

Please feel free to copy this article for your own use or for a friend, as long as the article remains complete and includes my name as author. All other rights reserved. If you have any comments on these articles, please let me know — knowledge feeds on conversation. Thank you.

## Are You Sitting Comfortably?

Scott Clark  
© Copyright 2001

A few years ago, a programme appeared on British television called *The Royle Family*, in which we watch a working-class family as they watch TV. But we watch them from the vantage point of their television, so they're looking straight at us as we look straight at them. They're sitting on a sofa, an armchair — more sprawling really, almost melting down the chairs and into the floor. I always wonder how many of us watching are sitting just as they are.

Many of us spend a lot of our waking lives sitting: at work, in a car, in waiting rooms, in front of the TV. Do we sit in a way that makes us more comfortable, more relaxed, happier? Do we sit in a way that gives our arms and eyes the support and freedom they need? Do we sit in a way that we can sustain through a working day, a working life?

In my capacity as a Feldenkrais Practitioner, I see quite a few people who are in a real crisis as a result of the way they sit, with pain and discomfort in their arms and shoulders, their upper backs and necks. Many already know they should find a better way of sitting, but are unsure how to do it. They've tried 'sitting up'; they may have tried several different (and possibly expensive) chairs in the hope that adequate support will put them into the right position. As a result of my experience with many of these people, **I really believe that we can sit well** — that our built-in capacity for learning, strength and flexibility is not only up to the job, but offers much more potential than any chair or complicated external support. Even in cases of considerable damage to our inner mechanism, there is usually much more possibility left than we dream. It's a matter of how we use that possibility. And that means, more than anything else, learning: We must learn to use more fully what we already have.

The following movement exploration is one way of beginning to learn about what sitting could be. Try it out as gently and comfortably as you can. In fact, your comfort is the most important part. This isn't like a school lesson, with a right and a wrong way of doing things that you must do correctly. Instead, I hope that it can be a way of coming closer to your own nature and feelings.

*Sit on as flat a chair as you have. Make sure it's not too hard — use a thin cushion if you need to. Make sure that it's low enough that your feet can reach the floor, and you can still have your thighs more or less level (not sloping steeply down toward your knees). Sit on the front edge of the chair, so that your thighs are hardly touching the chair. What does that leave? What are you sitting on, if not your thighs?*

At the bottom of your pelvis, are two strong protrusions called, appropriately enough, your sitting bones. They're usually about five or so inches apart, though most people imagine them much wider.

*Sway a little bit forward and back, and a little bit side to side, in order to feel your sitting bones. When do they move with you? When do they stay more still, with your spine moving above them?*

*Now sway a little bit forward and back, moving your shoulders and head just a few inches each way. Aim to move your whole back as if it were a stick, so that every part moves at the same time. Can you do this gently, without holding on tightly inside? Can your pelvis be part of this, so that you can feel the movement rolling you very slightly forward and back on your sitting bones? Do this fairly slowly, perhaps timing the movement with your breathing.*

Even when we aren't doing anything on purpose, the basic processes of life are still going on. The heart is beating, digestion and other internal chemistry continues, and we breathe. Most of these are not only unconscious, but they can't even be made conscious — except breathing. Breathing is right on the line, we can interfere with it consciously or we can just let it get on with its job. As a result, it occupies a special place in any attempt to learn about ourselves and movement. In this exploration, I would ask you simply to connect the timing of the other actions with your breathing, without doing anything special to the breathing itself. It's one way to make sure that you aren't holding your breath!

*Now do the same thing, except keeping your pelvis still — don't let your pelvis move. Can you find a way to let everything above your pelvis sway lightly forward and back, without the pelvis being involved? The movement can be, in fact should be, as small as necessary to be truly comfortable.*

*When you've done both of these ways of moving, go back and forth between them a few times. Compare them: how many ways are they different? In which parts of yourself? How many ways are they similar, and in which parts of yourself?*

One of these ways of moving may be more familiar than the other — a sure sign that you do it more often. Now, our principal bad habit is to step on the brake and the accelerator at the same time, and in this case, that often means moving the torso but holding the pelvis still.

