

REAL LIFE

To postures new

Are you hunched over a desk all day at work? A 15-minute routine of simple exercises can keep you on the straight and narrow

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LIKE most people I know, I spend nearly all of my working day in front of a computer. And, like most people, my face gets nearer the screen as the day goes on. By close of business, I'm nose to nose with Microsoft Word and hunched into the bargain.

I do try. Chronic shoulder pain has forced me on a journey that has taken in Pilates, yoga, physiotherapy, acupuncture and massage. Yet the hunchback is a persistent visitor, and if I'm honest, I have only myself to blame. I know the theory of good posture, but bless them, my shoulders start giving in to the afternoon slump before midday.

When it gets really bad, I take action and while all the therapies listed above have given some relief, none has proved to be lasting. That's why Somatic Movement Education sounded so tempting.

It's a type of mind-body training that gives you the tools to heal yourself by 'unlearning' the bad postural habits that lead to pain, tension and stress.

Best of all, once you learn the principles and commit to a 15-minute daily programme of



Gentle: Tanya Fitzpatrick eases into Clodagh's aches and pains. Far right: Lisa Petersen does some somatic movement exercises

exercise, you may never need to seek help again.

At least that was yoga teacher Lisa Petersen's experience. She was so impressed with the training that she and partner Tanya Fitzpatrick now run Align, a Dublin-based company specialising in somatics.

Lisa explains: "I had been a yoga teacher for five years and was suffering from chronic lower-back strain from an old gymnastics injury.

"I couldn't find any way to cure it and had

spent thousands of euro on therapies from chiro, to osteos, to rolfing, to acupuncture, to trager. . . you name it. It looked like I would have to stop teaching yoga because I literally couldn't hold myself consistently together.

"At the last minute, a friend saw me almost in tears at a yoga workshop and told me a teacher was flying in from India the next week to do something called Somatic Movement Education.

"That was five years ago and I haven't looked back. I work not only as a somatics practitioner now, but I teach yoga all over the world."

Bring it on, I thought, as I booked a session with Tanya Fitzpatrick and found myself standing in front of a huge mirror to assess my posture. I was horrified at the slanted figure looking back at me.

I discovered that I was balancing on my toes instead of my heels, that my tailbone was tilting forward instead of in neutral and, as a result, my shoulders were thrown too far back. No wonder I had pain.

What surprised me most was my own lack of awareness. Lying on a table, I tried a few gentle rolling movements and it felt as if the bones in my lower back had rusted over.

In the non-invasive session that followed, Tanya worked her fingers over each vertebra

and the knots of tension in my body came into sharp relief.

With a series of gentle exercises, she taught me how to release the tight areas and gave me a home workout that involved 15 minutes of exercise morning and evening.

The relief, even after a single session, was very encouraging. In the four sessions that followed (see panel) I learnt a lot about my own bad posture and the things I do repeatedly that cause pain. But why do I tie myself into such a knot and why, like the three-in-five Irish workers who suffer from back pain, couldn't I work out how to fix myself?

The problem, says Lisa, is simple. "We are made to move, but modern life conspires against activity. We spend our days sitting at desks hunched over computer screens. Technology has freed us from manual labour, but our backs can no longer support us properly, resulting in an epidemic of back problems in the western working world."

Ireland is no exception. Last year, back pain was the single biggest cause of absenteeism, accounting for a large proportion of the €563m Irish small businesses lost due to illness. In medical terms, the cost of low-back procedures alone was €28m in 2002 and it represented 33,713 bed days in hospital.



Most of the people who go to Lisa and Tanya at Align are suffering from back pain caused by poor posture. Both practitioners feel that good posture must be taught in schools or we are facing a massive increase in the problems associated with chronic back pain.

It's time to think about what we do in a typical day, continues Lisa.

"You may find that between travelling to and from work, working all day, eating your lunch and dinner and then watching a bit of TV, most of your day involves sitting in various states, or slumping, or rushing from A to B with very little awareness of how you are moving."

That's without mentioning the heavy schoolbags, handbags or briefcases we drag around with us - or, if you're a woman, the time spent tottering along on too-high heels.

