

Esther Gokhale's hunt for perfect posture

Noelle Robbins, Special to The Chronicle

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Esther Gokhale is not a stalker, but she has pursued hundreds, even thousands of people around the world, mimicking their body alignment and walking style until her shadow matched theirs. She has studied men and women in isolated African, Brazilian and Indian villages where back pain is virtually unknown, despite long hours spent harvesting, weaving, cooking and toting heavy loads.

What she learned inspired her to open the Esther Gokhale Wellness Center in Palo Alto a decade ago, to help others better understand the difference proper posture can make.

Over the years, she has become a "back whisperer" of sorts, winning over tech execs at Google and Cisco Systems, Stanford academics, working moms and medical doctors - including one who described her as "nothing less than the Michael Pollan of posture."

While many are quick to blame stress, sedentary lifestyles and biology for back pain - she found a simpler answer: We have forgotten how natural posture looks and feels.

Even Gokhale, who was born and raised in India and spent summers in yoga ashrams and began teaching yoga as a teenager, was not immune to back pain.

"Yoga teachers in India did not notice my sway back," she says. "I was extremely flexible, but not quite in the right place."

Spinal surgery

After her first pregnancy, at 26, severe pain finally resulted in spinal disc surgery.

That experience spurred Gokhale, who studied biochemistry at Harvard and Princeton and acupuncture at the San Francisco School of Oriental Medicine, to take an anthropologist's approach to finding a better way to treat - and ideally prevent - back pain.

In her light-filled Wellness Center, photos of men, women and children she has studied on her global treks line the walls, statues from India cluster on bookshelves, and mobiles of tiny figures from Africa hang from the ceiling all illustrating one of Gokhale's primary beliefs about posture: It's all about the pelvis.

"Ducky butt, not tucky butt," she said, "Picture Donald Duck." She knows her admonition to "get our behinds behind us," contradicts the "tuck your tailbone" instructions of many yoga, dance and fitness teachers; but as a 30-year yoga instructor, she is convinced of its effectiveness.

"Tucked tailbones create depressed postures, rounding the shoulders and upper back," she says. "Like a dog when it's anxious, with its tail between its legs. Better structure means less pain, more confidence in your health. You look better and people respond to you differently."

It may sound simple, but for many Western bodies, it is not intuitive, which is why Gokhale holds sessions of six weekly classes or three-day intensive classes (both \$450) where she practices her three-pronged approach to perfecting posture - showing, demonstrating and repositioning with gentle hands-on manipulation. Single sessions (\$165) and Skype classes are available, and she offers free classes at schools for teachers and students.

"I really want to reach this audience, " she said. "Good posture can alter the trajectory of a young person's life."

Rave reviews

Her book, "8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back" (Pendo Press), published last year, illustrates her posture techniques and the history behind them. The book has won raves from repeat Wimbledon winner Billie Jean King, the American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons, doctors from the Mayo Clinic and Stanford Medical Center and even a Nobel Prize winner.

There are skeptics, but Deirdre Stegman, a doctor of internal medicine at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, is not one of them, and she has referred countless patients to Gokhale.

"Her work makes sense. I took her class and was amazed," said Stegman.

Another fan is Kim Scott, a 41-year-old Google senior manager and mother of 3-month-old twins who came to Gokhale after suffering a herniated disc.

"I had back pain all my life," said Scott. "Working with Esther changed the way I lay down to sleep, sit at my desk and walk. After the babies arrived, I came back to learn how to sit while breastfeeding."

Gokhale points out that the results are not always immediate and that she sometimes recommends acupuncture and massage to achieve faster relief.

"For a person in really bad shape, a cortisone shot can create a window of opportunity to learn better structure and movement patterns," she said, adding that she considers surgery rarely but occasionally necessary.

And while Gokhale said she feels it's never too late to learn good posture, her goal is to prevent back problems in the first place.

That is why she encourages parents to bring in their newborns. She teaches moms and dads how to carry infants in a traditional fashion, elongating their babies' spines. She rails against the design of modern baby furniture, umbrella strollers and car seats that are "setting kids up to slump."

Benefits continue

But the benefits are many - even for those who have long ago left the high chair.

After Chris Beveridge, 47, a Cisco Systems senior manager, was diagnosed with painful, disabling spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal column), he was not happy with the recommended physical therapy and prescription muscle relaxants his doctor recommended.

After six classes with Gokhale, Beveridge said he no longer white-knuckles his lectern during the three-hour presentations that come with his job. Better yet, he's able to enjoy playing electric bass with his band during off hours.

"Last year's gigs were very painful. I had to lie down between sets," said. "Now I can go all night."

Gokhale's posture pointers

Back in shape: A healthy back is a gentle J, not S, shape. Upper back is straight; relaxed shoulders slope downward; a defined groove runs the length of the spine from the neck to the "ducky butt."

Fashion: Posture-perfect fashion means pants with less fabric in front, more in the rear. Shirts just the opposite, more fabric in front for open, relaxed chests.

Learn: Classes available throughout the Bay Area, or gather eight friends and request a class. Free classes also offered through schools to teachers, students, parents. More information at egwellness.com.

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