

WATERWAYS

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Shoulders Back!



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Desk Ergonomics and the Subtle Art of Feeling Better

By Mark Lambert

I can't remember the last time I didn't wake up in pain. I don't mean to sound sorry for myself; I'm sure I'm not the only forty-something whose decades of sedentary desk work have taken their toll. But recently, the pain became harder to ignore.

COVID-19 is at least partly to blame. Thanks to the "New Normal," I now work exclusively at home, and my little hobby room/office just wasn't built for the daily nine-to-five. My desk is an awkward contraption, procured eight years ago from Ikea because apparently I can't not buy furniture when I'm in close proximity to meatballs. I bought my \$70 office chair from Office Max because it was on special and, well, I liked the color.

As weeks of telecommuting turned into months, I began to realize that my home-office was destroying my body in slow motion. When I finally lost the ability to look over my left shoulder, I knew enough was enough. It was then that I discovered Danielle Vernon's YouTube videos.

The Austin-based licensed orthopedic physical therapist has a lot to say about how to sit more comfortably and healthily. Despite some mild anxiety about where this ergonomic rabbit hole of postural correctness might lead, I decided I'd request an ergonomic desk assessment.

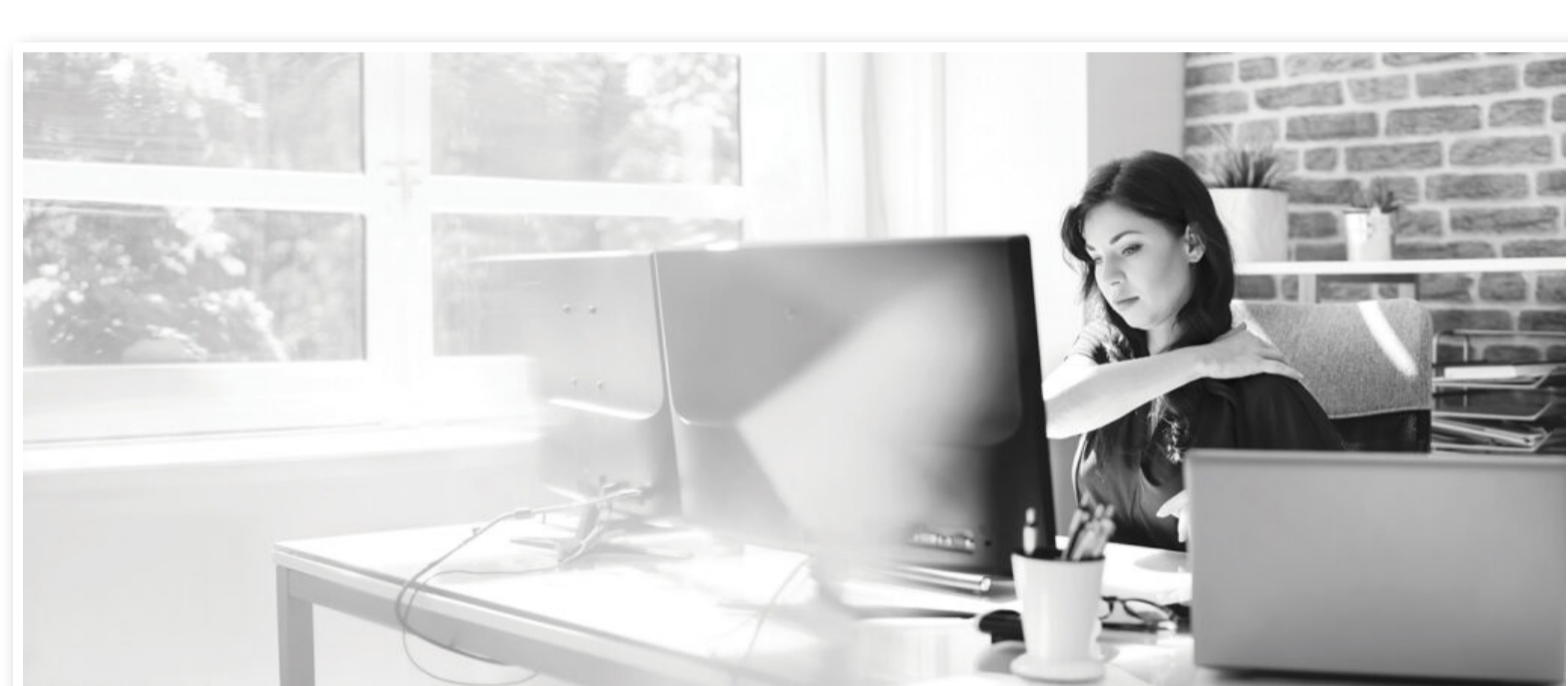
Sit to be Fit

We set up a Zoom session, and soon we were chatting about the deplorable state of my office. I was surprised by the thoroughness of Vernon's assessment. She started by observing how I sat at my desk and had me position my camera so that she could assess everything from my monitor height in relation to my eyeline to the position of my chair in relation to my desk.

