

Waking up I smile

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Pain in the neck

Categories : [General](#)

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One morning I awoke with pain in my neck.

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I shrugged it off, reasoning that it was likely just a short-term kink.

The next morning I awoke with a similar pain.

Again, I engaged my habitual response to discomfort and thought little of it.

This pattern continued, but after a week there was worry that something was wrong, and the worry was strong enough to call me to action.

The first thing I did was Google "Neck Pain." There were 16.8 million results. I skimmed a few articles from seemingly reputable sources, and gathered that neck pain was fairly common. It was recommended that targeted stretches would likely help, as well as bringing awareness to the general use of the body. The articles suggested being checked over by a professional, as the neck is both delicate and a critical part of everyday functioning.

I did some stretching on my own and tried to pay attention to when I was experiencing pain, but after a few weeks the pain didn't seem to be diminishing. I didn't like the idea of going to see a physician; I wanted the pain to just go away, and seeing somebody felt like it would make the pain more "real." Plus there was the logistics of receiving care... I'd have to research and select a doctor which fit my new health care plan and I'd have to schedule an appointment when I wasn't traveling, plus there could be follow-up appointments... eh I better just wait it out. It's not such a big deal, I told myself, I'll be fine.

However, after a few months the pain was still there, and despite my well-intentioned self-guided efforts, the pain began to increase in intensity.

Eventually, I gathered the willpower to seek out help from a few professionals: a Physical Therapist, an Alexander Technique teacher, and a Chiropractor. They were each very useful in their own right, and afterwards I was tasked with continuing the healing on my own by following specific stretching instructions, and paying close attention to the times during the day when I felt pain, especially time spent on the computer.

Despite a strong resolution to pay attention to my body while at the computer, it was difficult to remember. I had been using a mindfulness bell while working, and had the insight to pair the sound of the bell with a check-in on my body. This worked well. The first thing I noticed was how often my shoulders were unnecessarily raised while typing. The second thing I noticed was how often I was not sitting upright evenly on my sit bones. With practice these two habits became easier to notice, and over time I found myself adjusting on my own, without the aid of the bell to remind me.

I felt encouraged by my discoveries, and thought that soon I would likely be pain free.

But the pain continued, albeit to a slightly lesser extent.

I continued paying attention to the sensation of pain, and then began to notice it was not distributed evenly throughout my neck. Pain was felt more on the left side than the right. This

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was perplexing to me, as while sitting at the computer I seemed to be using my body evenly.

So I paid more attention to my body away from the computer. Being left-handed I reasoned that that might be an influence, and sure enough I was writing in a paper journal one evening and noticed the whole left side of my neck and shoulder were stiff while writing. I smiled.

Soon thereafter I was having dinner with my parents, and decided to tell them about my pain and my discoveries. Up until this point I hadn't really mentioned it to anyone other than the physician, as it didn't feel appropriate to talk about my discomfort when there were so many other things going on in life. After I finished recounting a version of the above story my mom casually offered: "Just now when you reached for your water glass your whole body was very tilted, I wonder if that has an impact." I was surprised at her comment, as I didn't recall tilting my body. A couple minutes later my dad suddenly said "stop" as I was mid-reach for a breadstick. My entire head, neck, shoulder, arm, and torso were so tilted it looked as if I was attempting to do a seated crescent yoga pose. Whoops.

I then realized that to truly understand the causes of pain would take nothing less than becoming aware of how I was using my body in each and every moment. No small task. From this experience I had unearthed some general principles:

- 1.) Reducing pain requires understanding the various causes of pain, some obvious some subtle.
- 2.) The majority of causes rest in my own habitual usage of the body, often carried out in unawareness.
- 3.) To become more aware of my usage there are specific exercises/tools that can aid me.
- 4.) To make lasting change I need support from others (friends and professionals).

I also recognized that in adopting these principles one could expect to face various challenges:

- 1.) Wishing the pain will go away; not having the willingness to begin to address it directly
- 2.) Becoming overwhelmed at the depth of the pain; not having the capacity to bring it all into awareness
- 3.) Clinging to one method and imagining it will fix everything; not exploring the various modalities of healing
- 4.) Attempting to take it all on ourselves; not asking for help

As soon as I articulated this to myself I immediately saw the parallel to the mind.

Mental pain, often referred to as "stress", is present for many of us much of the time. The degree of affliction varies by person and over time, but it's something we all encounter.

There may be numerous causes to this stress, and most are rooted in our habitual unawareness in how we respond to the things we encounter in life (i.e. by craving pleasure / rejecting pain without stopping and looking deeply into our experiences to learn from them). Mindfulness practice can support in bringing these unskillful responses into awareness. But re-training the habit pattern of the mind takes a lot of patience, and requires plenty of support from friends on

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the path.

Ultimately it boils down to being aware of what's happening as it's happening, and responding appropriately.

Sounds simple.

It is.

But it takes a while to learn how.