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Improve your posture

Siski Green / 04 November 2015

How improving your posture can boost your confidence, lift your mood and even help reduce your risk of falls.

Better posture also makes you feel better. Image posed by model.

Better posture can genuinely change your life – it can make you feel more energised, help others view you as more confident and attractive, and also boost your own self-esteem and even lift your mood.

Read our easy mood boosters

Posture guru Dr Steven Weiniger, from the USA, works to train other medical professionals to use posture improvement in their work, and believes better posture is something we should all strive towards.

As he points out, there are many phrases linked to posture and attitude – ‘keep your chin up’, ‘hold your head high’, ‘don’t be downcast’, or ‘I’m feeling down.’ And there’s a reason for that – your posture not only says a lot about how you’re feeling, it can even change the way you feel.

But before you straighten up in your seat, shoulders pulled harshly back, read on...

Posture is not all about standing straight

When most of us think about posture, we immediately straighten our spine and pull our shoulders back, but, says Weiniger, it's not just about how you stand still but also how you move.

"Posture is about motion, so the best way to take care of your posture is by changing positions, and regularly getting up to move around," he says.

"Walk to the kitchen for a drink and stretch your arms, lay down on the floor and stretch out for 5 breaths, or keep a ball around and take a exercise break."

You *can* enjoy sofa time

Having good posture doesn't mean you can't take a break on the sofa. "If you lay down on the couch, change sides," says Weiniger.

"Sit up taller and put a pillow behind your back (or a BackJoy or other support under your seat to level your pelvis). Put your feet up on the table and then put them down. The key is to keep moving."

Great incentives to improving posture

If looking after your back isn't incentive enough for you, better posture also makes you *feel* better.

"People who favour a slumped over posture while performing high pressure tasks report having more negative thoughts and feeling more depressed than those who sit upright," says Weiniger.

According to a study published in medical journal *Health Psychology*, adopting an upright seated posture in the face of stress can maintain self-esteem, reduce negative mood, and increase positive mood compared to a slumped posture.

Furthermore, sitting upright increases rate of speech and reduces self-focus.

Research from journal *Psychological Science* also found that people with expansive, "powerful" posture feel more in control, but were 45% more likely to take a risky bet.

This, says Weiniger, correlates with hormonal changes that were noted in the saliva samples of study participants.

The saliva samples showed that participants with more 'powerful' posture (chest forward and shoulders back, chin up and so on) experienced lower cortisol and increased testosterone – hormones balanced like this are linked to disease resistance and leadership abilities.

Striving for perfect posture is a personal thing

The ideal way to improve your posture will also depend on your gender, physique and your age. That's because your risk factors are different.

"Men and women have different relative strengths and weaknesses, and so different relative risk factors," says Weiniger.

"For example, a big risk of asymmetric, folded (aka "bad") posture as we get older is a fall. As described in my book, *Stand Taller~Live Longer: An Anti- Aging Strategy*, the second posture principle is Balance: Posture is How you Balance Your Body. So when posture fails, the result is a fall.

"In people over 65 who fall, a woman's fracture risk is nearly twice that of man due to thinner bones and increased incidence of osteoporosis. However, of those who fall 1 in 5 die within a year, but men die more frequently than women."

"So at the end of the day, our recommendation for everyone is to strive to stand taller and work to move with symmetry and control, and doing some exercise for strength and endurance/cardiovascular," says Weiniger.

Read more about how to avoid a fall - download our falls guide

It's no use, however, working hard at the gym to improve your posture if, while working out, you're still slipping into 'bad' posture habits.

"That way, you'll be training greater asymmetry and more folded (aka 'bad') posture. So, instead, you want to start every workout with posture exercise to set your postural and motion baseline."

Dr Steven Weiniger's website is www.BodyZone.com

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Siski Green

Siski Green has been writing health news and features for Saga magazine for more than ten years