She did not like my chair. I decided against drawing her attention to its attractive color. "Why do so many people choose chairs with that netting fabric?" she asked. "The problem with most office chairs is that the back support and seat pan can't be adjusted to suit anyone who isn't average height." I admitted that I'd developed a habit of shifting between slouching in my chair to rest my shoulders and leaning forward over my desk to ease the tension on my lower back. Vernon helped me reconfigure my chair's position and instructed me to roll up a towel and place it down the length of the chair back—a makeshift method of total spine support that she offers in more complete form through a back-support cushion she designed and manufactures.

"The goal is to get your body actively participating in changing your balance," she explained. "By bringing alignment back into your body—from your waist, through your shoulders and up into your neck—you'll begin to find it easier to sit properly without pain."

I tried out my strange new seating. Instantly, my chair felt, um, more chair-like. Sitting upright wasn't as much of a chore. It was comfortable.



Next, she scrutinized my desk and keyboard arrangement. Working back from my wrist position, she helped me adjust everything about how I type. My default work position had become this awkward forearm sprawl across my desk with my keyboard raised at the back. "My fingers are lazy," I explained. "I wanted to make it as easy as possible for them to reach the keys." I imagined the eye roll such a damning personal admission would surely elicit. Instead, Vernon politely but firmly reversed the whole shebang.

By the time we finished, my keyboard tilted slightly away from me with the front of it raised. My elbows now rested comfortably at my sides, fingers hovering lightly over the keys without that trademark wrist tilt to which I'd become so slovenly accustomed. Admittedly, though, it felt weird.

She explained why so much adjustment was necessary in my case. "You need to work from your wrists back to your shoulders. All that tension in your neck started because of how your wrists and shoulders were positioned."

I was an entirely more upright creature by the time Vernon finished her assessment. It felt good not to resemble a telecommuting version of Igor.

The Zoom session concluded with her recommendation of a few exercises I was told to perform at my desk every half hour: quad and hip flexor stretches, a smorgasbord of assorted lunges and some odd yet undeniably effective moves that stretched out my wrists, shoulders and deeply uncooperative neck.

I expressed my grave concerns and asked if such draconian measures were strictly necessary. My exact words may have been "Do I have to?" She reassured me that it would help, and I agreed to try the new office routine for a week before we reconnected.

My Week of Ergonomic Transformation

Bright and early the next day, I sat at my newly ergonomically-optimized desk and heroically powered up my laptop. The first few hours were ridiculously challenging. I couldn't stop squirming. My body kept wanting to slump like it always did. Again and again, I had to reset, straighten up and restack my shoulders over my damnably slouch-happy hips. I naively expected to transition naturally to improved posture. It wasn't that simple.

Why was I so bad at this? And those exercises! The timer I set to remind me to do them kept going off right when I was in the middle of something important. Determination gave way to grumpiness. I picked up the phone, and Vernon repeated her favorite mantra from our assessment: "This will not be comfortable. Your body needs to adjust. Give it time."

So I did, and by mid-afternoon, I realized that the low-grade headache that always struck by 3 p.m. wasn't there. I also felt more energetic and alert. Along with my posture, my mood lifted.

The rest of the week, each day was similar. My new desk setup felt a bit uncomfortable at first, but by the afternoon, I experienced less pain in my shoulders and more energy. The headaches lifted, too. Even weirder, I began to notice that I was getting an extra hour or so of nightly sleep. That's a huge win in this reluctant insomniac's book.

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Posture Correction is Hard but Worth It

"How are you feeling now?" Vernon asked at our follow-up assessment. I gave her the scoop on the beginnings of my transformation from Desk-Igor to upright (if not upstanding) citizen. I told her about the quasi-miraculous disappearance of my headaches. I also admitted that I now had a deeper appreciation of how hard it is to break old posture habits.

She was happy for me but unsurprised by my positive results. She noted that people spend years at their desks acquiring bad posture, so it would probably take a month or two before my new sitting and typing position would feel natural. Still, I was glad I made this change for the better, especially since COVID had me sitting at my desk more than ever.

Vernon ended the follow-up call with these words: "Just stick with it. And keep doing those exercises!" I would, I promised her, though I was hoping she'd forgotten about the exercises.

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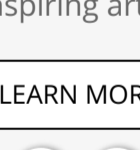


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