

# Natural Posture

WHEN OUR BODIES RETURN TO THEIR NATURAL ALIGNMENT, WE LET GO OF PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS, ALONG WITH A SURPRISING AMOUNT OF MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL TENSION AND DISTRESS.

BY KATHLEEN PORTER

**OUR BODIES WERE DESIGNED** to sit, stand, move, and sleep in proper skeletal alignment. Unfortunately, due to modern, cultural adaptations, most of us lose this alignment during childhood. This can lead to a host of uncomfortable physical symptoms, ranging from back pain to constipation.

Why is proper skeletal alignment—what I call *natural posture*—so much more important than has been previously recognized?

Our physical bodies are one *entirely equal* third of the body/mind/spirit triad, and they are ruled by immutable natural laws (just like the Law of Attraction). These natural laws play an essential role in our overall health *and* happiness, and these laws apply to everything in our world, including the design of all species.

In fact, these immutable natural laws explain how some women in the world—including the ones shown in the image here—are able to carry enormously heavy loads on their heads while gliding along as if on a relaxed stroll. These women happen to be from the same species as all the rest of us: They demonstrate not only what is possible, but what is *effortless* when we inhabit our bodies according to their natural human design. When you and I return to the same natural structural alignment that these women experience, we too are able to move through the world with greater ease.

And yet, the benefits of natural posture extend far beyond effortless strength. Many people, myself included, have found that proper skeletal align-

ment allows other health issues to resolve themselves as if by magic. This is because deep structural *misalignment* not only can cause obvious physical distress like back pain and neck pain, it also affects the efficiency of breathing, circulation of blood, digestion, elimination, and nervous system functions, all of which can lead to a breakdown in the natural “flow” of optimal health within the body.

## BABIES NATURALLY FIND ALIGNMENT

Babies come into the world as pure awareness: receivers of the myriad sounds, shapes, colors, lights, shadows, movements, and sensations that envelop them. They inhabit minds that are not yet “self” conscious, fearful, or capable of judgments.

As babies develop, body/brain connections begin to build through repeated natural movements and new cascading perceptions, which lay the groundwork for the unfolding of language, motor skills, and the integration of sensory input, all of which contribute to an



◆ When bones are aligned along the vertical axis of gravity, the weight of a heavy load is distributed through those bones, so muscles don't have to strain. This is the natural alignment that all healthy toddlers discover.

emerging sense of identity as “self.”

Through lots of belly-to-Earth experiences in the earliest months of life, babies begin to develop a strong internal “core” of stability. This core is made up of deep muscles of the torso that fire up and develop when babies “push off” against the Earth. Such an exchange with the physical “ground of our being” is key to initiating natural movement and, if allowed to develop naturally, will provide a lifetime of solid support for the upright spine.

These postural muscles continue to develop as babies teach themselves to roll over and over and over, then to sit up on a perfectly anchored pelvis, then to crawl with efficiency, and finally to stand solidly on two legs that function as vertical pillars of support. By the time babies have graduated to toddlerhood, they have fulfilled their evolutionary mission to become upright, tethered

in place by this core of stability.

While figuring out how to stand and walk with a heavy, bowling ball–like head balanced on top of the spine, toddlers find a vertical axis of gravity within themselves—an axis around which the skeleton precisely, and exquisitely, aligns itself.

Watch a toddler move and you will see that almost all movement occurs in the primary joints—ankles, hips, knees, and shoulders—with little, if any, extraneous bending or twisting within the spine. Such is the natural human design for efficient, flexible, and relaxed movement.

### LOSING WHAT CAME NATURALLY

Healthy toddlers are the gurus for how to live solidly in relaxed and comfortable bodies. While toddlers experience moments of both physical and emotional distress, they bounce back quickly; they return to an easeful, home-base equilibrium, free from any excess tension in their muscles *or* their minds.

This comfortable state is possible because naturally developing children

inhabit their bodies with a simple interplay between *aligned* bones, which provide underlying structural support, and *relaxed muscles*, which are free to do their primary job of simply moving the bones.

