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NOVEMBER 2014



QUICK PICK-ME-UP

POSTURE

Feeling low? Straighten up your spine and you just may give your mood a lift, too.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY Johnny Miller

Erik Peper, a psychologist and a professor of holistic health at San Francisco State University, doesn't need a three o'clock coffee run every afternoon, thanks very much. And neither do you, he says. All you need to do is quit slouching. Good posture can perk you up, he insists, "maybe even better than coffee."

Good posture is both physical and mental. How you carry your frame affects hormones and oxygen levels; it can also affect attitude and mood. All this reflects whether you feel energetic or exhausted overall. Not convinced? Follow these steps and experience the difference for yourself.

how to stand tall

1. Place your feet hip-width apart. Angle your toes out 7 to 10 degrees, but once in a while place your feet parallel. (Changing your stance is easier on your legs.) Knees should be slightly bent. All four corners of your feet should be in contact with the ground evenly.
2. Pull in your lower belly. Or, to borrow a phrase from Pilates, engage your core.
3. Keep your shoulders back and down (regardless of whether your arms are at your sides or on your hips). Keep your head over your torso, and line up your ears with your shoulders.

WHY THIS POSTURE PICKS

YOU UP: It fuels confidence. There are two reasons for this. First, hormones. A 2010 study published in the journal *Psychological Science* found that when subjects assumed a "high-power" pose—taking up the maximum amount of space that is socially acceptable with your body (say, by standing tall with hands on hips)—their levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, plummeted. What simultaneously shot up? Testosterone, the hormone associated with domineering behaviors. As a result, the subjects reported feeling more in control and willing to take risks.

The second reason this pose builds confidence: It affects how others feel about you, which in turn affects how you feel about yourself. Slouch while

you're talking and you send others the nonverbal message that you're not sure of what you're saying, whether that's the case or not, says Peper. They'll also be more likely to tune out, which can shake your confidence for real. With a confident stance, chances are your audience will be more engaged—and you'll feel more charged up about what you're telling them, too.

how to step lively

1. Start in standing position, as previously described.
2. As you walk, roll from heel to toe.
3. Let your arms swing naturally by your sides while your shoulders remain pulled back and down. Keep your head up, so you're looking into the distance, not at your feet.

WHY THIS POSTURE PICKS

YOU UP: You breathe better. As Cynthia Vaughn, a chiropractor in Austin, Texas, and a spokesperson for the American Chiropractic Association, explains, when you slouch (whether you're standing still or moving), you



compress your rib cage. This forces you to breathe from just your chest instead of your abdominals, so your cells have less air to function efficiently and you may feel tired. The improvement in breathing is especially noticeable when you're on a long walk. For an added jolt of energy, pick up the pace by pushing harder off the balls of your feet. This little spring in your step, if not an outright skip, can help, according to a 2012 study published in the journal *Biofeedback*. When subjects skipped, they reported energy levels 46 percent higher than when they moved with their head down and shoulders bent forward. Of course, increasing the heart rate

is a natural rejuvenator, thanks to increased endorphin levels and blood flow. But do it with good posture and you'll enhance the effect with more oxygen.

how to sit straight

1. Place your feet flat on the floor or, if your feet don't touch, on a footrest. Knees should be at or slightly below hip level. Keep a small gap between the backs of your knees and the front of the seat.
2. If the chair can be adjusted, tilt the seat bucket (the part you're sitting on) somewhat forward. This will force you to lean back a little, stacking your torso over your pelvis. Chair not adjustable? Use a wedge to tilt the base of your spine slightly forward. You can also sit taller on your own, but you'll be fighting

gravity, and "gravity always wins," says Steven Weiniger, a chiropractor and the author of *Stand Taller Live Longer*.

3. Keep your ears over your shoulders. If you're typing, your forearms should be parallel to the floor.

WHY THIS POSTURE PICKS YOU UP:

The ergonomic sitting described here, in addition to improving breathing and preventing backaches, can help you stay positive. A 2014 study published in *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy* found that slumped sitting activated memory networks associated with bad moods, whereas an upright posture fired up more happy-memory networks. In

addition, a good sitting posture might toughen you up: In a University of Southern California study published in 2012, researchers concluded that standing or sitting upright helped subjects "manage emotional pain" better than rolling up into a ball did. The reason? You feel less helpless when your body is less constricted. So don't slouch the next time you're bogged down with work. Simply by sitting straight, you'll muster the can-do thoughts needed to power through.



in a slump? Visit realsimple.com/standstraight for quick exercises that will make maintaining good posture easier.

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