

# **Yoga Tips for Improved Posture Support: A Q&A With Julie Gudmestad**

*Julie Gudmestad is a physical therapist and Iyengar yoga teacher dedicated to making yoga accessible for everyone, regardless of body type or age. She spoke to us about the importance of good posture for back health, and how yoga can slow or reverse the effects of aging on our muscles and skeletons. Go here for more information about Julie Gudmestad and her continuing yoga education courses on Yoga U Online.*

Q: As we all know there are many things that change in the body as we get older, but there is one common change that we never hear discussed that much, i.e. the slow but sure deterioration of our posture. Is this loss of our natural posture support just a cosmetic issue or is it something that we really should be paying attention to?

Julie Gudmestad: Well, it is a cosmetic issue. Sometimes, I marvel when I see people that are beautifully dressed and every hair is in place and the makeup is perfect and the overall image they're projecting is ruined by their bearing and horrible posture.

But even more importantly, there are many injuries and health problems that bad posture can contribute to. I think it's partly due to the habitual ways that Westerners use their bodies—a lot of sitting by computers or tablets, which cause us to slump forward. Unfortunately, people can get away with bad alignment for decades, and not realize that they're going to have to pay a big price later for this kind of posture misalignment and the uneven forces it puts on the spine.

Q: I would imagine that slumped-over posture isn't the best thing in terms of the body's functions either?

Julie Gudmestad: No, definitely. The stomach and digestive organs are right there in the upper abdomen, so they're going to get compressed when people are slumped over. And the diaphragm, which is the major muscle for respiration, can't move freely. The heart and the lungs, of course, are in the ribcage, so they get constricted too. Straightening people up, making more room for their heart, their lungs, their diaphragm, their digestive organs, will help every system in the body function better.

Q: We talked about how these posture issues are [caused by] our habits [like sitting at a computer]. But habits aside, there really also is a tendency, all things even, for our posture to deteriorate over time?

Julie Gudmestad: I don't believe that there is a mandatory amount of muscle mass that you're going to lose regardless. I think the changes—the weakness—that we see in people's posture when people get into their seventies and eighties is because they stopped working the muscles. And of course, a muscle that doesn't get worked is going to atrophy.

Q: So which muscle groups do you have to work on to retain good posture or improve your posture?

Julie Gudmestad: The weakness that I'm most concerned about is in the erector spinae, which are the two long muscle groups that go up either side of the spine. The mid-back area on a lot of people just generally tends to be weak, so the lower and middle trapezius, which helps to position the shoulder blades are often involved. And down into the low back, the quadratus lumborum is a factor also, it is also a spinal extensor.

Weakness of these muscles will contribute to these posture problems. Just as bad, it also makes the back more vulnerable to injuries when people are doing activities around the house, like lifting a heavy basket of laundry, cleaning the garage, getting the groceries out of the car and into the house.

Any of these small bits of lifting and pushing and pulling that people do during the course of a normal day could be dangerous if your back is weak. You're also very vulnerable to those kinds of so-called garden variety back strains, back pain, back injuries. This is a particular soapbox of mine, because I think if people's backs were stronger, we physical therapists would have way less of these back strains that we end up dealing with every week.

Q: Why is it so hard to improve posture?

Julie Gudmestad: When people spend long periods of time at the computer with their arms forward and their head forward, then the muscles and the connective tissue on the front of the body gets short and tight, and this can lock people permanently into this forward head posture. And the way chairs are set up, they invite people to slide their pelvis forward and their back goes back. The mid-back goes back against the backrest, pelvis is forward, the head is forward, and then you sit there for eight hours a day. So in many cases, it's a combination of the muscle imbalances and poor seating options.

Q: And of course, once your body gets used to one type of alignment in space, it thinks that that's normal.

Julie Gudmestad: I've had so many people tell me, when I put them into just beautiful, textbook alignment and they'll say, "Well, this feels abnormal," and then I have to say, "Well, it's actual textbook normal, but could we say that it's unfamiliar to you rather than abnormal?"