In contrast, when our bones are not aligned, our muscles must compensate—which means they must struggle to cobble the body together with tension, as is the case with so many adults today.

Photographs of myself as a toddler reveal that I, too, inhabited my body with this same aligned ease. But by the time I was 11, photos show that I had taken on unnatural postural habits that left me looking “collapsed.” I had lost the support of a solid core and an aligned pelvis, essential ingredients for a naturally elongated spine upon which the head can balance with delicate, tension-free ease.

Perhaps my slouched stance was the result of familial patterns that were modeled for me, or perhaps I fell down the stairs or off my bicycle. Maybe I developed protective emotional stances or took up slouching in order to appear shorter, since, at the time, I was the tallest girl in the sixth grade.

There are many reasons why, particularly in the U.S. and other technologically advanced places in the world, postural collapse has become an epidemic that is developing at younger and younger ages. Among them: Babies today spend far too little time lying on their bellies, and instead spend most of their waking and sleeping hours lying flat on their backs or in a semi-reclining position in car seats, strollers, carriers, swings, and other devices.

Unfortunately, these devices cause the pelvis to tuck under the way a *sad dog* tucks its tail between its legs. This posterior tilt of the pelvis disrupts the position of the sacral platform on which the spine sits, causing the spine to collapse and short-circuiting core development. Most parents today are unaware that they are unwittingly



The human skeleton serves as the framework of support for the body in the same way that wall studs and posts are the framework of support for a house. The yellow dots here mark the weight-bearing joints—ankles, knees, hips, and shoulders—that all must line up along the vertical axis of gravity, or “plumb line,” as defined by natural physical laws.



training poor posture into their children's bodies by placing them, for hours at a time, in physically disempowering positions that have lifelong health implications.

In fact, the pelvis is the foundation of support for everything above it. Having an aligned pelvis is a key element in determining whether we will enjoy easeful, flexible movement; authentic strength; freedom from tension and pain; and the lifelong benefits of enduring vitality.

You might want to try this on yourself: Tuck your tail like a *sad dog* and notice how your back (spine) rounds and the front of your body collapses.

Without a solidly aligned pelvis as the foundation, the spine cannot function like the *trunk of the tree*. Tucking the tail breaks the body's dynamic connection with the Earth: The spine becomes unable to serve as a conduit for the

push-off exchange of energy between ourselves and the Earth.

## POSTURE AND EMOTIONS

With 66 years now stretched out behind me, I am able to look back on periods of my life when my physical posture reflected the psychological and emotional stages I was experiencing at the time.

By adolescence, I had already adopted the sad-dog stance. I "tucked my butt," bent my knees slightly, collapsed my chest, and dropped my head backward. In the process, I was training muscles to unnaturally shorten or lengthen, so that this became my default posture.

I'm sure this lack of stability only served to reinforce the profound feelings of angst I felt as a teenager, when all I wanted to do was draw as little attention to myself as possible—or, preferably, disappear altogether. Like so many young

people, I was deeply bothered by feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness, and I was convinced that I was painfully unattractive.

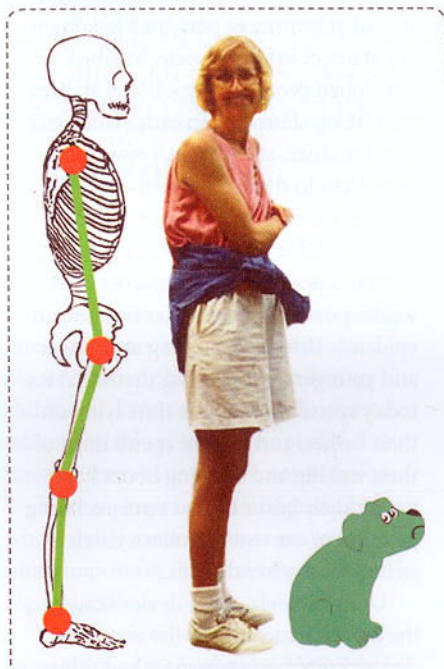
I can now understand how these beliefs affected my experiences. How I *felt* about myself and how I *inhabited* my body appear to have been inextricably interwoven from an early age.

