Picture a human skeleton. The kind you see in anatomy classes, hanging on a stand, waiting for students to gather round and count the ribs, or touch the vertebrae. Besides the fact that the skeleton is just a bunch of bones, there is something about each and every one that is different from most real humans. They all look more or less the same. The spine has two little curves, at the neck and at the lower back. The vertebrae stack one on top of the other. The arms and legs hang from the torso. And the head rests on top of the neck. Not in front of the neck, or tilted to one side, or dropping down. Right on top.

Yet if you look at most Westerners, and as we become more technologically “advanced,” other cultures as well, you will notice that many people have their head forward, or tilted, or pulled back. This slight diversion from the perfect balance point on top of the spine can wreak havoc with the entire structure of the individual. Yet so many times people come to me and say, “I try to stand up straight, but 30 seconds later, I feel my head sticking forward again.” Or “Is there anything I can do about this lump that seems to be growing out the bottom of my neck? It makes it really hard to stand up straight.”

Why do so many adults have head and neck problems, problems that cause repercussions through the whole self? There are many reasons for your head “being in the wrong place.” This 60s term meant that the person had a strange way of thinking that didn’t jive with the others. Or how about, “Get your head on straight!” When your head starts to pull, or drop, it can actually affect your entire life. Let’s look at some of the different aspects—both physiological and psychological—that are affected by the head’s placement, as well as some of the causes.

One of the primary changes to the use of our skeletons has taken place in the last century. Before that, most people worked outdoors, or engaged in other physical activities. With the Industrial Age came automated jobs and office jobs that required long periods of either standing in place or sitting down.

The skeleton is designed for movement. Standing or sitting for a long time actually produces stress on the skeleton thus creating a struggle for balance. When you sit a long time for example, the lower back starts to feel tight. You want to slouch, round over, and the head starts to move downward. Add to that all the different demands for looking straight forward in a focused fashion: driving a car, staring at a computer screen, assembling a product for hours on end. This not only affects the carriage of the head, but it affects the eyes as well.

In so-called undeveloped nations, people have to walk from place to place, often carrying their luggage on their heads. If the head is not aligned, carrying a weight becomes uncomfortable very quickly. But if the head is resting on top of the spine, it can easily sustain weights that are too much for the arms.

In theater, we often use the carriage of the head to define a character. Someone with his head thrust forward is perhaps aggressive, thrusting himself into every encounter. Or if the head is forward and slightly down, a quality of shyness or weariness creeps into the situation.
portrayal. If you take these two examples, out of many others, you can see how the physiological and psychological begin to relate. **If your head is thrust forward, it takes the spine out of balance.** It demands that you keep moving forward or you’ll just fall down. To compensate, you have to hunch your shoulders and engage your shoulders, grip the sternoclytomastoid muscles (those rope-like things on the side of the neck), and sometimes even tense your jaw. With that level of tension, no wonder a person feels aggressive!

Once the head is forward and little down, the person’s skeleton is losing the battle with gravity. The upper spine needs to round a bit to keep the person’s head from falling further and to help with balance. The eyes need to peer upward. It is difficult to turn the head quickly from side to side, making the person vulnerable to things coming from the side. And with the spine all rounded, there isn’t enough freedom for a quick directional change. This is a very unbalanced, insecure feeling. Not to mention extremely tiring. Thus, the person is physically as well as psychologically insecure and weary.

Of course, the above are generalizations and each of our postural choices are richly varied. But it’s important to note that they are indeed choices. They may have been unconscious—brought on by imitation, stress or lifestyle—but they are not genetic. **Babies don’t have their heads sticking forward.** Once a child begins the process of being vertical, the head begins to affect the carriage. The placement of the head can be affected by something as simple as undiagnosed near-sightedness, or as complex as unconsciously imitating a parent’s incorrect carriage.

Ultimately, it’s not important **HOW** you lost your good posture. **What counts is how to develop more choices so that you can stand, sit and walk comfortably, using your skeleton the way it was designed.**

**Moshe Feldenkrais, the developer of The Feldenkrais Method®** once noted that if the head was not organized, the rest of the body will not be fully functional. He developed hundreds of lessons that can help re-organize the carriage of the head on the spine.

These lessons are pleasant movement sequences that can be done by anyone, regardless of ability. If you have noticed that your head “is not on straight,” you may want to explore working with a Feldenkrais® teacher, or taking an Awareness Through Movement® class in your area. 

—by Lavinia Plonka, GCFT, content editor of SenseAbility. Contact her at:  
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May 6th, 2004, will be the 100th anniversary of the birth of Moshe Feldenkrais.

This presents a unique opportunity for the worldwide Feldenkrais community to honor Moshe and celebrate his life and our work.

While we look to Moshe as the developer and source of our work, he was also a fascinating person who participated fully in the history of the 20th Century. Most of us are at least partly familiar with his story. He left his home in Eastern Europe at a young age and joined the immigration to what was then Palestine. He went to Paris for his education and worked with Nobel Prize winner Frederic Joliot-Curie in nuclear physics. He met Jigoro Kano the founder of Judo and became one of the first European black belts in this art. When the Nazis took over France, he escaped to England where he joined the war effort. He worked in the formation of the State of Israel and was familiar with David Ben-Gurion. In the midst of all of this, he made his debilitated knees an object of study and developed what we know as the Feldenkrais Method.

His study of the potential for human learning brought him in contact with some of the most brilliant minds and talents of his time—Yehudi Menuhin, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Julius Erving, Milton Ericson, Peter Brook—the list goes on. Before his death in 1984, Feldenkrais wrote several books and trained hundreds of people in his work. Recent figures indicate there may be as many as five thousand practitioners worldwide. These practitioners continue to study and develop the work, applying it in diverse fields including health and rehabilitation, dance, theater, athletics, and education. The Feldenkrais Method has implications for the study of infant development, cognitive and movement sciences, and evolutionary biology.

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