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Fitness

Learning How to Walk (Chewing Gum Not Included)



PLAIN FOOTWORK Students in Sherry Brouman's walking class are taught how to best use their muscles to maintain a proper posture while walking.

By SARA ECKEL

AFTER Lynne Wu moved to New York from Cincinnati, she realized her body wasn't prepared for the sheer amount of pavement-pounding required in her adopted city.

"At the end of the day my lower back and ankles would hurt," said Ms. Wu, 40, a development consultant for nonprofit organizations. "I just wasn't used to walking that much."

Ms. Wu discussed her problem with her former [yoga](#) teacher in Ohio, who made an unusual suggestion: why not take walking lessons?

Many people would have been insulted by such advice — don't we all master this skill as a 1-year-old? — but to Ms. Wu it made perfect sense. "I hate exercising," she said. "So I thought, 'What would happen if I could walk properly and get a relaxed, centered workout in a city like this?' "

Last January, Ms. Wu and her husband, Rob Gilson, signed up for private walking classes with Jonathan FitzGordon, a yoga teacher and owner of Yoga Center of Brooklyn.

During 10 sessions over about seven months, Mr. FitzGordon trained her to walk with her feet parallel, her weight evenly distributed and her body aligned.

Ten months later, Ms. Wu still had ankle issues — she was in the very late stages of [pregnancy](#) — but her back pain was gone and her walk had changed drastically.

Few of us think we need a course in walking any more than we'd need a course in breathing, but Mr. FitzGordon insists that most Americans don't have a clue how to step, a problem he first noticed among his yoga students. "People would enter with terrible posture," he said. "Then they'd do beautiful yoga, and listen to everything I said about alignment. As soon as class ended, they went straight into the bad posture."

To help students take their practice into the street, Mr. FitzGordon incorporated walking lessons into his yoga classes, as well as teaching small group and individual sessions. His clients are mostly people who have visited doctors, [chiropractors](#) and massage therapists in search of relief for muscle or [joint pain](#).

Under Mr. FitzGordon's instruction, the clients try to correct their entire movement system rather than address aching knees or shoulders in isolation. "The body is like a machine," he said. "Each part has its own job, and everything is connected."

But unlike a car, the body also has the ability to compensate if one part breaks. "If you get a flat tire, you're not going anywhere," Mr. FitzGordon said. "But if you hurt your foot, you can limp and keep going." Thus, the entire machine is thrown out of whack.

Dr. Keith Kolber, a neonatologist in Los Angeles who was suffering from a herniated disc, was hoping to avoid surgery when he booked several private walking lessons with Sherry Brouman, a yoga instructor and physical therapist. As Ms. Brouman watched him walk barefoot and shirtless through her studio, she noticed that he was leaning away from the pain. Ms. Brouman helped him regain proper alignment, with his weight falling on all four corners of his feet.

"Over time my gait looked more natural, and it became more easy and more curative," said Dr. Kolber, 46. "If I felt my back was acting up, I'd go for a mile or two walk, and I'd feel better at the end because I was making the right corrections."

Ms. Brouman said most postural problems happen when the body's muscles don't perform their intended job. For example, people who don't use their stomach muscles when they walk cause strain by forcing the back muscles to compensate.

The proper move is to make subtle realignments in the rest of the body, like pushing the inner thighs back and untucking the tailbone. Such adjustments may seem minor, but Ms. Brouman admits that not everyone likes being told how to walk.

"It hits them where it hurts," said Ms. Brouman, who is also an author of "Walk Yourself Well" (Hyperion, 1999). "People want to feel like they know how to do this."

Dr. Steven Haddad, an orthopedic surgeon with the Illinois Bone and Joint Institute in Chicago, said exercise could help relieve certain soft-tissue problems, but warned that it could not correct a bone misalignment or deformity.

"You can't make your bones go in different direction than they want to go in," he said.

FORCING the body to move against its natural patterns and bone structure could even lead to deeper problems, said Dr. Susan Lewis, associate director of Women's Sports Medicine at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco.

"If you're pushing yourself in a place that isn't comfortable, I'd respect that," she said. But both doctors agreed that if the focus was on strengthening the trunk, centering your weight and breaking bad habits like slouching, movement lessons could be helpful.

Of course, learning to walk properly is one thing. Breaking a 30- or 40-year habit is quite another.

Dr. Heidi Prather, associate professor of orthopedic surgery at the [Washington University](#) School of Medicine in St. Louis, said people with strong yoga practices who sign up for eight or more sessions will be somewhat self-selecting in their ability to maintain, but such discipline is rare in the general population.

"Sometimes I'll tell patients that their issues are more cerebral than physical — they need to think about how they move," she said. "Most people don't want to do that. They want a quick fix."

Two years after taking Mr. FitzGordon's program, Sharon Goldman said she couldn't go back to her old walk if she tried. Ms. Goldman, 39, injured herself during a midlife crisis; a painful divorce compelled her to throw herself into

numerous physical activities — running, in-line skating, tennis — that her body wasn't prepared for.

For more than a year, she visited a number of doctors and physical therapists to treat the pain that ran from her legs to her neck, but she didn't experience long-term relief until she started working with Mr. FitzGordon — in part because he spoke in plain, everyday language.

“They were saying essentially the same things, but the physical therapist would say, ‘You need to get a sense of where you are in space,’ ” said Ms Goldman, the executive editor of a marketing trade magazine. “Jonathan would say, ‘Don't tuck your tailbone.’ ”

Ms. Goldman does not think changing her gait alone prompted her recovery. She also credited intensive [physical therapy](#), as well as yoga and Pilates, but learning to walk was the first step.