

Might You be Strengthening Your Pain?

by Lawrence Gold

Are you an injured athlete? A dancer who has occasional pain that interferes with your training? Or perhaps are you someone who wants to lose weight but can't exercise because you hurt?

If you have chronic pain from an injury, chances are likely that you have tight, sore muscles and possibly over-compressed joints. If you want to avoid strengthening your pain, there are some facts you need to know to avoid making your pain worse.



About Muscular Pain

1. Muscles often go into involuntary contraction following an injury.
2. Contracted muscles get fatigued.
3. Muscle fatigue brings soreness.
4. The pain of soreness makes us contract muscles elsewhere in the body.
5. ... and the pain spreads.

You may not have thought about it, but after about four seconds of strong, muscular contraction (say, lifting a bag of groceries or a box), your muscles tire; you start to feel the burn. Notice it, some time. Imagine the burn of muscles highly contracted twenty-four hours a day. What might that feeling do to your freedom of movement?

Let's look at other facts.

About Joint Pain

1. Muscles in contraction pull on bones.
2. Bones come together at joints.
3. When muscles contract, they compress joints.
4. Over-tight muscles cause over-tight joints.
5. Tight joints hurt and may feel stiff.

6. Long-term over-compression of joints leads to cartilage damage and/or loss.
7. Cartilage loss leads to loss of mobility, and possibly, surgery.

Now that I've presented some (possibly obvious) facts about muscular and joint pain, let's look at what happens when you exercise.

About Strengthening

Your injury has caused you to change how you move. Your whole body avoids the pain by moving in a new way. This is called "favoring an injured area," "guarding," "poor posture," "loss of freedom of movement." It's also called, "aging."

So, you have two things going on.

- You have painfully contracted muscles.
- You favor the injured area by moving differently.

With an injury, you have two obvious options.

- Continue to exercise and work through the pain.
- Avoid exercise.

In general, exercise strengthens *your existing movement pattern*. That means that, if you have been injured, exercise strengthens *the movement pattern of injury*. The contraction of the injured muscles gets stronger and the contraction of the rest of your muscular system, which protects the injured area, gets stronger. The whole pattern of muscular contraction gets stronger. That's what the usual approach to strengthening does.

Knowing what you do about muscular contraction and pain, one conclusion is inevitable: If you strengthen muscles after an injury, you risk strengthening the pain.

That fact explains why, after exercise, the pain of an injured area, after a period of temporary relief, often gets worse. It explains why people often reduce or avoid exercise, once injured.

Let's say that after a time, the pain subsides. You start exercising, again. So far, so good – if you have returned to a free pattern of movement.

But often, the pain subsides without movement returning to normal. That's why we see bad posture and limited movement so much more often in older adults than in younger people.

So you start to exercise, again. Suddenly, the old injury reappears.

It hasn't "reappeared"; muscular contraction has just gotten stronger. Now, you feel the cramp, the spasm, the pain.

Let's say you see a physical therapist, who puts you on a regimen of strengthening and stretching.

Unless he or she supervises you closely to be sure you are exercising in good form, you're likely to be exercising your pattern of injury, making it stronger. Your progress is likely to be slow, and likely to be painful.

You've got to change your pattern of movement, your coordination, or else.

The Walking Wounded

Watch people who jog down the street. How many come down heavier on one side than on the other? How many have legs that twist with each stride, rather than move gracefully straightforward, straight back? Do you think they are aware of how they are moving? Are you?

That's the problem with injuries: the pain subsides, but the pattern remains. People get injured and they're never the same.

If you want to be free of old injuries, if you don't want to re-injure yourself, don't exercise your injury, don't strengthen your injury, don't strengthen your pain. Get away from the movement pattern of your injury.

The question is, "Get away, toward what?" How do you get back to healthy freedom of movement?

First step: get rid of the "favoring," the "guarding."

Remember, favoring and guarding perpetuate the pain of injury through muscular over-contraction. Don't strengthen that movement pattern; get rid of that movement pattern. Don't strengthen the pain; don't avoid the pain. Get rid of the pain and its underlying cause, muscular over-contraction.

Another Option

What can you do, other than working through the pain or avoiding exercise? Retrain your muscular system.

To retrain your muscular system involves two steps:

1. Restore over-contracted muscles to their flexible, pliant state. Regain freedom of movement.
2. Apply that freedom of movement into patterns of coordination. Develop new patterns of coordination.

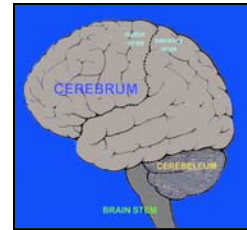
It's not so easy to regain freedom of movement through strengthening because strengthening strengthens muscular contraction, and contraction strengthens the pain.

If you've tried stretching, you know that doesn't work, so well.

If you've tried massage, you know how well that works. The same is true of other manipulative therapies.

So, what works?

Here's a clue: Patterns of coordination are stored in your brain. Your brain *learns* movement; it learns coordination; it learns to control muscular tension.



You develop new patterns of coordination by *learning* them. Think of how you learned to drink milk from a glass, to write, to type, to ride a bicycle, to ski, to shoot a basket, to thread a needle, to drive a car. Patterns of coordination. Learned.

Here's another clue:

Think of how you feel more relaxed after yawning. Yawning is an act of *muscular contraction followed by full relaxation and movement*.

You regain freedom of movement by contracting and *relaxing* in coordinated patterns. Yawning is just one pattern. The principle can be applied to many patterns of contraction/relaxation.

Your brain's ability to learn is the key.

Here's one method: somatic training.



Somatic training uses a contact/relax mechanism *in movements and positions directly related to your injury* to eliminate muscular over-contraction and to develop coordinated *freedom of movement*. A somatic trainer works with you to develop *the ability to relax* as well as the ability to contract muscles. Once you've retained the ability to relax your muscles, you are no longer in danger of

strengthening your pain. You have your freedom back.



For more information on practitioners and self-help programs, visit Somatics on the Web, www.somatics.com/page7.htm, write to Lawrence Gold at inquiry@somatics.com, or call him at 505 699-8284.