

How come my back still hurts?

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If you suffer from chronic aches and pains, you may have tried exercise as a way of feeling better. It probably helped, but maybe not enough. Doubtless you wondered why you still had problems, since you thought you were taking such good care of yourself (and you were – exercise is vital to your health).

There's actually a much more specific and effective way to address chronic discomfort, as this story from a recent yoga coaching session I conducted illustrates.

A yogi client of mine sat down on his mat at the beginning of our session and said to me, "I do yoga every day, and I'm really strong and flexible. So how come at work sometimes my back or shoulders bother me? That doesn't seem right."

I had a pretty good idea of the answer, but I knew if he was really going to understand he would have to figure it out himself. So I asked him to stand up and hand me an 8 lb. weight from the table behind him. He bent forward at the waist, snaked his arm behind him, picked the weight up with his thumb pointing down, and brought it through to the front of his body by passing it near his hip. When I asked how the movement felt, he said, "Well, okay I guess." I had him do it a bunch more times so he could memorize the feeling.

Then I asked him to lie down on the floor, and I guided him through a series of gentle, easy movements called *Awareness Through Movement*[®]. (What's that? Read on.)

Afterwards, I asked him to hand me the weight again. This time he turned his head, his shoulders, and his hips to look behind him instead of bending forward. He reached back with his thumb upward instead of downward, grasped the weight, and simply turned back around to hand it to me. I said, "Hmm. Do you know that's different from what you did before?" My client looked puzzled, and asked me what he'd originally done. When I demonstrated, he said, "Really? You're kidding! Why would anyone pick a weight up like that?" He tried each version a couple of times, and observed, "The way I did it before wasn't a very easy way to do it. Before, the weight felt heavy. Now it hardly feels like it weighs anything."

'Would you say you got stronger or more flexible when you did those movements on the floor? Is that what made it easier to pick up the weight?' My client wasn't sure, so I suggested he use his maximum flexibility to pick the weight up. "Keep your shoulders pointing forward, and really stretch your chest muscles to reach your arm back and use your shoulder strength to pick up the weight."

He started to do what I suggested, and he was able to reach the weight easily without turning around because he really is very flexible. But as soon as he began to lift the weight, he immediately put it back down and said, “No way. I’d hurt myself if I did it like that.”

“So if using all your extensively developed flexibility and strength doesn’t necessarily make lifting the weight more comfortable and safe, what does?” I asked. My client thought a moment, and proposed, “My strategy is what changed. I just did the movement in a better way. So are you saying that this might be why my back still bothers me sometimes, that it’s because I’m not doing things with the best strategy, and in fact that I might even be misusing my flexibility to do things in an awkward way?” Pleased that he’d figured it out, I said, “Chances are good that’s exactly what you’re doing. We all do. We could all move better than we do in some situations, and exercise doesn’t really address our need to learn to move with all the elegance and ease we could.”

So how can you learn to move in an easy, elegant comfortable, wise way? There are several movement education techniques that can help you. My favorite, and the one I’m trained to teach, is the *Feldenkrais Method*®. I incorporate it into my personal training sessions so my clients can really connect their improving physical fitness with a pleasure and ease in movement in their daily lives. To me, it’s just irresponsible to help make a person stronger without helping them also become wiser in their use of strength.

If you’re interested in trying the *Feldenkrais Method*®, you can find a group *Awareness Through Movement*® class – there are many in New York, and they’re very inexpensive – by going to www.feldenkrais.com. You’ll also find a good explanation of the method there. You can also seek out practitioners for private sessions in the Web site directory as well.

Another alternative is to order audiotapes of *Awareness Through Movement*® lessons. Go to www.feldenkrais-resources.com for an online store. And, of course, feel free to give me a call or drop me an email if you’re interested in private lessons or if you have any questions. Call me at 212.252.5519 or email jae@intelligentexercise.com.

Other movement education methods include the Alexander Technique, which you can explore at www.alexandertechnique.com, and the Trager Approach, at www.trager.com. Both of these methods are very effective as well, and take slightly different approaches. Choose the one you like best. The investment you make in learning to move better will more than pay for itself in greater comfort and ease in your everyday life, reduced injuries over time, and other, less direct but no less valuable improvements in how you experience yourself as a whole person, and what is possible for you in your life.

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