

Aging with Grace

Straighten Up and Fly Right

By Helen Hinchliff
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“Sit up straight!” she ordered. “Your nose is heading for your keyboard again!” Later, we took a walk: “Stop slouching!”

Though exasperated, she didn't give up on me. “Here's a tip: Imagine a string attached to your belly button. Then pretend I'm drawing you forward. When you lead with your belly and let your head and chest follow, you'll be standing straight.”

No, that isn't my mother issuing instructions and offering pointers about my posture; it's my personal trainer. She meanders around my mind, ready to remind me that if I'm going to fly right I'll need to straighten up first. But whenever she takes a break, I revert to what comes naturally. *I really need her.*

Why is it that the older we get, the more we tend to slump and slouch?

Dr. David B. Reuben, chief of geriatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at U.C.L.A., explains that, as we age, the disks between our vertebrae tend to dry out and become thinner, compressing the spine. The process has already started by age forty. From then on, we can expect to lose almost half an inch of height per decade.

As I grew into my thirties and forties, I noticed my maternal grandmother leaning forward and losing height. By the time Grandma reached 99, she was six inches shorter than she was in her thirties. My mother lived well into her 94th year, and she also lost significant height. Seeing them shrink into tiny, hunched-over beings, I vowed that would never happen to *me*.

I was chatting the other day with Pauline, a reader of this column with whom I'd recently become acquainted. She commented that we are all aware that people grow older and eventually die. “But it's something that happens to *other people*,” she said. “We don't think it can happen to *us*.” I guess I'm in that category too.

Over the years, I could see *other people* slumping forward. Then, in 1998, I visited Dr. Milligan for the first time. After a checkup, he commented, “Your height is 5' 5 1/2". Does that sound right?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “I'm 5' 6 3/4.”

“You aren't when you're slouching.”

Well, I wasn't going to stand for that! So Dr. Milligan walked over to the measuring chart, and . . . *slouched*. His head was forward, his shoulders rounded, and his whole body had a downcast look. Was that how I looked? I returned to the chart and stood as tall and straight as I could manage. Immediately, I gained about three-quarters of an inch in height.

The rest of my shrinkage was probably due to gravity. At 58, I could have expected a loss of four-fifths of an inch.

Intent on improvement, I sought out a physiotherapist. "Back up against a wall," she instructed, "and place your heels, calves, buttocks, upper back, shoulders, and the back of your head against it." I couldn't do it! But, over the space of several weeks, I worked myself into that posture and could hold it easily.

But, once fixed, I didn't keep at it. When I started to write this article, I decided to test myself. Sure enough, I failed. Back to square one.

Osteoporosis can also cause us to shrink. Our bones become thin and porous, and we start to experience tiny fractures in our spines. The more fractures we have, the more likely we are to develop kyphosis, an unnatural rounding of the back, which also makes us shorter.

We usually associate osteoporosis with elderly women. My mother had it, and so did her mother, but my uncle and two of my younger brothers do too. And so do I. Apparently, osteoporosis runs in our family, but does that mean we have to shrivel up?

Dr. Reuben says it's possible to stave off kyphosis through exercise. The more we strengthen our core muscles, the more likely we are to straighten up. Stretching exercises also work to keep our muscles flexible and, if started early enough, yoga can reverse kyphosis. Combined with a healthful diet including plenty of calcium and Vitamin D, exercise is the key to keeping kyphosis at bay.

Here's a thought! We're all members of somebody's amorphous group of *other people*. We can be objects of their imagination, but let's not merely be somebody else's vague idea of other people to whom stuff happens. Let's be ourselves, walking tall, straight, and strong. And it couldn't hurt us to take a personal trainer along for the ride.