Accomplished actors understand this. They employ subtle details of skeletal alignment and posture in creating the characters who temporarily inhabit their bodies. When playing the part of someone who is arrogant, looks down his nose at people, and has a condescending attitude, an actor is likely to lift his chin up (a requirement for looking down one's nose), pull his shoulders back, and hold his chest up high with mountains of tension.

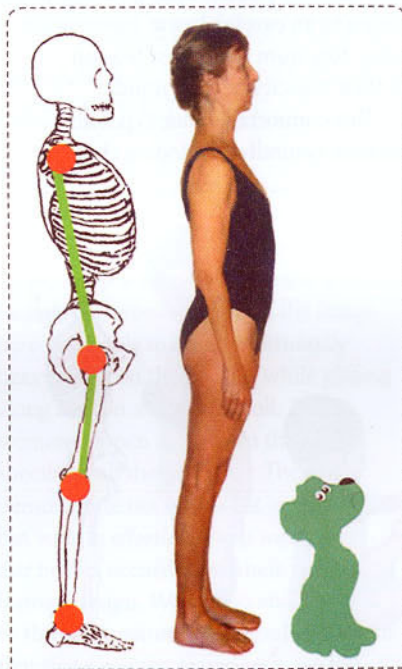
When practicing yoga, I often focused on consciously working at opening my heart by lifting up my chest and pushing my heart chakra out in front of me. If we really pay close attention when doing this, we can see (and *feel*) that this is not opening the heart at all, but, instead, putting up a shield. The heart chakra, while a non-physical energetic entity, has three-dimensional properties that relate to the physical spine. When we lift the chest, we not only distort the spine, we close off the back of the heart chakra.

Opening our hearts means that we are willing to put down this shield and let down our guard. This can be scary, for it leaves us softer and more vulnerable to many things: to being hurt, to letting others in, to feeling the pain from which we've worked so hard to protect ourselves, sometimes since a long-ago childhood. Yet putting down the shield and being willing to be vulnerable is the hallmark of a truly open heart.

Finding the natural physical support that exists within us as an unending architectural underpinning empowers us; it provides a bone-deep strength that helps us feel safe enough to trust in ourselves, even in difficult times.



This photo of me at age 33 captures the "sad dog" stance. A sad dog tucks its tail between its legs. I also bent my knees slightly, collapsed my chest, and dropped my head backward.



After years of doing yoga, an over-corrected stance had turned me into a "tense dog," with my tail tucked, my belly sucked in, my chest up, and my shoulders back.



While it is important not to make sweeping generalizations about personality characteristics as they relate to posture, chances are you look quite different when you are feeling depressed and low than you do when you are feeling excited and up. And then there is the middle way of equanimity—neither up nor down, but centered—where the bones are aligned and the energy is calm.

A photograph of me taken in 1981, when I was 33 years old, reveals I had that same sad-dog stance. Fortunately, as a mother of young children, I was far more content and happy than my stance suggested, but I was still plagued, at times, with feelings of inadequacy. I also experienced a lot of physical problems during that time. I had frequent headaches and jaw pain, or TMJ (temporomandibular joint disorder). I “threw out” my back with regularity. I struggled with digestive issues, such as bloating and constipation. And I begged my husband almost daily for massages of my chronically tight shoulder muscles.

### EXERCISE CAN EXACERBATE THE PROBLEMS

At about the time that sad-dog photo of me was taken in 1981, I had begun to exercise regularly. I, along with a host of other women, gathered at the local YWCA and jumped around to music, doing what was called “aerobics.” I enjoyed how I felt when I moved more, along with the growing increase in my stamina, though I often felt sore afterward. I believed in the “no pain, no gain” philosophy back then, so I continued to move in ways that, because of my misalignment, served to entrench poor habits of movement, along with compression of my spine and joints.

