



## What happens in nearly everybody that leads to chronic pain and stiffness?



### Maturing Well Instead of Aging Poorly

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**People experience the chronic pains, stiffness and loss of freedom of movement attributed to aging as early as their thirties. According to popular opinion and medical science, that is to be expected. Popular opinion and medical science don't say *why* it is to be expected, except perhaps to blame (without an illuminating explanation) *our genes*. While bodily changes *are* linked to our genetic destiny, there is another factor, not genetic, that is within our power to control.**

This article explains why pain and restriction often appear with aging -- and what you can do about it. The illuminating explanation has to do with a common, seemingly innocuous condition underlying the movement restrictions of aging in nearly all persons -- the accumulation of muscular tension. By preventing tension from accumulating now, one can prevent the damage that leads to poor aging later; by eliminating accumulated tension, one can reclaim much of the physical grace and comfort one had years earlier.

### THE OBVIOUS SIGN OF DECREPITUDE

**H**ow can you tell an "aged" person at a distance? It's by their posture, isn't it? Posture is a habitual way we have of moving and positioning ourselves, using the muscular system.

Much has been said in recent years about osteoporosis -- loss of bone density -- being responsible for changes of posture. While that is true in some cases, muscular tensions have much more to do with the postural changes of aging than does osteoporosis. The posture of aging reveals muscular tensions that a person has accumulated and may have carried for years.

Along with postural changes, the mythology of aging has two key features: pains and stiffness.

Is it possible that chronic muscular tension alone can create the pains and stiffness of aging?

### SOURCES OF PAIN AND STIFFNESS

When muscles get tight and stay tight, they cease to be elastic; they restrict movement. That sense of

restriction is what people call "stiffness".

Those same muscles, held tight for days, weeks, and years, get tired, sore, and prone to spasm. That feeling of muscle fatigue and soreness produces much of the chronic pain of aging. The effects of muscle tightness on joints is another factor that adds to pain and stiffness; tight muscles pull bones together at joints, creating pressure.

Most people are sore to the touch in one place or another -- not because they are "old", but because they are tight, and their muscles, overworked.

The problem exists, however, not in the muscles themselves, but in the brain that controls them -- why is why massage and stretching provide only temporary relief. Muscles obey the brain, and if the brain says, "contract", muscles contract -- massage and stretching notwithstanding.

There is nothing wrong with people's brains, however, and they don't need medication or a brain-scan; they need to learn -- or relearn -- to relax. They need to break their tension habits, formed over a lifetime.

People go through their lifetime of experiences doing either one of two things: tensing or relaxing. Think back to an earlier time in your life when you were in a new and possibly stressful situation -- one that you knew might last a while or that lasted longer than you expected. Notice how you feel when thinking about it. Are you tense, or relaxed? Can you tell? How were you, then? Did you manage your tension or did you turn your attention to "more important things"? Did you get used to your tension? If so, you probably lost some of your ability to relax. Over a lifetime, did you get more flexible, or more stiff? That's how you know, and that's one way a person's brain gets conditioned to maintain a level of tension.

Another way is through a physical injury. When we get hurt, we guard the injured part by pulling it in and out of action. The event of injury may make such an impression upon us that we may (and many people do) continue to guard the injured area in memory of the injury for decades. Thus forms a tension habit that leads to accumulated tension, pain, stiffness, and sometimes joint damage -- "arthritis". Even without arthritis, accumulated tension adds drag to movement and makes it more difficult; people feel tired all the time, "old".

Even physical fitness programs can lead to chronic tension. Many kinds of fitness training emphasize strength and firming (tightening) up. Rarely do they teach a person to relax. More often, they teach a person to stretch and "warm up", which is not the same as teaching relaxation. So many fitness programs (or at least the way some people do them) cause them to form tension habits.

So, it's not so much our years as the tension habits we form over those years that determine whether we develop the pains and stiffness of aging and lose that part of our youthfulness.

## **A WAY BACK TO MORE YOUTHFUL COMFORT AND MOVEMENT**

The pain and stiffness of aging start out as temporary tensions that become learned habits. Those habits can be unlearned.

The odd thing is that our tension often seems to be "happening to us" -- rather than something we are doing. Much of it exists below our "threshold of consciousness". We're "used to it"; we don't notice it. So, the first step to breaking a tension habit is to become conscious of it. Only then can we stop tightening ourselves up.

"Somatic exercises" effectively break the tension habit. The word, "somatic", means "self-sensing and self-controlling" -- the way you sense and control chewing. There are a number of systems of [somatic exercises](#) that accomplish this goal.

Somatic exercises improve posture, make you feel younger, improve flexibility, and ease or eliminate chronic pains. They make spontaneous movement without pain possible, again.

The clinical form of Hanna Somatic Education clears up especially painful or persistent problems.

Either way, you gain freedom of spontaneous movement without pain, better coordination, more complete relaxation, and more strength guided and helped by the coaching of a somatic educator.

Improvements are stable and require minimal upkeep -- a few minutes of somatic exercises as part of ones daily regimen. Once a problem has been resolved, those exercises can keep you comfortable and supple for a lifetime.

So, if you thought pain and stiffness are the inevitable result of "aging", consider the possibility that you can forestall or reverse those effects.

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**Illustrated instructions for somatic exercises are found in [Somatics: Reawakening the Mind's Control of Movement, Flexibility, and Health \(Perseus Books\)](#); available in several languages.**

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