

Is the toughest of bodywork therapies the answer to bad posture? Alice Hart-Davis works her

# Perfect your posture

**A**SSOCIATED with laziness, poor posture can cause you to be marked down by prospective employers by making you look as if you lack confidence. It can also set you up for a lifetime of back pain. Yet bad posture, along with slouching and slumping, is one of our most common habits.

Postural distortion syndrome, to give it its medical name, can lead to all manner of other evils, from repetitive strain injury and respiratory problems to digestive disorders, toothache and sciatica. It is the trigger for around 30 per cent of back pain sufferers; it can cause neck tension, which leads to headaches. An estimated 80 per cent of us will suffer from its effects at some stage in our lives, at a cost to the nation of a whopping £5 billion in medical fees.

The British Chiropractic Association is so concerned that it has recently launched a "straighten up" initiative, a quick series of exercises designed to strengthen the spine and improve posture. "It's like brushing your teeth," says Tim Hutchful of the BCA. "It doesn't take long to do, but it pays dividends for life."

I used to think I had good posture — though the osteopaths, Pilates experts et al to whom I have dragged my bad back over the years begged to differ.

But recently I felt it was time to do something drastic, and booked in for a course of Hellerwork, which is seen as the ultimate posture bodywork since it aims to totally realign the body.

At the end of my first session I was feeling baffled. Mainly I was wondering why, when I've known about the technique, and have lived round the corner from the treatment rooms of the best Hellerworker in Europe for 10 years, I hadn't tried it before. Already, in an hour my shoulders had been loosened and now sat an inch further back on either side of my collarbones — this meant that I could now breathe properly, deeply. It was amazing. It might be the answer to 15 years of back pain. But what

amazed me more was that it hadn't hurt.

Hellerwork, an intensive form of remedial bodywork conceived by a Californian engineer called Joseph Heller (no, not the Catch-22 chap) in 1978, has had a bad press ever since some wit labelled it "scream therapy", and lurid stories abound of just how much pain it involves.

Otherwise known as "structural integration", Hellerwork aims to loosen the over-tight fascia of the muscles (the "bag" of connective tissue that encloses each muscle), so the body can be eased into better alignment. To get results, it requires rather more intervention than most therapies, hence its reputation for causing pain.

Roger Golten is considered the best practitioner in Europe; he gave up his job to learn the technique after it helped him solve his chronic back problems 23 years ago, since when he has treated clients from Roger Daltrey to Julie Christie and Kevin Spacey (about his present celebrity clientele he is resolutely silent).

Any reference to "the 'p' word", as he calls it, vexes him greatly. "Any pain is momentary," he says, in measured tones. "Hellerwork is about reducing and releasing the pain held in the body."

The other thing about Hellerwork is that one doesn't undertake it lightly. You can't dabble in it, or drop out halfway, so it's a major commitment of time and money.

At first it was quite straightforward. The first session frees up the chest and breathing; the second works on the legs, so that they stand where they ought, directly under the pelvis. After my second treatment I could stand back on my heels in a way I couldn't before. Again, it didn't hurt, and it seems to be working at some deeper level. Once I was safely out of the door, I found I was in floods of tears, though I couldn't say why.

By the third session — shoulders, arms and sides of the body — I was distinctly wary. Roger told me that Hellerwork, being a Californian creation, has a psychological angle to it, but he tends to skip this unless there are things that clients particularly want to talk through. But yes, he said, Hellerwork often involves a great deal of emotional release. The session passed off without incident, as did the next three, and my posture was definitely improving — all, blissfully, without me having to "do" anything.

"Trying to have good posture is like fighting for peace," Roger said. "You can't make it happen. A lot of it is about relaxing."

I stopped being so wary and got rather fond of Roger for all the good he was doing me, even when (session five) he was burrowing in the deeper layers of my

tummy muscles (peculiar, but it didn't hurt). But then we hit session seven: head, shoulders and the neck.

Actually, those bits were tolerable; it was when Roger tackled my jaw muscles from the inside of my mouth that I hit the ceiling. Some people sail through this without incident but I know that's where I bury all my tension — I clench my teeth all night and that's what makes my neck and back so stiff.

It was excruciating. I didn't scream but I cried and cried. Goodness knows what trapped traumas it had unleashed but the release, both physical and emotional, was immense. I could move my neck freely from side to side and open my jaw properly. On

the downside, I felt so overwhelmed that I could hardly walk, let alone think straight, for the rest of the day. Roger Daltrey, apparently, has this done each time he visits. Crikey.

It took me a while to book the remaining sessions, not least because more jaw work was required, but perversely, I began to look forward to it since I felt so much better afterwards.

Taller, straighter and more balanced, in mind as well as body.

Now it's all done, I still go back for occasional top-ups. I'd hesitate to say that my back is "better". Like an alcoholic in recovery, living with a dodgy back is best done one day at a time and it would be foolish to presume that nothing can rock the boat. But together with an exercise regime that has strengthened my stomach into a rock-like band of muscles, Hellerwork has kept me pain-free for nearly a year, which is considerably more successful than anything else I've tried. Is it worth it? Definitely. The great thing is, you can't remember pain.

● Hellerwork with Roger Golten, £100 per session at Pilates Off the Square, 4 Mandeville Place, W1 (020 7935 8505, [www.golten.co.uk](http://www.golten.co.uk)). For posture exercises from the BCA, visit [www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk](http://www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk)



**Arms and the man:** Roger Golten works on Alice's neck

## SIT UP STRAIGHT – OFFICE CHAIRS TO HELP A BAD BACK

For back-pain sufferers, most office chairs are a subtle form of torture. "The best type of chair is one that has a forward-tilting seat," says Craig Brown of The Back Shop in Marylebone, which offers a plethora of intriguing chairs and posture aids. "A forward-tilting seat protects the pelvis and elongates the spine, and keeps everything straight. Bear in mind that it's not only the chair that you have to worry about — if you are tall, your desk-height may well have to change in order for you to be able to use your chair properly."



### THE SPINALIS CHAIR

The seating equivalent of a Swiss ball. It is cunningly designed to make sitting into an activity by demanding that you use all your core postural muscles just to stay balanced. From £390 (model above is the Apollo, £690) at The Back Shop, 14 New Cavendish Street, W1 (020 7935 9120, [www.thebackshop.co.uk](http://www.thebackshop.co.uk)).



### BAMBACH SADDLE CHAIR

Looks like a saddle on a pole and takes a bit of getting used to (you sit as you would on a horse). Doing this puts the weight on the pelvis and makes you use your postural muscles to hold yourself upright (£470; 020 8532 4100, [www.bambach.co.uk](http://www.bambach.co.uk)).



### HOGANASMOBLER PLUS 361

A medium-sized chair, with head-rest, lumbar support, back rake adjustment and tilting seat adjustment. From £934 from The Back Shop (as before).



### KNEELING CHAIR

Makes it easier to sit upright with a natural curve in the back. Don't be tempted to buy a cheap one since these often place a lot of stress on the knees. Back2 in Wigmore Street has chairs such as the Puttnams Posture Stool from £135 (020 7935 0351, [www.back2.co.uk](http://www.back2.co.uk)).



### HAG H09 PRIVACY 9430

Executive chair which, as well as being endlessly adjustable, offers a Plexiglas screen to give you added privacy as well as support. £1,338, at Back2 (as before).