By the mid-1980s, I had been introduced to yoga, and I finally

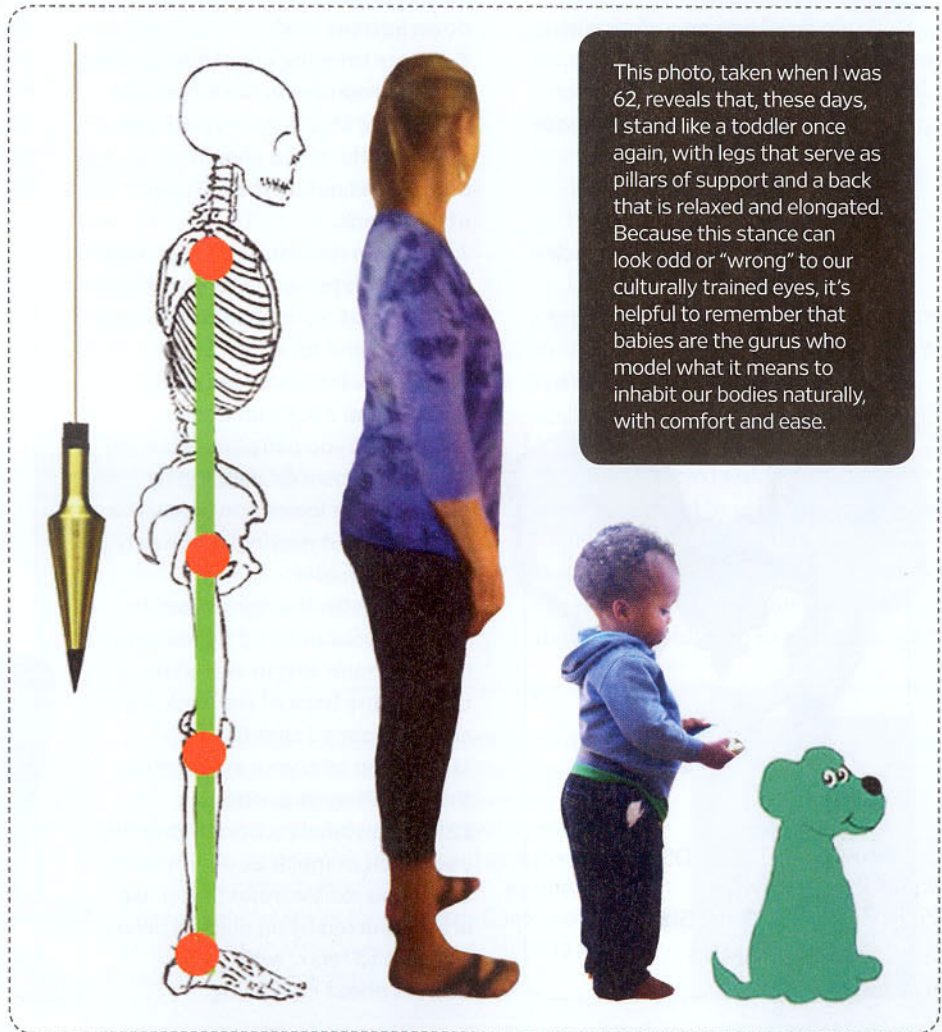
began to find relief from much of the tension and pain I carried with me everywhere I went. I felt stronger than ever and gained flexibility. Best of all, I started “standing up straight.” Within a short time, I had become certified to teach yoga. Soon after, I opened my own yoga studios in two locations, where I continued to teach classes for many years.

Over those years, I studied with a number of well-known yoga teachers, and as best as I can recall, they all taught me to “tuck my tail, suck in my belly, lift my chest up, and pull my shoulders back.” This seemed to work just fine, as long as I actively stretched almost daily. If I let my own practice slide for any

reason, the same familiar aches and pains returned almost immediately.

I later realized I had replaced my sad-dog ways with an overcorrected stance that turned me into a *tense dog*, a posture that was held together by chronic tension.

Perhaps as a reaction to the growing and widespread collapse of modern living, our culture has adopted a “chest up, chin up” stance that is widely accepted as the standard for *good* posture. This stance goes unquestioned, yet it is unnatural and unhealthy in the long run. Such a stance requires a lot of tension in muscles of the back and neck, and it is the cause of much of the back pain so many people experience.





