

# Body Awareness

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When we are in pain we often guard our body as way of protecting ourselves. This may due to many reasons including: not wanting to increase the pain, not wanting to increase an injury or possibly because of a habit of holding tension in our body.

Research is starting to show that there is no single correct posture to prevent further injury or pain. Avoiding certain positions will also not prevent back pain because there is lots of variation in the curve of our spine.

Let's start to think about some of the ideas around guarding our body.

## 1. Body Awareness

Ask yourself these questions:

- How do you hold yourself in sitting? In standing? Do you lean to one side, do you raise up your shoulders, do you put less weight on one leg than the other?
- Can you use a mirror/reflected window to see yourself? Try watching yourself and notice how you hold your body
- How does how you hold yourself say things to others? Often how we feel is revealed in our body language

## **2. Body Tension**

Ask yourself, where in your body do you hold your tension?

- raised shoulders, clenched jaw and tight fists
- pelvic floor muscles often tighten up when we feel scared, anxious or are in pain

These muscles may often be in this tightened position due to your overprotective nervous system. Let's look at some different ways to increase your awareness of the tension in your body.

## **3. Moving and changing position can be helpful**

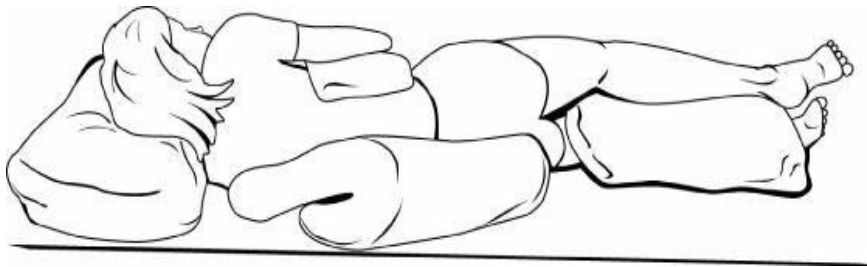
- Start to explore different positions including those positions that you may be avoiding. "Motion is lotion".
- Slowly increase the amount of time in a day that you are adding some of these changes.
- Use of rolls, pillows, body pillows, wedged pillows has been found to be helpful as you start to move into these new positions.

### **Driving or sitting for prolonged periods:**

- Use rolls under knees, behind your back — adjust to what feels right.
- Use rolls under elbows to decrease the tension on the muscles and decrease the need for neck muscles to be constantly working.

### **Sleeping:**

- More sleep increases parasympathetic nervous system which increases healing and calming signals.
- There is no “healthiest” sleeping position.
  - a) **Back:** pillow under knees (supports back, hips and knees)
  - b) **Side:** pillow between knees
  - c) **Stomach:** can often aggravate: pillow under stomach/hip can be more comfortable for back



## **4. Gentle strengthening exercises**

Doing different exercises that focus on smaller muscles in your body can help increase body awareness. Examples of these smaller muscles are the pelvic floor muscles along with core's Transverse Abdominis (TA) and Multifidus muscles.

We practice these exercises in Fitness class (i.e. belly button to spine) in many different positions. The goal of these exercises is to do them while you are doing everyday activities such as washing the dishes, standing in line.

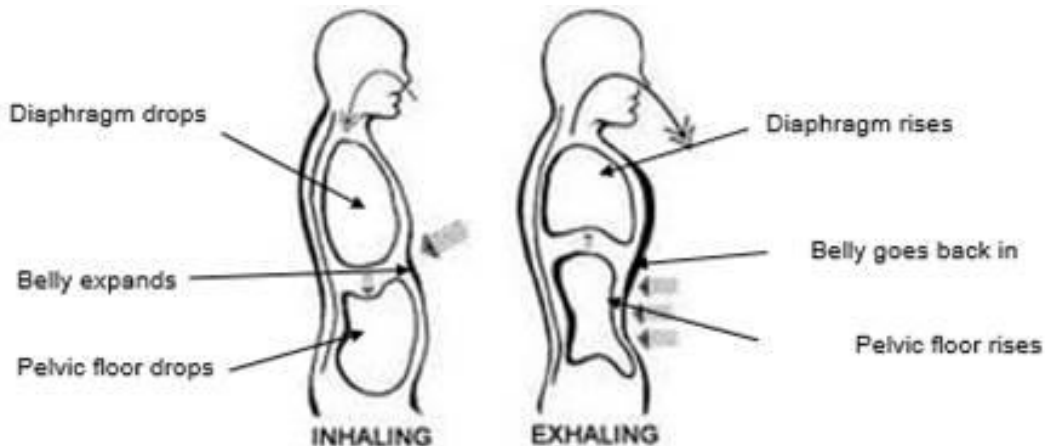
## 5. Stretching and the use of breathing techniques

