

The Art of Sitting by Jason Mixer

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Sitting. What could be more simple and uncomplicated? When I sit, I sit! Certainly placing one's backside on the seat of a chair to relieve overburdened legs is one of precious few remaining activities that I need not attend a seminar, nor read a book, to execute properly. I have been sitting for most of my life, and it is one thing I know how to do.

The way we sit, in actuality, has a precise, though often overlooked, influence on many aspects of our well-being and comfort. Stomach disorders, back pain, leg circulation, self-image, and chronic muscle tension are only a few of the areas of experience that may be aggravated by poor sitting habits.

As children, most of you were encouraged by well-intentioned relatives to "sit up straight!", or "stop slouching!", or "get your head up!" When so instructed by our grandmother, my sister and I would throw out our chests, arch our backs, and subsequently feel exposed, uncomfortable, and foolish, hotly resenting this unsolicited postural intrusion upon our lives. When left to ourselves, we would quickly collapse into a rounded slouch that felt more forgiving, seemed less conspicuous, and would be considered by our peers to have a greater measure of "cool".

Later, in my twenties, as I quietly suffered from the distress of an unending ache in my lower back, I would sometimes suppose that if I had only listened to my grandmother maybe I would not have all this pain and misery. If only I would just sit up straight.

It was not until 1971, when I was exposed to the work of Dr. Ida P. Rolf, that I fully understood the consequence of common postural patterns. Later, as a Rolfer and Rolf Movement Teacher, I came to appreciate that the way we sit, stand, walk, run, brush our teeth, comb our hair, or any other commonplace activity can become a persistent muscular pattern that will determine our future movement possibilities. Because all body movement is the result of a response from the nervous system as well as the musculature, every-day activities, like sitting, become associated with the same, repeated nerve-muscle pathways.

Physically, any repetitive movement pattern can become so familiar that any other pattern, no matter how efficient, is felt to be awkward and unnatural. In the brain, when the same nerves fire over and over again, a kind of groove effect occurs limiting the possibility of other nerve impulse patterns. The result is an unconscious feeling of being locked, fixed, and limited with respect to movement options.

Fixed movement patterns have an adverse effect on:

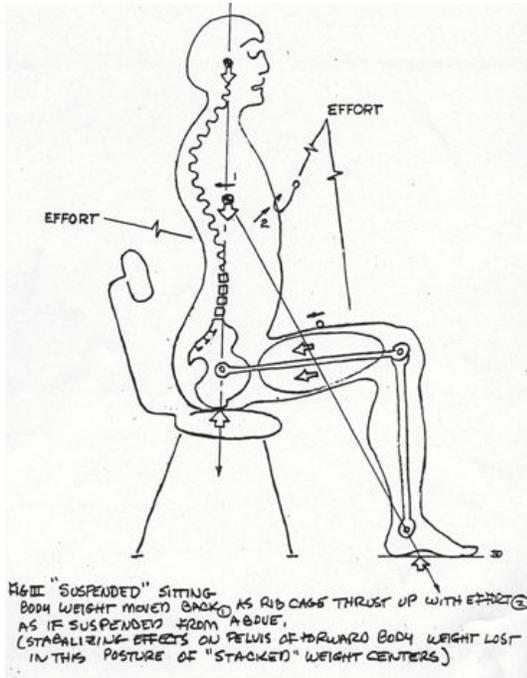
- Problem-solving (imagining only a limited set of solutions)
- Relationships (creating the same relationship problems over and over and over again)
- Confidence, strength, and the ability of the body to heal itself.

Sitting is only one of many activities that can be performed with increased ease, balance and support. Most of us sit to eat, write, relax, watch TV, read, or drive a car. We spend a lot of time sitting. Because we usually sit with muscles that are chronically over-stretched or over-contracted, these very same muscles eventually are molded into a rigid pattern which becomes fixed and usually permanent.

If, on the other hand, we can learn to sit in a way which creates little strain and allows for the free circulation of nutrients and oxygen through the blood stream, then sitting can actually nourish the body rather than interfere with its optimal function.