My life as a tense dog was dominated by endless “to do” lists, lots of judgments of others, an underlying impatience in many situations, and a sense of needing to control the events and people around me. It seemed that the more tension I held in my body, the more tension I held

in my mind, as well. If I didn’t stretch every day, I became restless and “up-tight.” But after stretching, I was relaxed and smiling once again. I had become addicted to stretching in order to keep many of these deep internal tensions—physical, mental, and emotional—at bay.

**A DRAMATIC SYMPTOM LED TO A NEW CAREER**

Then, one morning when I was 42 years old, I woke up completely deaf in my left ear, except for a terribly loud internal ringing. Sounds were jumbled into a chaotic soup of random noises, which

# How to Sit Comfortably Upright on an Anchored Pelvis

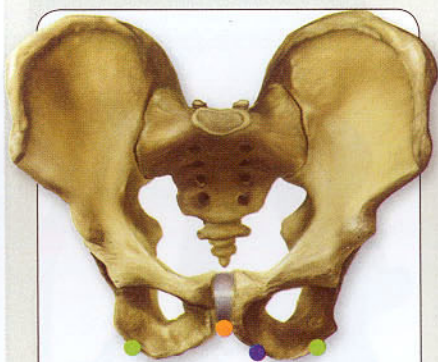
**N**atural, relaxed

sitting relies on an aligned pelvis as the foundation of support for everything above it.

- 1 **Begin by sitting on a chair with a flat sitting surface.**
- 2 **Place your feet flat on the floor about 6 to 8 inches apart with your knees relaxed open.**
- 3 **Lean forward at the hips and slightly to the left.**
- 4 **“Walk” your right sit bone back behind you (see illustration of pelvis). Your pubic bone is aiming down and back as well.**
- 5 **Now repeat on the other side by**

**leaning forward at the hips and slightly to the right, then walking the left sit bone back as well. Make sure your pubic bone is anchored down into the seat.**

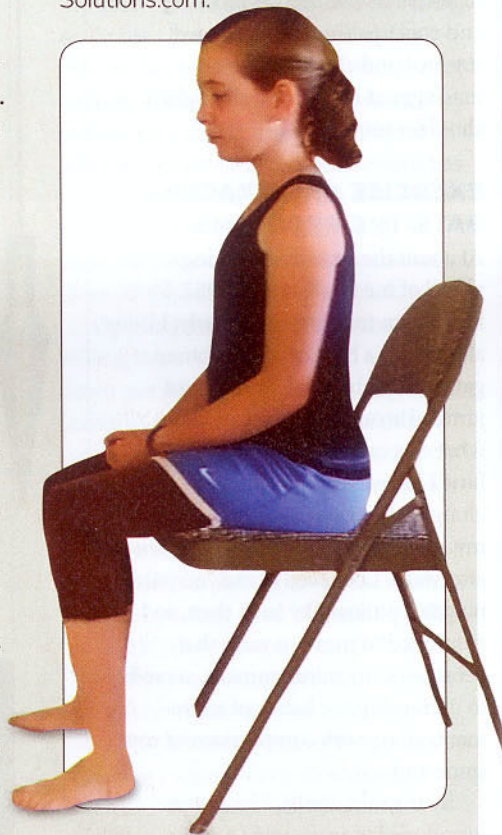
- 6 **Before bringing your torso upright, round your back (yes, do this even if this is the opposite of what you think you should be doing!) and notice the full width of your back.**
- 7 **Maintain this width through your back as you bring the torso upright. At this point, your shoulders will be raised up and forward.**
- 8 **Roll your left shoulder up, around, and back (not down). Notice that you can place your left palm face down on your leg by rotating your lower arm below the elbow without moving your newly aligned shoulder.**
- 9 **Repeat with the right shoulder.**
- 10 **Bring your head up by maintaining maximum length and width through the back of the neck. Your chin is dropped slightly.**
- 11 **Look up with your eyes, rather than by lifting your chin.**
- 12 **Take an inhaling breath that fills your back as much as your front.**
- 13 **As you exhale, *relax!* When we are supported by an aligned pelvis, it is safe to relax, without any worries about collapsing.**



- **SIT BONE**  
(ISCHIAL TUBEROSITY)
- **PUBIC BONE**  
(PUBIS SYMPHYSIS)
- **PUBIS RAMUS**

These instructions can feel odd at first, since they are likely to be different from what is familiar. The more you practice these steps, however, the easier and more natural this way of sitting becomes. Remember to always begin by setting up your pelvis.

