

pose

Put your **back** into it

Renowned Yogaworks teacher trainer, **Laurel Beversdorf talks to YogaLife** about the importance of looking after your spine



Headstands strengthen your back muscles. Different variations engage and strengthen the core to pull the body into alignment and correct bad posture.



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he Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, one of the cardinal texts of yoga philosophy, give us an especially timeless aphorism.

In English, this sutra translates as, “Future pain is avoidable.” This certainly applies to most cases of back pain. According to the World Health Organization, lower back pain is the most common spinal disorder, affecting over 80% of people at some point in their lives. Having back pain is almost as common as owning a cell phone. However, while you can learn how to operate your cell phone, your spine doesn’t come with an online list of FAQs to help us navigate its many functions. And given that there is no warranty or replacement policy we must do our best to inhabit it more consciously.

Knowing Your Spine

The spinal column is a serpentine-like, spring-loaded structure that chains from inside your skull just behind your nasal bones, all the way down to the tip of your tail bone. It serves as the central, segmented pillar of support and locus of movement for your torso, distributes the weight of your upper limbs to your pelvis and legs, and provides the protective bony casing for your spinal chord. Through the electrical artery of your spine, the brain and body become knitted together by a system of neurons more numerous than the stars in the Milky Way. The ancient practice and philosophy of yoga places particular focus on the spine as the body’s conduit for enlightenment.

The brain and spinal chord command your body’s organic and mechanical processes. Organically speaking, the body has an operating system that pretty much runs itself with no need for software updates. Your heart beats, your stomach digests and your cells reproduce on their own. In contrast, the mechanical functioning of the body lies largely within the bounds of your conscious control. You can consciously choose the manner in which you stack your head above your neck when reading an article, how you carry yourself through the hallways of your job, and the degree to which you stand evenly on both feet waiting in line. Learning about the anatomy of your spine, and then sensitizing yourself to its optimal alignment, both in your yoga practice and throughout your »

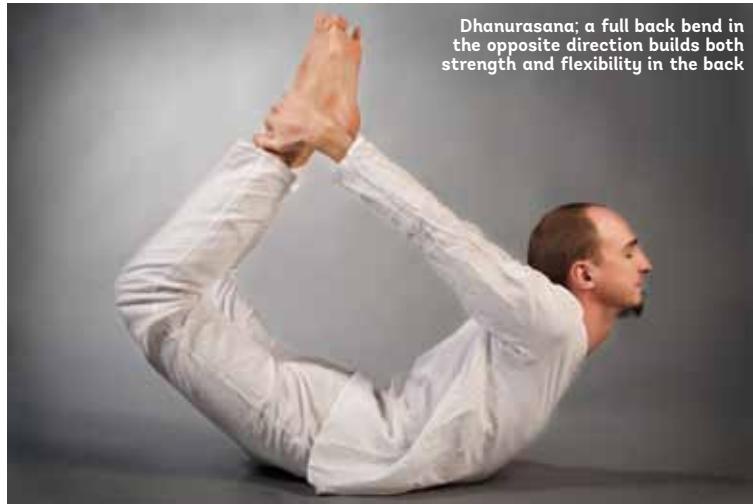
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day can make the difference between being in pain or feeling great.

Embracing your Curves

The spine's curvaceous column has four contours that alternately vault into and out of the body. Viewing someone's back like a topographical map as they lay face down on the floor, the curves of the neck and low back would be like valleys, while the curves of the upper back and back of the pelvis would be like hills.

These contours, when present in proportion to each other, are essential in counter-balancing the



Dhanurasana; a full back bend in the opposite direction builds both strength and flexibility in the back

Anuvittasana

Allow your exhale to lower you into your maximum depth, allow your inhale to lift you up and forward. Reverse this pattern on purpose by pulling backward more vigorously into the posture during the inhalation, then exhaling the tension.



large chunks of the body - head, rib cage, abdominal contents, and pelvis - one on top of the other, and in distributing these burdens over the body's central axis. This vertical relationship with gravity helps you stay upright more efficiently by stacking your bones, thus taking pressure off your muscles so they can relax physically while psychologically you will feel more calm. Remember, the brain and body are territories inseparably connected via the spinal chord. In short, tension echoes back and forth between the body and the mind.

In addition, our spinal curves help us absorb shock when we are walking, running, and jumping by increasing their curvature slightly in response to the impact. When there is too much or too little bend in any of these spinal regions, the entire system of counter-balances is thrown off. As a result, all of our body's tissues take a bigger pounding.

Yoga brings our awareness into the body in a heightened manner and facilitates a more upright, confident-looking posture

The demands of our technological society make it likely that we spend extended amounts of time in spinal misalignment looking downwards at screens. The head, which weighs upwards of 12 pounds, when not stacked above the neck, pulls the neck forward and flattens the cervical curve, in turn pulling the upper back and lower back curves into a rounded state as well. As a result our spine ends up in one big uni-curve, and the result is an architectural mess, if not rather unseemly. We end up following the postural example of, as the creator of Yoga Tune Up, Jill Miller warns, "creepy vultures".

Furthermore, working at a desk, driving a car, or staring down at a cell phone screen make maintaining optimal alignment challenging for another reason. While focused largely on what we are reading or seeing, the

eyes (one of our five sense organs used to perceive our external environment) dominate our sensory input, and make proprioception (our bodies internal sense of itself in space) less likely to occur. Ironically, on a deep cellular level, we must train our bodies to multi-task.

The Learning Curve

Yoga can teach us how to make space in our mind for self-awareness. It does this by inviting our awareness into the body in a systematic, deliberate and heightened manner. This practice can also make space in our bodies for optimal spinal alignment by strengthening key postural muscles that facilitate a more upright, confident-looking posture, and stretching chronically shortened muscles that pull our bodies off axis.

However, there are a few key components you should look for in your yoga practice to make this learning curve steeper. First, make sure you practice in a quiet, pleasant and uncluttered space. Also, practice with an instructor who helps you to align yourself optimally in relationship to gravity. Find a teacher who gives alignment instruction, feedback and adjustments. Finally, continue to educate yourself on your body's anatomy so that you know the object of your proprioception as well as your eyes know the screen of your cell phone.

Learn to inhabit your body as skillfully as you've learned to navigate the functions of your gadgets; make as much mental space for your body as you have made for your text messages and tweets; connect with yourself while you connect with your environment. You may not reach enlightenment, but I guarantee, you will feel lighter.

Being able to feel the presence or absence of your spinal curves, coupled with the willingness to realign your spine throughout your day, is the self-care that needs to start happening now. Right now, are



Laurel says the pelvic tilt is important in relation to a strong spine.

you stacking your head above your shoulders? Are your shoulders balancing over your hips? Do you feel the gentle inward swoop of your lower back curve, the width and breadth of your upper back curve, and the delicate bend inward of your neck curve? Align yourself in this moment, and kindly remember to re-align yourself throughout your

day, and life. There is no time like the present to avoid future pain. *

Laurel is a yoga teacher and anatomy instructor at YogaWorks in New York. She does teacher training workshops around the world. You can attend her teacher training on June 1st at Zen Yoga Media City. For more information call 050 376 6984 or go to www.satyaflowyoga.com