

## **Walking with Comfort and Confidence**

Adapted from

### ***Healing Hip, Joint and Knee Pain: A Mind-Body Guide to Recovery from Surgeries and Injuries***

**By Kate S. O'Shea MA**

*Kate had her first and only partial hip replacement in 1968  
to correct complications from congenital hip dysplasia.  
She has been working with individuals since 1980 to enhance  
their balance, comfort, and confidence.*

Most of us walk, yet few of us think much about it until walking becomes a problem. Suddenly, all we know is that walking is not the same anymore, but we don't know what to do about it. Difficulties can develop from trying to avoid pain and compensate for weakness. Understanding how your body is designed to move and support you can help. This article gives you tools to learn how to walk with more balance, comfort and confidence.

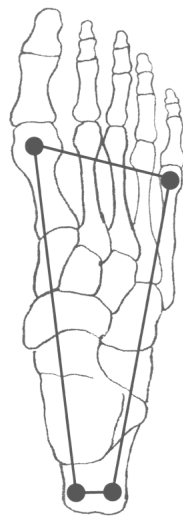
Walking is a process that requires structural support from the skeletal system, propelled by neurological organization, muscular coordination and strength. Following surgeries, trauma, or years of wear, our body may naturally protect itself by holding the injured area still. This unconscious "splinting" can cause characteristic unnatural movement patterns. I discovered my own compensations were not unique when I was in a ladies locker room years ago. I happened to notice that the woman next to me was holding her foot in the same tense and clumsy position as I had, before I began consciously improving how I move. And, she had a hip scar just like mine! Since that time I have seen many others using their feet and legs in very similar ways. The odd foot position helps stabilize the leg that is being used like a stick instead of a flexible, living part of the body.

Your skeleton is your natural support system. Understanding how the shapes of your bones participate in the process of walking helps you regain smoothness and ease. Following are some basic ideas to keep in mind for improving your gait. I focus on the feet and hips because if the foot/hip relationship is good, stress is reduced in the knees and back, and your gait will improve naturally.

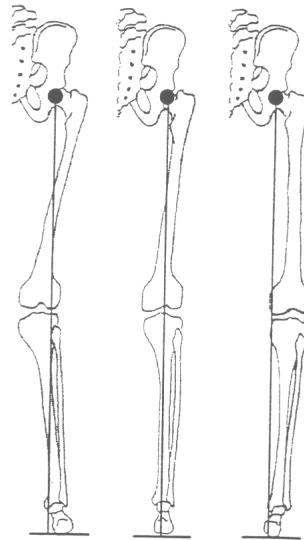
### ***Balance from the feet ...Up***

Attention to the feet is often the single most useful tool for correcting walking problems and discomfort, in my experience. The feet are the foundation for all other aspects of your support. The way you use your feet affects the stability of your ankles, which in turn stabilizes your knees and hips. Many people walk on only part of one or both feet, missing the opportunity to get support from the whole foot. The shape of your foot provides you with a broad base of support when you actively use it.

The key is to think of the four weight-bearing points of each foot and balance your weight between those points. Developing a sense of the width of your heel is especially important. Balanced placement of your heel stabilizes your leg. People often walk as if their heel is narrow, like a high-heeled shoe. This makes it easy for the ankle to collapse inward or outward. The illustration on the right shows the result of an imbalanced foot. It is possible to learn to be conscious of how your foot meets the ground and easily improve the balance of the ball of your foot, heel and ankle.



Four Weight-Bearing Points of the Foot.



Foot - Ankle - Hip Relationship  
(view of right leg from behind)