- a. Hold your stretch for 30 seconds to 1 minute. This is about 3-6 big belly breaths.
- b. Remember, we are not pushing through a stretch but approaching the area, using calm breath and noticing if the muscle will soften before moving into the area.
- c. Try do self-trigger point releases and self-massage techniques using balls or foam rollers while stretching.

## 6. Piston Breathing

Practicing piston breathing can help your body remember how to let go of your pelvic floor muscles.

It is also a way of “speaking” to your nervous system in a language that it understands, reminding it that despite the sensation and experience of increased pain that you are safe and not at risk of further injury.



### **Piston Breathing:**

Your pelvic floor muscles and diaphragm work together when you are breathing, like a piston.

- Breathe in (inhale) –lungs fill up, diaphragm drops, belly expands, pelvic floor drops and pelvic floor muscles lengthen.
- Breathe out (exhale) – lungs empty, diaphragm rises back up, belly comes back in, and pelvic floor muscles shorten/rises.

## **7. Pelvic Floor Muscle Functioning**

The pelvic floor is an area of the body that we don't often think about. An overprotective nervous system can increase the activity of the pelvic floor and this may affect bladder/ bowel and sexual functioning.

Common symptoms seen with overactive pelvic floor muscles:

- Having to go to the bathroom very often, even though there is not much urine that actually comes out when you go
- Feeling of incomplete emptying of your bladder and/or bowels or constipation or straining hard during bowel movements
- Pain with sexual intercourse (initiation, during and afterwards)

These strategies may help with symptoms of an overactive pelvic floor:

Situation 1: Sudden, strong and frequent urges to urinate:

- a. Pause and take 3 calm belly breaths. Rushing may make urgency worse.
- b. Distract yourself-want to retrain your bladder and nervous system to realize that there is less urgency (count backwards from 100 by 7s, imagine a relaxing scene, tell yourself you feel the need to pee but you know you don't actually need to go yet).

Situation 2: Difficulty emptying bowels:

- a. Sitting on a toilet, sit with your knees higher than your hips- "squatting".
- b. Use a couple of stools/squatty potty to get your knees at the right height.
- c. This position relaxes your pelvic floor muscles and straightens out your colon so that it's easier for you to empty your bowels.

## The Science Is Simple

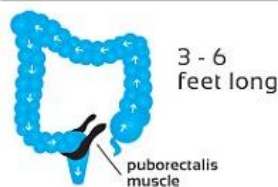
We are designed to squat



Our ancestors squatted for centuries before the invention of the modern day toilet.

In fact, the majority of the world's population still squats today!

This is your colon



The colon has the main purpose of removing waste from the body.

It features a natural bend (anorectal angle) which aids continence.

Sitting Keeps it Kinked



The puborectalis maintains the anorectal angle. Sitting only partially relaxes, the muscle, meaning that the colon is still kinked. It therefore remains difficult for faeces to pass through.

Relax with Squatty Potty



When squatting, the puborectalis muscle loosens creating a straight passageway into the rectum.

This ensures quick and comfortable elimination.

### Situation 3: Discomfort with sexual functioning

- a. Pelvic floor lengthening exercises along with piston breathing are a helpful step.
- b. Graded activity with sexual functioning- Sensate focus.

Think about one thing you have learned in class today that you could start using? Keep in mind that **change takes time!!**

#### **Ask yourself:**

- Is it realistic goal?
- Are there barriers that prevent me achieving this goal?
- How confident am I to do this goal on a scale from 0 to 10?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Score 0 means no confidence and 10 means total confidence.