

# THE POSER

THE LAZY-SHOULDERED SLACKER STANCE DOESN'T JUST LOOK BAD, IT CAN CAUSE BACK PAIN, FATIGUE—EVEN CRAMPED BREATHING. MAGGIE BULLOCK JUMPS OUT OF THE SLUMP

**R**ussell DeMicco, an osteopath at the Cleveland Clinic's renowned Spine Institute, takes exactly five minutes over the phone to confirm what I've long suspected—that, in his words, I'm a "poster child for bad posture." In fact, it takes only a few questions. "Is your computer mouse too far away from you? Is your monitor above or below eye level? Are you craning your neck to hold the phone? Are your legs crossed?" he asks, rapid-fire. Yes, yes, yes, and yes. "When you walk, do you carry your head forward? Do you round your shoulders? Do you arch your lower back?" Uh, yes?

DeMicco is quick to assure me that at least half the population has less than ideal posture. But I come from tall, smugly erect stock. Thanks to good, old-fashioned parental nagging (and despite a very slight case of scoliosis and a crippling case of adolescence), I was probably the only 5'8½" 11-year-old on the planet who *didn't* slump. These many years later, being told I have bad posture seems like a serious backslide into bad behavior.

Thoroughly shamed, I turn myself over to Hilka Klinkenberg of the New York City-based Etiquette International. With her pale blond hair and big black glasses, Klinkenberg looks a bit like iconic fashion editor Carrie Donovan—indeed, her own stick-straight stance was honed as a model in the '60s and '70s. These days, she is the woman CEOs call when their hotshot employees commit social crimes such as talking with food in their mouths. "People are making assumptions about you all the time. How do you think they feel when you're standing there, slumped over?" asks Klinkenberg, who videotapes her clients walking into a room, sitting, and standing to show them just how bad they really look. "They think you're bored. You don't care about what they're saying. You're not interested in them." Her students learn to clock their posture in every reflective surface they pass. "Your behavior needs check-ups and maintenance, just like anything else," she says.

Klinkenberg packs a punch, but Marilyn Moffat, a professor of physical therapy at New York University, really drives up my fear factor. "Aesthetics are the least significant part of the problem," she says, hunching over to demonstrate. "See? I can't even take a deep breath. That's a huge source of fatigue already; by the time you're 70 or 80 years old, it can compromise your respiratory ability." She explains that, over time, lax posture

contributes to back pain and injury, which affect up to 80 percent of us at some point in our lives. It also weakens the abdominal muscles, leading to less support for internal organs. Moffat glances at the barely perceptible (or so I thought) convexity developing at the back of my neck and delivers the final blow. "You're right. That absolutely is the beginning of a hump," she says.

Ouch. It's time to decide which of their proposed changes I'm ready to make. Topping the never-going-to-happen list are two biggies: shelving my high heels and switching to a backpack to evenly distribute my daily load. I've also ruled out the "Botox breast lift" recommended by one adventurous dermatologist: 40 units of the stuff (\$800 worth, or more than half of what it takes to do a full face) is supposed to paralyze the muscles under the bust and at the front of the shoulders that pull you forward so you can head to the gym to strengthen the back muscles that pull you up. In theory, by the time the cocktail wears off, four months later, you've shifted the balance of your musculature. None for me, thank you.

That said, there's plenty I *can* do, starting with ergonomically correcting my desk, which all my new gurus seem to agree is the root of the problem. I yank my mouse forward, prop up my monitor to just below eye level, and place a box (two phone books also work) on the floor for my feet so that my legs are bent at a 90-degree angle; each of these relatively minor adjustments helps me sit straight without leaning forward or back. All I need now is a headset for the phone, a narrow lumbar pillow for my chair (to support the natural inward curve of the spine), and, for good measure, bone-boosting vitamins—1,000 milligrams of calcium with vitamin D to help absorption (these won't help my posture, exactly, but they can help ward off another key spinal threat, osteoporosis). Every time I sit, I make a point to plant the base of my spine at the back of my chair (a new sensation for me, a perennial slider). When no one's looking, I press my upper back flat against walls—particularly elevators—in an attempt to reprogram my muscle memory into an exaggerated idea of what "straight" feels like. "Back and in" (what Moffat told me to do with my chin) becomes my new mantra, repeated about 50 times a day.