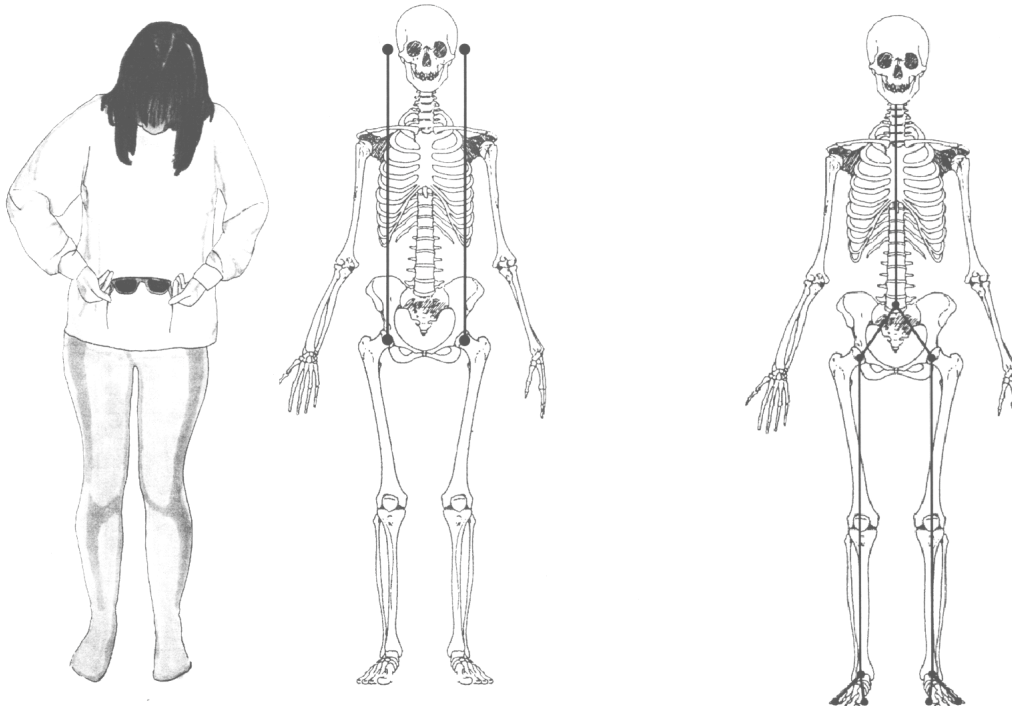
A simple way to improve the use of your foot is to increase your awareness. For a reality check, grasp your heel. Feel how wide it is. Stand and notice how you are using your heel. Next, be aware of how you are standing on the ball of your foot. Be aware of how each leg is being supported by each foot. Where are the imbalances? Imagine how the way you walk is affected by those imbalances. Now, feel the four weight-bearing points (the base of the big toe and little toe, inner and outer border of the heel) and

how that awareness influences your legs and general posture. Your foot is designed to provide a broad base of support; play with feeling that. Try walking with this new perspective.

### ***Central support from your hips***

It is essential to understand the true location of your hip joints in order to understand how they function. Many people are unclear about this most basic element of their support. These ball and socket joints are placed lower than most of us think. To discover this in yourself, bend your knees slightly, keep your back straight, and lean forward about 45 degrees letting your buttocks extend behind you. Put your fingers in the crease that is created in the front. Your hip joints are located in that crease.

My favorite fact about hip joints is that they are just as far apart as your ears. You can use a pair of eyeglasses to measure. This relatively narrow width between the hip joints provides a central core of support to your whole body. When people are asked to locate their hips they often point to their waist, or the widest part of their seat. Neither of these places provide stability to the body when you think in architectural terms.



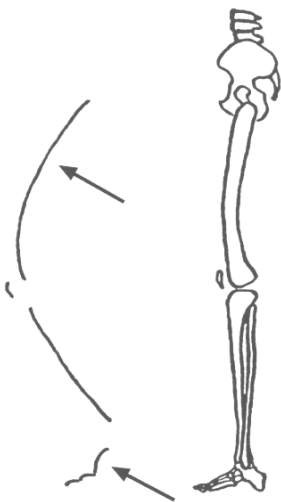
Central Position of Hip Joints

Full Support from Feet and Hips

Learning to feel the central nature of your support provides a sense of balance and collectedness which transports energy up through your hip joint and pelvis, ascending and energizing your spine. Awareness of your innate, centralized support gives you more balance and freedom as you move.

### ***The spring in your step***

In addition to support, a naturally graceful gait has a quality of roundness. The back of your femur (thigh bone) is arched to facilitate an easy forward swing as you walk. The underside of the bones of your feet are arched, adding spring to your femoral arch. I like to think of the arch of my femur easily propelling my leg from behind, like a wheel, as I move forward. Actively using your toes as your foot comes off the ground with each step adds momentum and spring to your step. You can practice this first, by standing and lifting one heel off the ground by pushing down with your toes, alternating, going up on tip-tip one leg at a time. Then try walking as you use your toes more actively. It may feel odd at first, but it is worth playing with. You can also use your toes in this way to give added strength and momentum when climbing stairs. This active use of your toes and lower leg can help avoid overworking your thigh.



The Arch of the Femur – side view of left leg.

Some people tend to walk with their toes pointing either in or out (pigeon-toed or like a penguin). One way to correct this is to direct your knees straight-ahead as you walk, not worrying about your toes. When your knees are aligned, your feet naturally track forward. I have found that this method is often most easy

on the body. If you focus on controlling your feet, it can create tension in the hips. Try it and see what works best for you. The less tension we create, the more easy and natural our movement.

