effectively. And we use up precious energy simply sustaining uneven muscle pulls.

A well-aligned body is not subject to the downward pull and distorting effects of gravity; it is perfectly stacked, effortlessly asserting its verticality and upward thrust.

But as long as we live - as long as life lasts - there is the possibility of change for the better. Muscles are soft and pliable; no matter how hardened and stringy they have become, simple stretches and yoga postures can release them. As we bring blood flow into tight, tense, stiff muscles, we improve their nutrition, and they start to come back to life. It is never too late.

Any return we make towards a more harmonious structure is rewarded by improved general health, additional energy and a deepened sense of well-being. Through the release of physical, emotional and psychological tension, body and mind become a more balanced, integrated whole, expressing not pain and limitation but flexibility, liveliness and freedom.