Next up, a posture-correcting massage with **Albert Garcia**, the brother of famed nutritionist Oz, at his new

For more information, check out the posture guidelines on the website of the American Physical Therapy Association at [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org).

Upper West Side spa, Restore. Garcia tells me that his job is to loosen the muscles that are pulling my body into the wrong position; it's up to me to relearn proper sitting and standing techniques. He gets to work kneading the muscle tissue that has built up on the right side of my spine as a result of my scoliosis (still minor, he says) and uneven carriage, a process that is by turns soothing and searing. Afterward, as I stumble blissfully out the door, he hands me my "homework" (12 reps of a forward-bending, seated stretch; 12 reps of a shoulder lift done while lying on my left side) with a warning: "If you've invested five or 10 years in that posture, it takes a lot of time, a lot of stretching, a lot of exercise to correct it."

Ah, exercise. Apparently, there's no getting around the fact that what I really need is core stability, a

balance of muscle tone all the way around the torso that would hold my spine upright whether I'm thinking about it or not. Pilates, yoga, the Alexander technique, and Rolfing are all built around core strength and flexibility; Cleveland's DeMicco recommends fluid, gentle tai chi, which puts very little stress on the joints. When it comes to fitness, I'm not exactly a self-starter, so I enlist the help of Brett Hoebel, a superenthused personal trainer who runs his own body-busting program, Urbanmotion, out of New York City's tony private-training-only gym Peak Performance. Hoebel stands me in front of a wall-size grid to see how I lean (slightly to the right, just as Garcia said), prods the back of my body from heel to neck to test my "soft tissue" for tightness, bumps, and scar tissue, and makes me stand on two scales, one foot on each, to determine how evenly I carry my weight (12 pounds heavier on the right).

His diagnosis: I'm all flexibility, no strength. Hoebel adds a new trick to my arsenal: putting tape down my shoulder blades (under each bra strap) as a sticky, ultraliteral reminder not to

pull forward. He suggests building muscle tone through a comprehensive weight-lifting regimen but also prescribes a list of subtle posture-specific moves, such as the prone cobra: lying facedown with arms outstretched and slowly lifting my arms and chest, Superwoman style, in slow, steady reps. (This is done with a wooden dowel balanced from the back of my head straight down my spine, which, though slightly humiliating, forces me to "fly" in perfect alignment). Hoebel's approach is the only one so far that seems guaranteed to work, in that it doesn't depend on 24/7 awareness of

something that's been completely subconscious my whole life. Problem is, it requires faithful trips to the gym, a place I prefer to visit as little as possible.

Looking for the easy way out—as usual—I test-drive the last word

in back health, a newfangled exercise machine called SpineForce. Climbing aboard this raised motorized platform, I obediently push and pull on two long handlebars (the required level of pressure is customized by its internal computer) while the base oscillates in slow circles. The goal is to strengthen the core muscles (specifically, the company claims, the 180 or so that run alongside the spine) that keep you upright on a moving surface; by creating tension from the tips of the fingers to the ends of the toes, it also is said to deliver a full-body, zero-impact workout in 15 to 20 minutes. The bad news is, although the machine is making its way into gyms and the offices of chiropractors and physiotherapists, New York City is currently SpineForce-free.

For now, when I need a quick fix, I perform Klinkenberg's wine bottle-opener trick: I raise my arms to ear level, then press them down by my sides, pushing my shoulder blades together and down. For a few precious moments—as my core rises and my shoulders square—I, too, am ex-model straight. □

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