Suspended Sitting

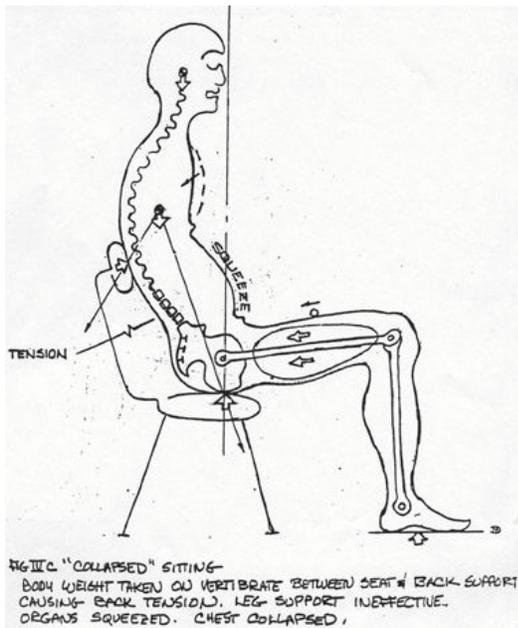
For most of us, maintaining what is thought of as “good posture” is not easy and not fun. Try sitting up straight right now as you read this. Do you pull up your rib cage and keep it suspended away from the diaphragm and pelvis? If you hold your rib cage up, you must be using muscle contraction. In general, there is no way to hold up any body part without using muscles, which, in turn, requires effort, and the expenditure of energy. When sitting, we like to relax, not struggle. Therefore, sitting up straight is just too much like work.



“But I do sit up straight!” you might protest. So, you are one of the exalted few who have conditioned yourself to sit straight and are now chuckling with self-satisfaction. Beware the held and constantly suspended rib cage. You have probably built extra effort into your sitting posture and have caused structures designed for body movement (the surface muscles of the shoulders and neck for example) to be used for a far more demanding structural purpose. Over time, holding yourself erect in the suspended sitting position utilizes an enormous amount of energy which might be more advantageously used to improve your backhand or golf swing, to walk, jog, paint a picture, or write the first volume of your memoirs.

Collapsed Sitting

Collapsing, the only apparent alternative to holding oneself up straight, is equally maladaptive and stress producing. When one has maintained a collapsed sitting posture for a matter of years, any or all of the following conditions are likely to occur:



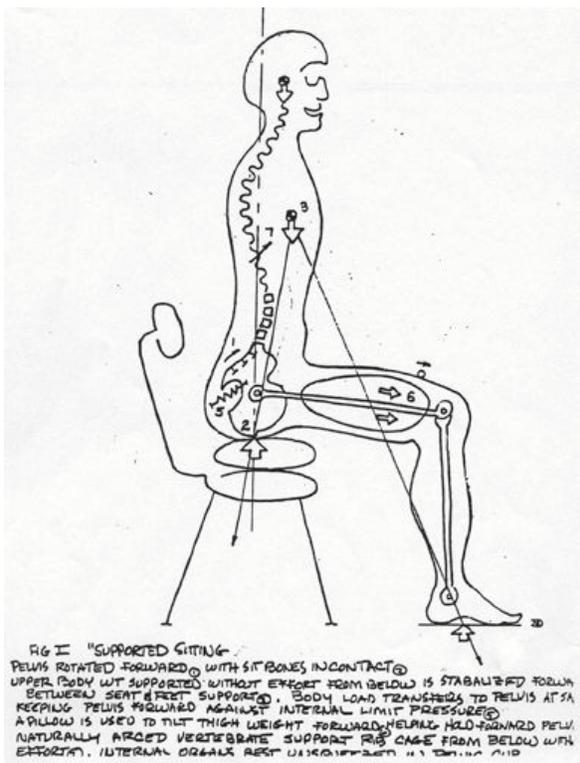
1. A spinal column which has lost some of its natural curve and is therefore essentially weak.
2. Shoulders which either round forward, or are pulled back causing limited rib movement and undue strain between the shoulder blades.
3. A digestive system that is cramped into a space smaller than its design calls for, preventing optimum function of the organs of assimilation, elimination, hormonal release, and sexual function.
4. An organism which expends far too much energy merely maintaining vertical balance in the field of gravity.

What a discouraging story! There seems to be no hope for the unfortunate sitter who may finally conclude

with Frank Lloyd Wright that “Man was made to stand or to lie down, but not to sit... “Must we complain to Heavenly Motors to arrange for an evolutionary recall of the human body? In fact, the solution to the problem of sitting is as simple as it is effective. Before guiding you through this solution, a general rule should be stated which has emerged out of the movement aspect of Ida Rolf’s work known as Rolfing Movement Integration. Always support your body from below, rather than suspend it from above. Applying this rule will allow your body to function more easily, more efficiently and with less muscular tension.

