

BODY AWARENESS 101

By Courtney Townley

Knowing how to properly align your body not only during your workouts but in all of your daily activities is an invaluable skill. The less pressure you put on your joints and the more balanced your musculature is the less susceptible you become to injuries that are inconvenient and painful. Like learning any new skill, changing your body's mechanics takes practice, patience, and more practice. Below are a list of basic questions you can ask yourself repeatedly throughout the day to help you begin bringing more awareness to your body and your alignment habits.

How am I breathing? Breathe has the potential to release tension in the body, focus the mind, oxygenate the blood and assist in stabilizing the spine. Many people fail to reap these benefits because they take short shallow breaths into the high chest area. This type of breathing actually promotes tension in the body, especially in the shoulder and neck region. To be sure that you are breathing more efficiently it is helpful to feel the rib cage expand, rather than the chest to rise, when taking a deep breath. When exhaling the two sides of the rib cage at the front of the body should draw closer together so the abdominals can contract slightly to aid in supporting the spine.

Try This: Take several deep breaths while resting your hands on your ribcage. Visualize your ribs expanding as you inhale and contracting as you exhale.

Where are my shoulders right now? Often the answer to this question will be: “up near my ears” or “forward of my torso”. All too frequently the answer is both. Having the shoulders constantly elevated towards the ears causes even more neck tension than just shallow breathing alone, and having the shoulders forward of the body creates an imbalance between your chest and mid-back muscles. *Try This: Gently lift your shoulders up to your ears, roll them slightly back, and then slide them down easily towards your mid-back.* You should feel that your chest is much more open and your mid-back is more engaged. You are now in a much safer position for lifting, reaching, and rotating your arms.

Where is my head positioned in relationship to my shoulders? Due to the fact that we are almost always leaning forward to perform the tasks of daily living such as driving, typing, and even walking, we tend to carry our head out in front of our torso. The head should actually be lined up right over the center of the shoulders to prevent unnecessary stress in the neck and upper back. *Try This: Draw your chin in slightly towards your throat, so that your ear lobes are lined up over the center of your shoulders. Can you feel how much longer and less tense the back of your neck is in that position?*

Where am I holding my pelvis? The pelvis is basically a complex arrangement of bones in the shape of a bowl that rest on the top of your thighs. Muscles from your hips, lower back, and abdominals all attach to sites on or through the pelvis. If the muscles are imbalanced, which is often the case, lower backs get strained, abdominals get weak, and hips get tight. It is most common, especially in women, to carry the pelvis a little too far forward. *Try this: Gently contract your gluteal muscles to push your pelvis slightly*

forward, and at the same time draw your abdominal muscles up and in towards your spine. You should feel that your lower back and the front of your hips lengthen. You should also feel that you now have less pressure in your lower back and you are standing taller!