

# Beth Says...

by **Beth Butler**  
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In the early days of the Educated Exercise and Movement Center (founded in 1985 and now known as The Movement Center), Susan Sempeles, a fellow dancer, exerciser and friend, presented me with a book she compiled entitled, *"Beth Says—Being a Compendium of Pithy Aphorisms by Which to Improve the Quality of Your Life."* Of course, I understood the offering to be a mixture of praise and appreciation along with a little good-natured ribbing. There were others, however, who might have preferred if Beth just kept her mouth shut. Namely, my students' significant others (probably mine as well on occasion). As I later discovered, "Beth Says..." became a popular but not always a welcome phrase around the house. Over the years, I think we have reached an understanding. For my part, I do not expect all of my recommendations to be heeded by all people all the time. Everyone has different needs and is ready, willing and able to make changes at his/her own pace. I have tried to impart this to my students. For their part, a little openness goes a long way. I've even received reports of some of the most initially resistant partners occasionally finding my information useful.

I think that's enough background for now. So, let's get down to it—what does "Beth say..." anyway?! Beth says practicing the simple movements described below will release shoulder tension, relieve stress headaches, loosen your lower back, help you breathe better, tone abdominal muscles and make you look and feel 10 pounds thinner. Even under the best circumstances, the holidays are a stressful and hectic time for many of us. What could be a better gift to yourself during this holiday season? Take a few minutes to pamper yourself and you'll enjoy the rewards all day long.

## On Breathing: Holding Your Breath

You may be surprised to discover how often you hold your breath on any given day and in all kinds of situations, such as doing dishes, getting ready for work or just talking. Experiment by stopping what you are doing right now and take notice of how, or if, you are breathing. I just did that myself and noticed that my breathing was tight and shallow, possibly another indication of how I feel about and thus, how my body reacts to writing. Try not to alter your breathing or to be critical of it. Your goal is to simply become more aware. Finally, observe how you feel after a "breath check." Has your body or mind

relaxed? Did your concentration or mood improve? I recommend a "breath check" several times a day, preferably in a variety of situations.

## It's All About Standing Well:

There are many variables which influence our posture, such as self image, emotions, thoughts, aches and pains and postural role models (parents, peers, athletes, etc.). Observe your own posture by standing sideways in front of a full length mirror. Even better—have a friend take a Polaroid picture of you. Take special notice of your head (is it jutting forward?), shoulders and upper back (are they rounded forward?), back (is it swayed?), pelvis (is it tilted up or back?), and ankles and feet (is your weight evenly distributed?).

## How To Improve Your Posture: (Photos A & B)

Stand with your feet 3-6 inches (or hip width) apart. Make sure your toes are pointing straight ahead and your feet are parallel. Your weight should be evenly distributed right to left and over the entire foot. Relax your toes. Try to lift your inner ankles but don't let your big toes lose contact with the floor. Unlock your knees. Lift the rim of the pelvis and imag-

ine that you tail bone is heavy (like you have an alligator tail). Buttocks should remain relaxed. Let your arms hang at your sides. Roll the upper arms outward so that your palms face the outer thighs. Gently lift your clavicle (the bone at the top of your chest). Be careful not to let your lower back arch too much. Imagine the top of your head moving in an upward direction (like a helium balloon). Look straight ahead. Relax your expression. Hint: now would be a great time for a "breath check."

Practicing good posture can be very taxing. It takes daily practice to achieve long term changes. The following movements will help you to achieve and support positive postural changes.

## The Clock: (Photo C & D)

Stand about 8 inches from the wall with your feet hip distance apart. Stand evenly on both feet, relax your jaw, neck and shoulders. BREATHE. Imagine a clock face on the wall. Put your palm on the wall starting at 12 o'clock. Keep your arm straight, but don't lock your elbow or lift your shoulders. Take several breaths. Then walk your fingers back to 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock and 3 o'clock. Take several breaths in each position. At 3 o'clock puff your chest out like a pigeon and gently rotate your chest toward the center of the room. Take several breaths. Let your arm swing down. Observe how you feel before doing the other side. If it felt too easy—stand closer to the wall. If it felt too hard—stand farther away from the wall.

## Half Dog (push the wall away)

To get a sense of dynamic alignment (good posture), you must learn to make a connection with the Earth. Half Dog also improves strength and flexibility. Stand facing the wall with your feet hip distance apart and your hands at shoulder width and height. Step back, as in photo E, until your back is flat and parallel with the floor as in photo F. If your back begins to round, walk your hands up the wall until you are able to keep it flat. Make sure your entire palm is on the wall with your fingers spread and middle finger pointing straight up. Observe which body parts feel tight (e.g. shoulders, back of the thighs, calves) and try to relax them. BREATHE. Finally, imagine pushing the wall away with your palms and reaching back with your tail in the opposite direction. Keep your arms straight and upper arms rotated outward. Broaden your shoulders. Extend your neck like a turtle. Relax your face. Feel a connection from the head to the neck, lower back and tail. Stay in this position as long as you like. Take a "breath check." Note which body parts are tired. Fatigue indicates a break in the flow of energy through the body. To come out of the position, bend the knees slightly and step forward to the wall. Take a moment to observe the sensations in your body.

## Wall Press: (Photo G)

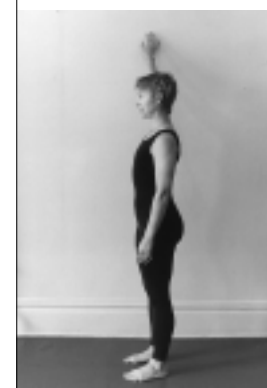
The Wall Press will help you overcome rounded shoulders. Stand as in photo A but with your back to the wall. Place your heels 6-8 inches away from the wall. Lean your shoulders and buttocks against the wall. Protect your back by drawing your navel towards the spine. Keep breathing. Press your arms against the wall. Broaden your shoulders. Slowly begin to raise your arms. Wrists and elbows should stay in contact with the wall. Stop when your shoulders begin to lift up towards your ears. Note if the muscles below your shoulder blades are working. ■



A



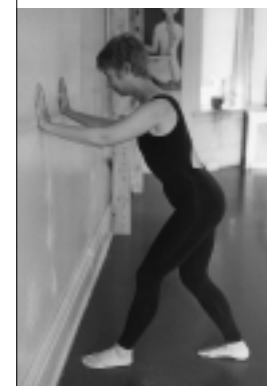
B



C



D



E



F



G



Next Issue: Look for more breathing exercises and ways to relax and renew your mind/body/spirit after the holidays.

To Learn More: The Breathing Book by Donna Farhi; Back Care Basics by Mary Pollig Schatz, M.D.; relax and renew by Judith Lasater, Ph.D., P.T.

Photos: Kevin Falser

Models: Betsy Dorbian, Massage Therapist and Yoga Teacher

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