

## *Beyond Stretching – The Whole Body yawn*

Concerns with stretching muscles point to one key observation: muscles get shortened.

The key question is, "Why?"

Your muscles are controlled by your nervous system. Your muscles have no control of their own. The obvious conclusion to draw is that your muscles get shortened because your nervous system is stimulating them to contract.

Athletes and dancers attempt to stretch their hamstrings to avoid injury. "Attempt" is the correct word because stretching produces only limited and temporary effects, which is one reason why so many athletes (and dancers) suffer pulled hamstrings and knee problems.

As anyone who has had someone stretch their hamstrings for them knows, forcible stretching is usually a painful ordeal. In addition, stretching the hamstrings disrupts their natural coordination with the muscles of the fronts of the thighs, which is why our legs feel shaky after stretching the hamstrings. The same is true of stretching any other muscle. More than that, because muscular tension is maintained as a postural habit (by which we maintain our sense of "normal" tension and posture), forceful stretching does nothing to change that habit; like "going on a diet", we soon rebound to the way we were, or worse. If we stretch ourselves by pitting one muscle group against another, what often results is an increase in tension in both muscle groups.

Oddly enough, if you try to relax habitually tight muscles by an act of will, you are likely to find that you can't relax past a certain point, even with special breathing, visualization, or other techniques.

At that point, you may assume that those muscles are completely relaxed and need stretching. You may not realize that you are contracting "on automatic" due to postural habits stored in your nervous system. Any attempt to stretch them simply re-triggers the impulse to re-contract them to restore the sense of what is "familiar". That is why hamstrings (and other muscles) tighten up again so soon after stretching or massage.

Fortunately, there is a more effective way to manage muscular tension than by stretching. To understand how it works, let's start with the recognition that muscles that need stretching are actually contracting.

What is necessary, then, is to shift your familiar "tension set point" – your sense of what "relaxed" is – from habitually tense to habitually relaxed. That way, you contract only when you intend to do so.

**To change your set-point requires more than stretching or massaging; it requires you to learn – or relearn – how to relax and what that feels like.**

### *The Whole Body Yawn*

Yawning is relaxing -- but it's not an attempt to relax.

Next time you yawn, notice what's happening. You're not relaxing the muscles of your mouth and neck; you're tightening them! It's *afterward* that you experience relaxation.

This is an important clue. You are experiencing a basic way we operate. To relax, we must be reminded of the difference between tension and relaxation. We must *feel* the difference. Yawning does that.

This process of tension/relaxation can be applied systematically to the whole body. The movement maneuvers given in this program do exactly that. They involve very much the same quality of tension and relaxation as yawning does – and they produce a similar result: relaxation, greater freedom of movement, and recovery of our energy from wasteful habitual tension.

Doing movements with feeling in slow motion is the key to somatic transformation.

Significant results come relatively quickly from doing the somatic transformations. Make the transformations part of your daily regimen, and soon strength and freedom of movement become second nature. You enjoy assurance of your fitness for physical activity of all kinds.