You’ll find many more tips on how to sit, stand, bend, walk, and sleep with natural ease in my book, *Natural Posture for Pain-Free Living: The Practice of Mindful Alignment* (Inner Traditions/Healing Arts Press), and on my website, [NaturalPosture Solutions.com](http://NaturalPostureSolutions.com).





were indecipherable to a brain that only knew how to interpret signals coming in from two ears.

A CT scan ruled out a brain tumor, and doctors soon proclaimed that nothing more could be done for me. So, I sought help from homeopathy, acupuncture, Chinese herbs, Ayurveda, the Alexander Technique, psychological counseling, and energetic healing, in what turned out to be an expensive crash course in alternative healing practices.

Fortunately, with time, my brain figured out how to unscramble the sounds I was hearing, and though I was still quite hearing-impaired, I was not beset with the same level of distress.

Although studying the Alexander Technique had no effect on my hearing, it did open my eyes to the possibility that I could inhabit my body with greater ease. The Alexander Technique teaches people how to stop using unnecessary levels of muscular and mental tension during everyday activities—and with that, a whole new interest was born in me.

I began to spend time studying with Jean Couch, founder of the Balance Center. Jean was a longtime yoga teacher who introduced me to concepts of skeletal alignment that she had learned from Noelle Perez of L'Institut Supérieur d'Applomb in Paris, France.

What I learned from Jean, as well as from studying the Alexander Technique, put me on a quest to understand, firsthand, the bone-deep reasons why some small women are able to carry heavy loads on their heads with ease, why *natural movement* is relaxed and easeful, and why flexibility and strength are innate qualities that do not have to be continuously cultivated.

## STUDYING AND TEACHING

This quest led me, after my children were grown, to travel to places in the world where many women successfully carry heavy loads on their heads without developing spinal or pain problems and



“Sad,” “tense,” and “happy” sitting positions affect our chakras and the flow of energy through the body.

where people in their seventies, eighties, and beyond often maintain natural flexibility, strength, and vitality. I sought out these people, meeting them, speaking with them (when I could), and photographing them.

I also sat in meditation in Burma (Myanmar) for an extended period, exploring the most subtle nuances of the center of alignment that corresponds to a peaceful mind. This gave me ample opportunity to practice letting aligned bones support me during periods of sitting and walking, and it helped me learn how to surrender more than resist, how to relax more than hold tension, and how to tune in to the most subtle details of my body's sensations: how it breathes, how it creates and holds onto tensions, how it lets go, how it feels when it is aligned, how it feels when it is not, and how this body interacts with, affects, and *is* the mind. Such an approach to meditation—one that includes the body,

rather than trying to transcend its earthly, embodied reality—is a remarkably transformative path.

Since then, I have developed many visually graphic ways of imparting this information, and I have written books in the hopes of making concepts of natural alignment accessible to people everywhere. I have taught natural alignment in elementary school classrooms, as well as offering hundreds of classes and workshops for adults.

I have met thousands of remarkable people who have learned that they can be in charge of how they feel, and who have reaped the benefits of inhabiting their bodies according to their natural design. Many people who struggled with what they once believed was intractable pain have found relief by using these methods.

It turns out much of the chronic pain that is epidemic today is structural and can be corrected by learning how to align the body according to its natural design.

As director of the Center for Natural Alignment and author of *Natural Posture for Pain-Free Living*, **Kathleen Porter** helps children and adults rediscover natural skeletal alignment so they can experience ease of movement and freedom from pain ([NaturalPostureSolutions.com](http://NaturalPostureSolutions.com)). Kathleen also has taught classes at the National College of Natural Medicine, New Mexico Academy of Healing Arts, and the Omega Institute.

