

Strategies of Stability

One of the problematic pieces of “conventional wisdom” about the body, I think, is the assumption that we need to *hold onto* muscles to make our bodies behave correctly. This shows up, especially, in thinking about core stability: many people have equated it with “suck and tuck.” Here’s another way to think about stability...

Consider that we have two opposing strategies for achieving a feeling of stability: we can find it through *compression* or *poise*.

Compression is the slouch of a person watching TV on a couch, but it's also the “bad posture” all around us. In fact, in that posture, higher segments are using lower segments *as* furniture; they’re sinking as they would onto a couch. Compression feels “down,” heavy, sinking. So how is that stability? It’s just that when we sink, we “hit bottom” as the segments settle into density and the muscles automatically brace to keep us from collapsing entirely.

Poise could also be described as *appropriate alignment stabilized by tone*. Compared to compression, it feels “up,” light, and mobile. In this state, centers of mass of body segments are approaching their most efficient positions in gravity. As we do this, stabilizing tone automatically appears; we don’t have to try to make it. *Appropriate alignment generates support, tone, and muscular stability*. (By the way, the reason I especially like the word “poise” is that it suggests the feeling of balance, readiness and tone. Stability, by contrast, sounds a bit more stiff.)

How can we choose to “do” one or the other? If you’re looking for poise, I think that focusing on alignment—not muscle contraction—is the best path. Many people can readily learn to identify balance or the direction of imbalance in any given body part. At this point, simply shifting centers of gravity to a more neutral alignment will allow us to notice the associated feelings (support, tone, stability). And although attempts to deliberately hold onto muscles (such as pulling the abdominal wall in or drawing the scapulae down the back) have their place, I think that they will always be a second-best strategy because of the inherent conflict between holding and movement...including the movement of breathing.

By the way, achieving compression is easy. Just allow yourself to sink, to let go, in weight-bearing. Keep relaxing more and more, and you’ll begin to fall into “bad” posture. We can’t shorten in a straight line, like a telescope; segments have to move around each other to sink. As you sink, you probably do it in the shape of your own usual postural tendencies, so it can be an educational experience. Finally, investigating what alignment makes you sink the *least* as you let go will give you important clues as to what alignment is right for you.