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SPIRIT, MIND & BODY

Repetitive Stress Injury

by Siena McCarthy

Until computers started to dominate the workplace, there was little understanding of the physical cost involved in spending many hours a day using a keyboard while staring at a monitor. Many jobs today require some kind of repetitive movement, whether it's sorting mail or making hamburgers, cleaning teeth or assembling cars. What is still missing, for most people, is a deeper understanding of why these problems develop, so that we can pay attention to what we're doing and avoid creating the problem in the first place.

A simple way to look at the human body is as a collection of organized, balanced, self lubricating hinges. Some hinges work in one plane like the elbow. Some hinges work in two planes like the wrist. Some work in three planes like the shoulder. And our spine can be viewed as multiple hinges stacked one on top of the other. These hinges are designed to work effectively and painlessly throughout our lifespan. If there is no genetic anomaly or permanent injury, then we're dealing with a repetitive stress injury, which is something we can prevent.

In order for a hinge to carry out its function properly, there needs to be a heavier part and a lighter part. A screen door works because the house functions as the heavier part that holds one end of the hinge stationary so that the door can move freely. Our body works basically the same way. If you're typing on a keyboard, your arms and shoulders become largely motionless. They anchor the movement, like the house, so your fingers are free to move, like the door. The hinge, in this case, is your wrist. But even the best designed hinge will eventually wear out from continual, repetitive use. Weeks of this stress can cause pain in

the nerves that pass through the wrist and a few years may damage them to the point that they may not recover.

The bigger problem is not that we hold only a few parts still while we make small movements with our fingers. It's that we frequently hold our entire body still, even our breathing! When we focus to pay attention, our head becomes the stationary part that allows our eyes to move and then we immobilize the rest of the body and largely shut down our breathing in order to keep our head still. It's not that we actually need to freeze everything else in order for the small body parts to move freely; rather it's that, because we are so focused on doing it right, we become frozen and rigid. We've all heard the often repeated command, from parents and teachers, to "Sit still and pay attention!"

Our bodies were designed to move. As babies and infants we were continually in motion. Without exploration through movement, we would not learn to crawl, sit up, walk or talk. As we get older, our world of movement shrinks and we not only do less movement but less varied types of movement. Healthy movement requires intelligent muscles – intelligent because

they are being challenged to perform varied and new tasks – not simply to do the same thing over and over and over again.

So, you can use your body's hinges until they wear out or you can teach them some new tricks, like learning how to use only the muscles needed and not freeze the parts that are still free to move. There are many ways to do this beyond what is already known about ergonomics, taking frequent breaks, stretching, etc. Give your body what it craves, which is learning new movement. Yoga, Gyrotonic, Gyrokinesis, Feldenkrais, Tai Chi, QiGong, any of the martial arts, etc., are great ways to wake up your body's inherent desire for movement and, as a natural byproduct, you will learn how to take better care of yourself. While everyone comes in with different genetic gifts, each of us can improve and expand our balance, ease and freedom of movement and that is one of the keys to enjoying life to the end.

Siena McCarthy is a Certified Gyrotonic and Gyrokinesis Instructor in Cotati. She teaches at Body Works Yoga in Petaluma, 769-9933. She can be reached at 707.795.1481 or spiralexansion.com

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