

Better Balance

We all know we have them. They're there on the bottom of our legs just below the ankles. But when we're standing do we actually have a sense of what is going on with our feet? For a little check in (and a few tips on improving balance and walking more easily) give this little lesson a try.

TO BEGIN:

Stand with your feet about 6 to 8 inches apart (about as far apart as your hip joints). Stand so your feet are parallel. If you feel a bit unsteady, feel free to stand slightly less than arms length behind a chair letting your hands rest lightly on the chair back for support. Be conscious of allowing your hands to rest lightly without gripping. Notice where you take your weight on your feet. Is it more on one foot than the other? More to the front or back of the feet? More to the inside or outside?

DO:

1. Very slowly make a small movement of bending your Right knee forward. Do this so the entire sole of your foot remains on the ground. Let the knee bend directly forward without pointing to the left or right. Repeat this several times then pause to rest.
- 2 Return to bending your Right knee forward increasing the bend until your Right heel begins to lift from the floor. Again let the knee bend directly forward. Repeat several times then pause to rest.
3. If you're so inclined, continue the movement letting the Right knee bend a little bit more with each repetition until your foot lifts from the floor. Can you do this without letting the ankle flex (in other words, can you let your foot remain soft and without effort so the toes drop toward the floor of their own accord as you bend and lift the knee)?
4. Repeat 1 – 3 on the Left side.

NOTICE:

As you bend your knee, notice what happens to your pelvis? What does it do? Do you notice movement along your spine? Do you feel yourself getting taller or shorter as you bend and straighten you knee?

Breathing to Relax the Shoulders

Relief for tense shoulders is only a breath away.

TO BEGIN

Sit or stand comfortably.

Notice the distance between your ears and shoulders. Is it the same left and right?

This lesson can be done just about anywhere. Use it often to relieve not only shoulder tension but tummy butterflies and anxiety.

DO

1. Lift your shoulders bringing them as close to your ears as possible. KEEP THEM THERE.
2. Exhale completely pushing out as much air as possible. If you're somewhere where it's okay to make noise, make a continuous hissing sound through your teeth as you exhale. This will prevent you from sneaking a small breath in the middle of the exhale and allow you to exhale completely.
3. Hold your breath as you drop your shoulders.
4. Allow your lungs to fill with air. DO NOT take a breath, allow the air to come into your lungs. If you have exhaled completely this will happen automatically. If not, repeat Steps 1 – 4 making sure you push out as much air as possible.
5. Repeat 3 or 4 times.

NOTICE

Was there a change in the distance between your shoulders and ears?

How do your shoulders feel? More relaxed?

OPTIONS

When you think your lungs are empty try pushing out a little bit more air being careful not to inhale.

Comfortable Sitting

TO BEGIN:

Notice how you are sitting.

Are you slouching? Holding yourself stiff and straight?

Is your weight clearly in your sit bones or more toward your tailbone?

What happens if you bring your feet about as far apart as your hip joints are wide.

Leave your feet this distance apart and adjust your position so your ankles are directly under your knees. What happens to how you are sitting? What happens to your level of comfort?

TO DO:

Sit with your feet directly under your knees and about as far apart as your hip joints are wide. Place your hands under your sit bones. Note: place the palms of your hands on your chair with your fingertips pointing toward but not touching each other. Sit on the back of your hands. You should be able to feel your sit bones clearly contacting the back of your hands.

Let your shoulders drop. Now gently shift your weight from one butt cheek to the other. Feel the weight come through one sit bone and then the other.

Do this several times.

Rest.

Remove your hands.

Sit and notice the difference.

NOTICE

Do you feel more connected to your chair? Is your posture more natural? more comfortable? What other changes do you notice?

Crazy 8s

Figure eights, or infinity signs for those so inclined, offer an easy way to coax the body to give up uncomfortable holding patterns. The following movements can be done while resting in any position but for our purposes, we'll assume you're sitting in front of your computer wishing there were a way to relieve the tension headache that's been nagging you for two days and the stiff back that just won't seem to quit.

