

The Correct Way to Sit in a Chair (and How This Could Help Your Performance in More Ways Than You'd Think)

Description

I remember when my dad bought our first VHS camcorder.

Unlike today's tiny camcorders which fit in your hand, this thing was huge. 'Twas basically a VCR with a lens on it, so imagine trying to balance that on your shoulder.

Anyhow, it was pretty cool to see yourself on a TV. And if you've ever seen America's Funniest Home Videos, you know that watching yourself skateboard and fall down in reverse is pretty funny.

But for once in my life, I was also able to see what I looked like when performing on stage. And what I saw, was a wee bit horrifying. Shoulders hunched, neck arching forward, tummy jutting out, knees locked – it wasn't a pretty sight.

In an instant, I understood exactly what a teacher meant when he remarked that I sounded great with his eyes closed...but not so much with his eyes open (which was relayed to me in as kindly a way as possible, of course, but still stung a little).

Of course, none of this should have been a surprise. After all, my posture on-stage was a pretty faithful representation of my posture in the practice room.

Given that I spent most of my practice time sitting, hunched over, this became my default playing position whether I was sitting or standing.

And even though I got pretty good at playing with crappy posture, I wasn't doing myself any favors. Aside from it being a pretty uninspired visual experience for the audience, it led to a lot of bad technical habits too.

And a recent study suggests that it may have been negatively affecting my performance from a psychological perspective as well.

How so?

Math time

A [team of researchers](#) recruited 125 college students to participate in a simple math challenge.

First, everyone took a short questionnaire which asked them to rate their level of anxiety about testing, whether they had a tendency to blank out in exams, how much difficulty they had in math, and so forth.

Two ways to sit

Then, the students were taught how to sit in two different ways. One, was the “collapsed” position. Which basically involved sitting slouched over, looking down, with the lower back rounded. Or, the way most of us sit pretty much all the time, even though we know it’s “bad” posture.

The other way was the “upright” position, where students sat straight, looking up, with a slight arch in the lower back. The way you’d sit if your scary high school math teacher suddenly locked eyes with you and said “sit up straight!”

Serial 7’s

Half of the students were then asked to sit in the collapsed position, while the other half sat in the upright position. As they sat in these positions, they were instructed to count backwards from 843 by 7’s, as quickly as they could, for 15 seconds (e.g. 843...836...829...etc.).

Then, students were asked to sit in the other position, and repeat the task.

Want to guess how the students did?

Posture mattered (but only for some)

Well, unfortunately, we don’t have any data on the students’ actual math performance¹.

But we do have students’ ratings of how difficult the task was.

Interestingly, posture didn’t have much of an effect on the perceived difficulty of the math challenge among the best math students and test takers. Their ratings of the task difficulty were 4.9 when slouched, and 4.0 when upright (where 1=easy; 10=difficult).

But it was a different story for those students who *did* have test anxiety, struggled more with math, and had a tendency to blank out in exams. They found the math task to be significantly more difficult when performing it slouched (7.0), than when sitting upright (4.8).

Why?

So why does a challenging cognitive task feel more difficult when slouching over?

The exact mechanism isn't clear – but there are a number of other studies which suggest that our posture can affect our mood and mental state, so the findings here aren't a total surprise.

And given that sitting upright is a pretty easy fix, the researchers suggest that students who get anxious about tests or who are afraid of blanking out in exams, should try making a conscious effort to sit upright in these kinds of pressure situations.

Ok...but if sitting upright is so easy, and we all know that [slouching is bad for us](#), why don't more of us sit with good posture all of the time?

Well, the problem, I think, is that sitting with good posture is actually not as easy as it sounds – because the way we've learned to sit might be all wrong!

Re-learning how to sit

Due to increasing shoulder and back pain over the last couple years (dang...isn't this the sort of thing "old" people say?), I've spent some time trying to train myself to sit with better posture. But I can never seem to find a comfortable position, and I keep reverting back to my default slouchy position...blaming my chair...and daydreaming wistfully about [Herman Miller office chairs](#).

So when I came across a TED talk which suggested that I could sit without back pain if I found my "primal posture," I was intrigued – but kind of skeptical. Because, you know...*what the heck is primal posture?!*

Well, it turns out that sitting with good posture isn't just about sitting up straight. In fact, when told to "sit up straight," our first instinct is to puff out our chests, which actually makes things worse.

"Untuck your tail"

The key to sitting correctly, according to some, is learning how to sit so that you're not sitting on your (imaginary) tail. *Again...what?!*

Freeing your tail shifts the alignment of your pelvis so that your spine is stacked correctly, allowing you to sit upright much more effortlessly – where it actually feels relaxing.

I've been experimenting with this all week, and though it does take some practice to get the hang of, feels way better. At least, I'm not feeling quite as resentful towards my chair as I usually do after a long day of writing.

And though it's too late to turn back time, I imagine that my posture when performing, would have been a whole lot more optimal as well if I had sat this way when practicing.

Take a look at the TED talk below, and see if this makes sitting for long periods of time much more comfortable. After all, sitting is *supposed* to be a pleasant experience, right?

Esther Gokhale at TEDxStanford

Additional tips

[To Fix That Pain In Your Back, You Might Have To Change The Way You Sit](#) @NPR

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