Lisa wonders how many of us would be able to balance a jar of water on our heads and bring it home, as women still do in some non-sedentary cultures.

"To carry such a heavy weight, your spine needs to be perfectly aligned and there has to be strong support from your postural muscles."

However, simple changes can make a radical difference. Lisa recommends that people first take a long look at how they spend their work and leisure time.

"Simply understanding a few anatomy basics can help a lot," she says. "For example, your head weighs 4.5 to 5kg. Looking down at a computer screen will cause the muscles of your upper back to ache from holding the weight of your head against gravity."

"A supportive chair, a carefully set-up desk and computer workstation will all help you on your way, but you also have to be aware of how you are unconsciously holding yourself if you want lasting change," Lisa says.

That's where the hard work and the 'unlearning' exercises of somatics come in. The

sessions teach you to become aware of where you are unconsciously holding tension in your body and how to release it.

"You teach your mind to train your body," Lisa explains. "The mind learns how to ride a bike or play an instrument, but it also learns negative things, like how to contract muscles around a weak or injured spot. Often, you don't even realise you're doing it."

Somatic Movement Education is suitable for all age groups and levels of fitness and it was first developed by American Thomas Hanne who refused to believe that people automatically become stiffer and less mobile as they age.

He set out to disprove what he called the ageing myth and wrote a book called 'Somatics: Reawakening the Mind's Control of Movement, Flexibility and Health'.

He died in a car accident in 1990 but research on somatics continues at the Novato Institute in California and there are many practitioners all over the world.

So why choose somatics over any other therapy?

"We teach you to become aware of the root cause of your problem and we teach you to rehabilitate yourself," says Lisa. "Rather than becoming dependent on your therapist, you learn the skills yourself and often achieve faster, more immediate relief."

■ Somatic Movement Education sessions cost €65 an hour. Typically, a person would need between three and five. For more information, see www.alignsomatics.com or contact Lisa Petersen 085-737 6076 or Tanya Fitzpatrick 086 328 0193

■ There will be a free introductory talk and demonstration of Somatic Movement Education on March 13, from 2pm-3pm, at the Open Minds Project, Pearse St, Dublin 2

SOMATICS: WHAT'S THE VERDICT

DOES IT WORK? In a word, yes. The relief I got from five sessions with Tanya Fitzpatrick was significant and long-lasting. And it went to the root cause of my problem - an inability to connect my upper and lower body so that my shoulders take all the weight of the head which weighs almost a stone.

The tension in all areas was released over a period of three months, but what impressed me most was the progress I made with a stubborn pain in my left shoulder.

I had a nagging pain in that area for over two-and-a-half years and nothing would shift it. The knots in the

shoulder felt as hard as bone. Tanya commented at one point as she worked to release them.

DID IT HURT? At times, yes, but it's the sort of exquisite agony that you embrace with open arms when you have tried everything else to no avail. Nothing I had ever tried succeeded in untangling the knot as the



session with Tanya.

The best part of Somatic Movement Education is that you can do it yourself at home, hopefully making further visits to any therapist unnecessary. It also helps that the post-session exercises are easy to do and, in some cases, provide instant relief.

SO, AM I FIXED NOW? This is the hard part. Undoing the bad habits of a lifetime is going to take some time. You'll need to commit to the exercises and, most importantly, do spot checks on yourself at your workstation.

During the months of treatment, I felt as if my whole body was being recalibrated and, at times, I didn't know which way was up.

Even now, I still have to look in a mirror to check my posture, but at least I know where my shoulders are supposed to be. I'm still prone to the afternoon slump but I feel I'm definitely well on the way to postures new.

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TIPS FOR COMPUTER USERS

■ LEARN how to sit properly when using a computer.

■ Balance the weight equally between both your buttocks.

■ Tuck your chin slightly in to stop your head falling forwards.

■ Sit with your head balanced over your rib cage and pelvis.

■ Place your feet underneath your knees.

■ Lengthen up through the crown of your head.

■ Stand up and stretch every 30 minutes.

■ When typing on a keyboard for a prolonged

period of time, take time out to shake out your wrists, hands and fingers.

■ Relax your shoulders away from your ears.

■ Make sure your screen is at eye level.