TO BEGIN:

Sit toward the front of your chair, back straight but relaxed (or, as relaxed as possible for the moment). Place the soles of your feet on the floor about as far apart as your hips are wide. Place the palms of your hands on your knees. Take a few moments to simply notice your breathing. What moves as you inhale? exhale?

DO:

With your eyes close, trace a small, SLOW, figure eight with your nose as if you were drawing an 8 on an imaginary surface directly in front of you. Make several eights then pause and reverse the direction. Trace several more imaginary 8s. Rest. As always, focus on ease. Do LESS than you know you can do allowing all of you to participate.

NOTICE:

As you trace your eights, notice what happens in your neck, shoulders, spine, etc. Are you holding or stiffening in any of these areas? What happens if you allow them to participate?

OPTIONS:

Explore what happens if you draw eights with:

- A. your right ear
- B. your left ear
- C. your forehead
- D. your chin
- E. the back of your head
- F. the top of your head

As you explore and play be conscious of doing the movements slowly so you can notice where you hold. See if you can let go of any holding patterns and allow all of yourself to participate.

Easier Walking

In walking, the relationship between pelvis and feet is critical to a smooth, comfortable stride. In Better Balance, we explored these movements by bending the knee as the heel lifts. In this variation, we'll keep the leg straight and notice how the pelvis adjusts to the restriction. Which is correct? Both! Walking is a complex movement that requires the pelvis to move in several directions simultaneously — think gyroscope!

TO BEGIN:

Stand with your feet about 6 to 8 inches apart (about as far apart as your hip joints). Stand so your feet are parallel. If you feel a bit unsteady, feel free to stand slightly less than arms length behind a chair letting your hands rest lightly on the chair back for support. Be conscious of allowing your hands to rest lightly without gripping. Notice where you take your weight on your feet. Is it more on one foot than the other? More to the front or back of the feet? More to the inside or outside?

DO:

1. Very slowly make a small movement of lifting your Right heel. Do this so the heel lifts very simply and gently from the ground. Let the knee remain straight, that is do not bend the knee. Let the movement of lifting be very small. How little effort can you use? Repeat this several times then pause to rest.

2. Place your Right hand on the front of your Right thigh. Keeping your feet on the floor (do not lift either heel) begin to slide your Right hand down the front of your Right leg and then back. Move very slowly noticing when you begin to bend and what your pelvis does as your hand moves down and up your leg. Do less than you know you can do, in other words stay in your range of comfort. Repeat several times then pause to rest.

3. Place your Right hand on the front of your Right thigh. This time, as you slide your Right hand down the front of your Right leg, very gently lift your Right heel. Keep your leg straight as you lift the heel, do not let the knee bend. What happens to your pelvis? Repeat the movement several times then pause to rest.

4. Repeat 1 – 3 on the Left side.

5. Walk around a bit and see what that is like. Does your gait seem smoother?

NOTICE:

How did sliding your hand down your leg affect the movement of your pelvis? Which direction did the Right side of your pelvis move as you lifted your Right heel? What did the Left side do? Can you sense a bit of "walking" in the movement? When you've experimented with both sides, notice how you take your weight on your feet. Is it different than when you started? Do you feel taller/shorter?

Fast Facial

Relieve that tension and look your best with this simple lesson.

TO BEGIN:

Sit or stand quietly. If you're bustling in the kitchen or waiting in the car to pick up the kids simply create a quiet spot by being still and focusing on yourself. Notice the amount of tension in your face and jaw.

TO DO:

Clench your teeth. Feel the tension in your face and jaw.
Release.

Clench again. Holding your jaw tight, breathe. What happens with your breathing? Where do you breathe?

Release.

Clench again. With your teeth clenched, push your belly out to inhale. What does your ribcage do? Your shoulders? Your back?

Release.

Breathe. Has your breathing changed?

NOTICE:

Do you feel a sense of relaxation of your face and jaw? If you have a mirror at hand you might want to take a peak. Do you look more relaxed? (Sometime you might try this as a "before" and "after" looking into a mirror before you try this and then again after. Do you see a difference?)

OPTIONS:

Once you're comfortable doing this lesson clenching your jaw, you might try scrunching your eyes or pursing your lips. Put them together for a full facial release.

