

# Relief For Back Pain

I have always been told that I have great posture. I used to hold my chest high with my shoulders back and chin up. Growing up I was always active playing tennis, dancing and showing horses. In my twenties and thirties I found my passion through yoga, walking/running and physically demanding jobs. I even went on to become a yoga instructor and massage therapist. I became hooked on feeling good inside and out and helping others achieve this, however I ignored something I thought was just part of me: my chronic BACK PAIN.

In fact, I was surprised to learn that I was not alone. I began to notice many of my fellow yogi and Pilates colleagues, as well as massage clients and yoga students, were all experiencing some sort of chronic posture related back pain. In fact, the American Medical Association reports that 80% of the population experiences at least one episode or debilitating lower back pain.

***“The dictionary defines fitness as possessing a quality of strength and overall health. Nevertheless, for many people today, fitness has become more about how one looks than how one feels. This is a cultural standard that has nothing to do with what is natural to our species’ design,” Kathleen Porter, Ageless Spine Lasting Health***

As long as I can remember, I have always suffered from back pain. I have probably spent thousands of dollars on massages, yoga trainings, physical therapy and chiropractors and even spiritual counselors, but nothing has seemed to undo the numerous problems that were causing my back pain, that is until I found Jean Couch founder of the Balance Center in Palo Alto, California. Jean taught me I could align and balance my posture and virtually diminish my pain through a simple, yet committed posture practice.

Jean studies in conjunction with Noelle Perez of the L’ Institute d’ Aplomb in Paris, France, which teaches an anthropologically based posture modification technique. Both Jean and Noelle were long time students of the famous Indian Yoga instructor B.K.S. Iyengar and studied with him extensively in India. Both Jean and Noelle became aware of the posture differences amongst the westerners practicing yoga as compared to the native Indians of India and began comparing different generation and culture differences in posture.

The approach at the Balance Center is simple and fundamentally based: Posture awareness through alignment of the bones correcting the misalignments and the chronic strain I was creating in my everyday life. I realized that what I thought was a healthy posture was actually causing strain on my muscular skeletal system. Although yoga and stretching could relieve my pain temporarily, these activities done in an already “misaligned” body was causing even more pain and strain.

***“The past century has seen a radical change in the way we stand. Up until the 1920s most people in the United States stood in an upright posture. Their support bones-the spine, pelvis and legs-are on the same axis, so the body weight is upright and balanced. I describe people with this posture as balanced.” Jean Couch***

Besides my own physical traumas, personal habits and injuries contributing to my back pain, I also realized cultural conditioning was a huge culprit. Some of these included the following:

**Posing unnaturally for photos**

**Crossing my legs to look “lady like” - causing an imbalance in my sacrum and possibly leading to scoliosis**

**Pulling my shoulders back to protrude my chest-straining my upper back (especially in yoga poses)**

**Holding my abdomen in to support my low back causing a constant contraction on my abdominal and hip flexor muscles**

**Performing abdomen exercises that further tighten hip flexor muscles**

**Constantly smiling and making unnatural facial expressions-contracting and straining my jaw, shoulders, neck and facial muscles**

**Walking with my quadricep muscles as opposed to my gluteal muscles**

**Bending from the knees to lift or bend causing a strain on my knees**

And the list goes on...bending from the waist to pick things up, clean or brush my teeth, arching my back wearing “fashionable shoes”, conforming my posture to fit tight uncomfortable clothing and chairs, sitting in uncomfortable chairs causing me to slump and sit on my tail bone rather than my “sits bones”, heavy shoulder bags, habitual foot placement habits...etc.

It was apparent to me that perhaps we were losing our natural ability to use our body in the natural biomechanical way it was meant to move. What we think is correct and “looks good” could actually be causing constant strain and unnecessary wear and tear on our joints.

In Jean Couch’s class we studied many photos from other parts of the world, especially places where people do physical labor for years on end. For example, we compared a middle-aged small woman carrying heavy rocks all day to a young muscular body builder. It was obvious in comparison that the small woman carrying rocks on her head all day had aligned bones doing most of the work whereas the bodybuilder’s power was mostly within his muscles, not in an overall integrated whole of his functioning body parts. We also looked at babies and young children as teachers of alignment, as well as men and women around the world with an overall ‘balanced’ structure; sitting, standing, walking and bending with perfectly aligned and extended spines.



We also studied many photos of yogis from India who were naturally anatomically in balance. They seemed to approach the yoga poses from an entirely different place than many westerners do.

One of the major components of the individuals in anatomical balance is the natural anterior tilt of the pelvis and an upright straight spine and natural curve of the neck, much like a baby or a toddler. Further, these people in 'balance' looked so relaxed and healthy as opposed to the many, tucked tailbones, slumped, curly or over contracted postures I am accustomed to seeing.

It suddenly occurred to me that our culture had chosen appearance over alignment and many of our anatomy and fitness/posture books have adapted to this cultural shift as well. Esther Gokhale points this out in her book: '8 Steps to a Pain Free Back', when she shows a picture of a spine from the 1900's compared to 1990. The early dated version has a much straighter spine as compared to the 1990 version showing the spine with an enhanced low back curve in the low back area, as opposed to the natural tilt sacrum.

I have learned through practice and commitment that it is possible to reeducate my body and mind to new basic sitting, walking, bending and sleeping positions throughout my day that can actually promote relaxation rather than stress on my body. My world has completely taken a shift as I slow down and commit to each moment of movement or placement of my body. In turn, my back pain has almost diminished, my pelvis has shifted and my waist and abdomen have lengthened along with my spine. All of these anatomical changes have also brought my body into a 'reserve mode' using my body much more efficiently than before. Each day I feel a new change both physically and emotionally. As my muscles, bones and myofascial tissues shift, so does my sense of Self.

If you are interested in learning more about Jean Couch and the Balance Center please visit: [www.balancecenter.com](http://www.balancecenter.com) or contact Kathleen Gallen at: [kakagallen@hotmail.com](mailto:kakagallen@hotmail.com) for workshops or private posture consultations.

**Kathleen Gallen is a certified Esalen and Thai Massage practitioner, as well as a certified Yoga and Posture instructor. (For more information, go to [www.positivechangemedia.com](http://www.positivechangemedia.com))**



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