*When you sway forward and back and include your pelvis in the movement, what happens in your knees? What happens in your ankles? If it isn't clear, try holding your knees or your ankles still for a few movements, then let them go. The movement in the ankles and knees is a small but essential accommodation to the larger movement of the torso; the contrast between holding them still and letting them go may make their small movement more apparent.*

You may notice that, if the seat of the chair isn't flat and level, it's a bit more difficult to find your balance. The chair itself is trying to dictate a direction: "Oh come on; lean back here!" Most chairs seem designed as if to seduce us into sitting their way, to seduce us away from any internal sense of balance and support that we may have.

*Return to the swaying, and then begin to decrease the size of the movement; like a pendulum slowly coming to a rest. Each movement smaller, and the next one smaller, until you come to a rest. Smaller and smaller. And finally, when you have come to a rest, notice where you are. Are you leaning a bit more forward than usual, or more backward?*

*Rest a moment before you go on. Sit however you like and notice what you feel, what you think, without guiding or compelling your thoughts. Let your breath move as it will.*

What we are used to feels right. That doesn't mean it is right, just that familiarity makes it feel right, and makes everything else feel slightly odd. This process chooses a position — the swaying, as it gets smaller and smaller, zeroes in on it — that is more centred, closer to neutral than what you're used to. If this new position feels as if you're leaning forward, then you are probably used to leaning slightly backward, and vice versa.

Perhaps this sounds as if we are looking for some final correct position that will cure everything. And in fact, for each moment there actually is a position of perfect balance — but then the moment changes. Turning your head, tilting it, even breathing: all these will slightly change your balance, and the larger movements of work or conversation will change it even more. What is needed is not a single perfect position, but a sensitivity that will lead us toward balance during all the movements of life.

Leaning the torso forward and backward is one vital dimension for balance in sitting. Another is the range between arching the back and rounding it. The words themselves can be confusing; I am using 'arching' to mean the movement in which the front side of the torso gets longer while the back side gets shorter, as in a proud or military bearing. By 'rounding', I mean the movement in which the front side of the torso gets shorter while the back side gets longer, a slumped or even caved-in bearing.

*Sit again on the front edge of your chair. Put one hand flat on the top of your chest, just below the front of your throat. Can you feel the highest bones in this area, the collar bones, where they join the top of your breast bone? Put the other hand flat on the lowest part of your belly, just above your pubic bone. The top of your hand will probably be a couple of inches below your belly button. Now bend your whole back so that the places where your two hands are resting come closer together. Then bend your whole back so that these two places go further apart. Your hands are just going along for the ride, not doing any work themselves; that way they can help you feel better what your torso is doing. When your hands come closer together, you are rounding your back, and when your hands go further apart, you are arching your back.*

*When you do this, is the top half of you — your chest and head — moving more than your pelvis, or the same amount?*

We seem to have a cultural bias toward keeping the pelvis still. When I teach this material, and look around the room at this stage of the lesson, I see that the majority keep their pelvis still, and move their upper body above. It's like an architectural metaphor, as if a motionless pelvis made the best foundation. But the human body doesn't work like bricks stacked on top of each other; our human potential is far more fluid. A well-coordinated person isn't imprisoned by gravity like a pile of blocks; instead, the forces of movement and the force of gravity ripple through the skeleton the way a fish ripples through water.

*When you round your back and your hands come closer together, let your pelvis roll toward the back of the chair, so that your tailbone comes closer to the seat or even presses into the seat. Then, when you arch your back and your hands move further apart, let your pelvis roll toward the front of the chair, so that your tailbone moves up away from the seat. Do this gently, slowly; really taking your time. Find a way to do this so that your chest and pelvis move an equal amount. Let every part of your back bend at the same time. Include your head by looking downward as you round your back, then a bit upward as you arch your back. And perhaps you can even do all of this so gently that you can breathe at the same time — so that the action doesn't obstruct your breathing at all.*

Our habits of movement are the greatest fruit of our learning. When we first learned to walk it took perhaps a year of learning. Now you can wake up, roll out of bed and walk again in just the time it takes to clear your brain and rub the sleep from your eyes. The whole point of memory is that you don't have to learn all over again. But one drawback is that we can get by for a long time without doing much maintenance, and our coordinations can start to resemble clothes that we've slept in, that haven't been washed or ironed for far too long. What we are aiming at here is like doing the washing, doing the ironing — cleaning or smoothing out our coordinations. We accomplish that by finding situations in which we can feel in a fresh, immediate way how all of our moving parts can cooperate to make simple, comfortable movement.

