

Straighten before you strengthen

by Tina Borgatta

When someone tells you that you better straighten up, it usually means you've messed up in some way—you've gotten off track and some aspect of your life has gone awry. But if you hear it from Chris Kussoff, it means your body, not necessarily your life, is what's out of whack. And if your body is out of whack, you're probably feeling it—in your knees, your back or perhaps your hips.

You see, Kussoff is a believer in Egoscue. If you've never heard of it, you're not alone. Many people haven't. But it's a method of achieving health and eliminating pain through a regimen of stretches and exercises, and sometimes weightlifting. The series of exercises could take as little as 15 minutes or as long as 90. Some can be done at your desk, others must be done on the floor.

The method was developed by Pete Egoscue, who on his Web site (www.egoscue.com) calls himself "the posture guy." In his books, however, he's referred to as an "anatomical physiologist." But he wasn't schooled in physical therapy or medicine. He simply developed a program that many people swear by—enough to keep him in practice since 1978, with more than a dozen clinics all over the world.

Among his believers: golf legend Jack

Nicklaus, who claims Egoscue changed his life. "Never have I experienced such complete pain relief," Nicklaus says in a testimonial.

It's all based on the notion that the body requires a healthy alignment of parts—from the head, to the shoulders, to the pelvis, to the knees, on down to the ankles and feet. If one shoulder rests higher than the other, something is wrong. And, Kussoff says, Egoscue can fix it.

"It's postural therapy based on the blueprint of the body," says Kussoff, who owns Egoscue clinics in Lake Forest and West Los Angeles. "Your posture from all sides—the front, the back and the side—should all line up, both vertically and horizontally."

It might sound similar to chiropractic medicine, but there's no back and neck cracking here.

"The difference between Egoscue and chiropractic is that we figure out why there's a difference in the plane," Kussoff says. "We try to understand what's happening in the body that's causing it to fall out of position, what muscles are controlling that position and then we'll develop a sequence of exercises that retrain the body to get back into the proper blueprint."

Or, as Kussoff simply puts it, "You've got to straighten before you strengthen."

The core principle of Egoscue made sense to Kussoff the moment he heard it. Before opening his clinics in Southern California, Kussoff had worked as a personal fitness trainer in Portland, Oregon.

"I heard a man speak who had worked for Pete Egoscue, and he talked about





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the need to straighten before you strengthen,” Kussoff says. “As a trainer, I would run into a lot of people who had developed knee or back pain and did not really know why. But if you have some part of your body that’s out of line, and you start training with weights and other exercise, you’re going to have a stronger person with the same condition, and in some cases, the activity could even aggravate it.”

The first thing an Egoscue therapist does is find out what symptoms the client is experiencing—where the pain is. Then the specialist assesses posture, examines the walk and watches how the client performs a range of motions to pinpoint the problem areas. Then a specially tailored physical fitness program is created that includes some common stretches, yoga movements and static strengthening exercises, all aimed at correcting those postural deficiencies—to get both those shoulders, for example, back in line with each other.

Once that’s accomplished, Kussoff says, the pain will diminish, if not completely disappear.

Kussoff even claims that some clients who have experienced severe pain because of cartilage deterioration in the joints emerge from the program virtually pain-free, without surgery, and in some cases even see a regeneration of the tissue. It’s a tall claim, but Kussoff stands by it.

“You don’t need to have full cartilage for joint function,” he says. “It’s more about the joint position and function than it is about the condition of the joint. If the joint is out of line, there’s going to be friction. And if there’s friction, there’s going to be pain.”

These postural problems could be the result of any

number of causes—injury, lifestyle, even work environment, he says.


“If you’re sitting at a computer all day with your shoulders rolled forward, your hips rolled under, and then you get in the car at the end of the day and drive home in that same posture, pretty soon you’re going to begin to look like that all the time,” Kussoff says. “You need to build up your muscular conditioning to bring everything straight again.”

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*“Pete Egoscue totally changed my life.”
—from the Foreword by Jack Nicklaus*

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PETE EGOSCUE WITH ROGER GITTINES