Sitting With Support

Sitting on a chair with a firm seat, place your hands under your buttocks until you feel the two bones which lie on either side of your pelvic floor. These are known anatomically as the ischial tuberosities, or more conveniently as the “sit bones”.



Assume one of your favorite collapsed sitting postures with the front of your trunk slumped forward and your spine curving like the moon in its first quarter. Notice how your pelvis rolls back when you slump, causing the weight of your trunk to fall behind the sit bones.

In order to come out of the slump, haul yourself up into a straight posture noticing how the pelvis rocks forward until contact is made with the sit bones. Because this suspended sitting is accomplished by hoisting the trunk up from above rather than supporting it from below, this position is usually strained and uncomfortable.

Find the two hip bones (the iliac crests) which are located on either side, just below the lowest ribs. Roll the hip bones forward and back noticing what happens to your chest and spine. When the hip bones roll forward, the front of the trunk lengthens and is supported without added muscular effort. When the hip bones roll back, the front of the trunk shortens and the old familiar slump emerges.

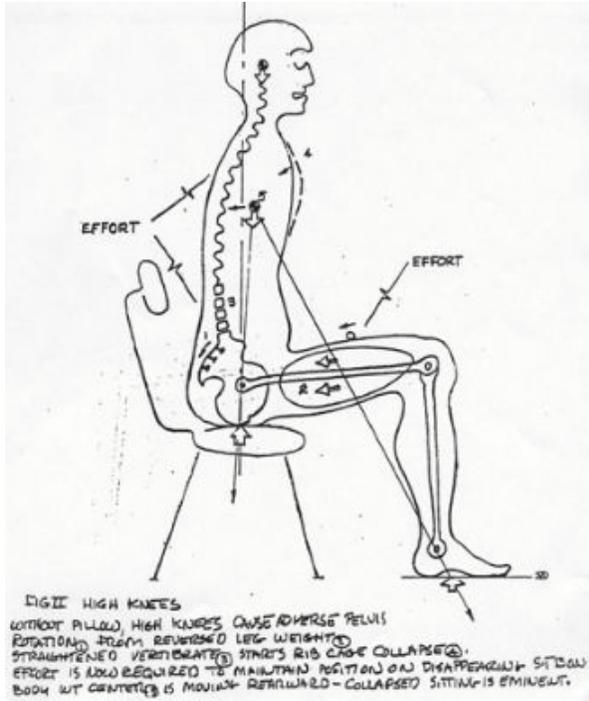
It is most important that you let the spine and rib cage respond to the movement of the pelvis rather than initiate it. As you do this, you may spontaneously discover the solution to the sitting problem. When you rock your pelvis forward until the weight of the trunk rests on the slightly forward part of the sit bones, your chest has been buoyed up and is now capable of comfortably resting in this position. Hallelujah. Amazing Grace! You now know how to sit with support in the supported sitting position.

With the trunk supported from below, the outside (extrinsic) muscles can enjoy a well deserved rest while the body’s core carries the weight with little strain or effort. The chest and diaphragm no longer squeeze the contents of the abdomen. The midsection pushes out less while the shoulders have elevated, yet supported, ribs to rest upon. The head, which can weigh twelve to fifteen pounds, is now situated up on top of the spine relieving weary neck and shoulder muscles.

Chair Height

Sit on a chair with your feet flat. If your knees are above your hip joint, you will find it advantageous to use a pillow to raise your seat until the hip joint is just above the knee. A good way to monitor this is to imagine a marble placed on top of the thigh. If the marble would roll back toward the pelvis, the

chair is probably too low. If the marble would freely roll toward your knees, you will find it easier to sit supported on the forward part of your sit bones. Play with this until the chair height - sit bone relationship is clear to you.



Supported Slouching

“But I like to slouch!” Me too. Being able to sit in different ways is as important as knowing how to sit “right”. If, however, slouching requires your trunk to be supported by the low back, then accumulated stress and eventual discomfort can only follow. When you slouch back into a stuffed chair, car seat, theatre chair, or sofa, maintain some sit bone contact with the seat, allowing your pelvis and spine to take most of the load. Contrast different slouched sitting positions, and discover for yourself how to be both comfortable and supported.

Summary

Remember to support your trunk from below rather than suspend it from above. A good way to implant this idea into your consciousness is to teach it to a friend or relative. An older person can benefit greatly from learning how to sit with support. A student, secretary, business executive, bus driver, or artist who learns this material through your initiative will thank you over and over again as they experience more comfort and ease during their work day.