Good for the Soles

BEGIN

Stand a few inches away from a table or countertop with your feet and knees together. (Sans shoes if possible.) Rest your hands on the counter. Make sure your pelvis is squared up to the surface you're standing in front of – that is, make sure that both sides of your pelvis are aligned and that one side is not forward of the other. Slightly bend your knees. Imagine your feet are standing on the crossing point of an imaginary figure eight painted on the floor.

DO

Very, very slowly use your knees to trace the eight. You'll notice your pelvis, spine, ankles and feet moving – allow them to move. Do several 8s in one direction and several in the other.

NOTICE

As you trace the eight are you allowing your pelvis to move so your knees can move behind as well as in front of you? Remember you're standing at the point where the top and bottom halves of the eight meet.

How does the weight on your feet change as you trace the 8s?

Do you notice other part of your body moving in an "8" pattern? (Your head perhaps – let your jaw be slack and see what happens!)

When you are finished, how does your spine feel? How do your soles feel? What about your neck? Any changes?

OPTIONAL

You can also imagine an infinity sign (a sideways eight) and do the same.

Instant Ease

It's been a tough day. You're feeling run ragged and that nagging sense of dis-ease is creeping in. Quell that anxiety with this little awareness lesson.

To Begin:

Sit comfortably on a firm chair with the soles of your feet on the floor. Interlace your fingers and place your hands behind your head. Bring your elbows to face forward. Without pulling on your head, round your back and direct your elbows toward your thighs. (If you find yourself pulling on your neck or have difficulty putting your hands behind your head, you can do this lesson with your forearms resting on your thighs somewhere near your knees. Let your head hang and allow your back to slightly round.) Remain in this position as you do the lesson.

To Do:

Staying in this rounded position, breath while focusing on the exhale.

Gently pull in your belly as you breathe out/exhale.

Each time you breathe out see if you can lengthen your exhale letting out a little more air.

Repeat several times until you begin to feel a sense of calm.

Notice:

The rounding of your back restricts your ability to breathe into your chest and belly. Notice how you compensate. Where do you feel yourself expanding when you breathe in?

When you are finished with this lesson, come to standing and notice if you feel more upright, present, grounded.

Just Breathe

Fritz Perls, one of the granddaddies of the mind body movement noted that anxiety is the inability to exhale. That's right – EXHALE. Breathing out is often overlooked but it is a very powerful tool for creating mental and physical ease. Try it yourself.

TO BEGIN:

Sit comfortably. Or, lie on your back with your knees bent and the soles of your feet on the floor. Place your hands gently on your lower belly and just breathe noticing what your belly does when you breathe in and what your belly does when you breathe out.

DO:

1. Breathe in to a slow mental count of 5 as you gently expand your lower belly.
2. Breathe out to a slow mental count of 7 as you gently pull your belly in.

That's it. Do this 5 to 10 minutes once or twice a day and see what happens.

NOTICE:

As you continue to breathe you might notice your ribcage beginning to expand in places you never thought it would or could. Notice how your back and chest also expand and contract with your belly.

OPTIONS:

If you have trouble getting to sleep (or staying asleep) try this breathing lesson while lying in bed. Not a back sleeper? Experiment with the belly breaths while lying on your side, or with your legs long.

Mindful Breathing

When the stress of the day gets to be too much, bring back the calm with this simple breathing lesson courtesy of Russell Delman's Embodied Life Program.

BEGIN:

Sit or lie comfortably.

TO DO:

Notice how you contact the surface that is supporting you. Feel that contact. Are you allowing yourself to really be supported by the surface you are on?

Continuing to feel your contact, expand your awareness to include any sounds you might hear – the furnace or air conditioner, people's voices, traffic, background music – whatever it is.

Holding both the physical sense and the auditory in your awareness, take 4 full breaths.

Release.

NOTICE

Do you feel more calm?

Special thanks to Russell Delman for a wonderful workshop. For those who don't know him, Russell is a Feldenkrais Trainer who has combined Feldenkrais, Meditation and Eugene Gendlin's Focusing into a program of mindfulness that he calls "Embodied Life". He offers public workshops for those looking to live more mindfully.