*Put your hands back in their places again — one at the top of your breast bone, the other at the very bottom of your belly. Remember to use your hands to feel whether you are actually doing what you intend. Now round your back generously, but still within the range of your comfort. Hold your back and your entire torso in this position as lightly as you can, and slowly tilt the whole position forward and backward several times. It may sound easy, but it often isn't: Your back may start to uncurl at some times, or round more at others, so go slowly. Feel the changes in your belly and the front of your torso as you move backward, and the very different sensations there as you move forward. When do you feel something in the lowest part of your belly, when do you feel something at the bottom of your ribs, when do you feel something further up into your ribs? Notice as well the changes in the back of your torso as you move forward and back. It's often much more difficult for people to feel these small changes of effort in the back of the torso.*

*Rest a moment.*

*Now do the opposite movement; that is, arch your back, so that the places your two hands are touching are spread as far apart as is comfortable. In order to have some room to move, it may help to spread your legs wide and to be perched as far forward on the chair as is possible, so that you're barely on it at all. Then, holding yourself in this arched position as lightly as you can, gently begin to sway forward and backward. Again, this is hard to do. You may well find that you begin to lose the arch either as you go backward, or as you go more than a little bit forward. Move slowly, and feel the changing sensations in the front of your torso, and in the back of your torso.*

*You've kept your back rounded while swaying forward and backward, and you've kept your back arched while swaying. Now let's combine the swaying with changing the back from arched to rounded and back again. Have your two hands in the same places, one at the top of the front of your torso, the other at the bottom. As you round your back, so that the two*

*hands are brought closer together, lean gradually more and more backwards. Look down toward your belly as you do this. Stop when you run out of room to comfortably round your back, or when you run out of room to comfortably lean backwards; whichever comes first. Then, slowly and gradually, arch your back so that your two hands are separated more and more, and at the same time, lean slowly forward. Look gradually upwards as you do this. Stop when it isn't easy to arch more, or when it isn't easy to lean forward more, whichever one comes first. Go back and forth, taking your time, breathing, smoothing out the movement. As you round your back, you lean backwards; as you arch your back, you lean forwards. Each time, find a way to make it easier, even if that means making the movement smaller. Easier and easier. Notice what happens in all the parts of you that aren't obviously involved in the movement — your knees and ankles and feet especially.*

It sounds like an easy combination. The words are so simple: lean backward as you round, lean forward as you arch. Yet many people find that they do the opposite combination without thinking. Our habits can be very strong, and very fixed.

*Begin to do this again. Gently, slowly, arching as you go forward, rounding as you go backward. When you have found an easy range and an easy rhythm, start to gradually make the movements smaller and smaller. Again, it's like a pendulum, swinging less and less with every swing, until it comes to a perfectly balanced rest. Let each movement be smaller than the ones before, until, in just a few more movements, you come to a rest.*

*When you have come to a rest, let both of your hands down, but don't change anything else. Feel what this place is like. Is it restful? Is it balanced? How does this place of balance compare to the kind of positions that you're accustomed to? Are you more arched than usual, or more rounded? More forward, or more back? What is your breathing like?*

As I said before, this resting place doesn't last forever. After a few moments, the demands of life will ask you to move this way or that way. But by practising this process regularly, we can sharpen our perception of balance and at the same time, smooth out the movements that bring us in and out of balance. This isn't the right way to sit, nor is it the only way to improve our balance while sitting, but it is an approach that can work — if you try it out, if you practice it from time to time. I would suggest repeating the whole exploration once a day, then using the last pendulum movement as a break from time to time, when you've been sitting for a while. After you've got used to this process, after it has become harder to pay attention in a fresh way, then it's time to move on to some other means of surprising yourself into fresh awareness. There are thousands of these explorations in the Feldenkrais Method, each one tailored to a slightly different movement or way of approaching the movement.