***A few more things to remember:***

- ❖ Try to keep your strides of equal length.
- ❖ Listen to your walk. Keep the sound of your footsteps quiet and even.
- ❖ Allow the back of your head to float behind you and your spine to lengthen easily.

One of Newton's basic laws of physics is that "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." Applied to walking, this explains that every time you step down, an equal *upward* force is transmitted through your body. This force is most direct and efficient when your body is well aligned. The points discussed so far help prepare you to feel the connection from your feet through your hips and your spine, propelling you forward and up. It takes practice, but it is worth playing with until you feel that lift: Your stride will lighten and energize.

***Other things to play with...***

- ❖ *Rehearse changes of position in your mind before you do them.* Imagining your movement first prepares your nervous system, muscles and bones for action. During recovery, it is easy to move too quickly without thinking. Turning abruptly, for example, can throw you off balance, forcing you to catch yourself, sometimes resulting in momentary or ongoing pain. Learning to move consciously will always benefit you. Before you move, imagine the easiest and most efficient way to accomplish the movement. Feel yourself doing it several times before you actually move, sensing the movement in your body. This rehearsal process is very helpful when shifting from one position to another is uncomfortable or awkward. For example, transitioning from sitting to standing. Take your time. Be patient and mindful. Allow your body to adjust to the new position. And, remember to be open to the possibility that you *can* move comfortably.
- ❖ *Remember to care for the joints neighboring any area of difficulty.* When one joint is hurt or immobilized your other joints may adjust by moving in new, sometimes awkward ways. This can create other discomfort and future problems. For example, my left hip was the original challenge. To compensate for limitation in my ability to rotate from my hip, my left knee exaggerated its natural range of movement for many years, weakening it somewhat. In addition, my right leg tends to be more tense out of habit because I depended on it so heavily before I became more aware. Now I take special care to keep those overworked places comfortable and continue to improve the way I move.

- ❖ *Notice your pleasure*, as well as your pain. Become aware of which parts of your body feel *good*. Learn from those places! What is a "good" feeling? What helps that good feeling exist? Can the feeling of goodness be expanded? Frank Wildman, Feldenkrais Method Trainer, has developed a pleasure/pain scale, which instructs the student to find two pleasurable associations with their body for every pain noted. Try this. Make up your own questions. Discover everything you can about your comfort.
- ❖ *Move to your favorite music*. Allow the music into your body. Feel how your body would like to move. Move with lightness. Let go of your ideas about how you should move. Enjoy yourself and your movement just as it is now.

Moving with awareness is a skill you can develop and a tool you can use anytime, anywhere to enhance your comfort and confidence. I encourage you to enjoy the process of discovering your inner resources.

## Orthopedic Psychology

review by Irene Alleger

## BookCorners

### Healing Hip, Joint, and Knee Pain

by Kate S. O'Shea

North Atlantic Books, P.O. Box 12327, Berkeley, California 94712 USA  
1998, softcover, \$14.95, 154 pp.

Orthopedic joint pain and disability affects a majority of our older population: arthritis, osteoporosis, hip dysfunction, knee problems, etc. The disability and pain suffered for years sometimes, often leads to depression and alienation from the body part that is causing the discomfort. The author of *Healing Hip, Joint, and Knee Pain* presents a body-mind approach that integrates the new research in this field to add a much-needed adjunct to drugs and surgery, for the orthopedic patient.

The author's intention in writing this book was to help the orthopedic patient to "go beyond the conventionally accepted level of recovery," and learn to give their bodies the time and attention to healing that our medical system does not encourage. Living in a busy world can make us feel that taking time to heal is unimportant or a sign of weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth as this book makes clear. People with disabling joint problems experience a lot of pain, and suppressing that pain with stronger and stronger drugs, does not lead to healing.

Orthopedic psychology is an evolving field dedicated to "the study of consciousness as it expresses, and is expressed by the condition and functioning of the skeletal system and its related structures." If you doubt your ability to improve your own condition, relying on pills and doctors to "fix" you, this book will teach you how to greatly improve your overall "balance," and ameliorate the pain level without drugs. More than that, it will introduce you to your body in a new way – emphasizing receptivity, patience, sensitivity to your body's signs of distress, and most importantly, the nurturing and attention – love, if you will – of your physical self.

Ms. O'Shea's own experience of having four orthopedic surgeries by the age of thirteen, to correct a congenital hip disorder was the beginning of a long journey to self-recovery. After being introduced to bodywork, she went on to investigate the connections between body and mind, and has been a Bodywork professional for 15 years now. Her techniques to engage the mind and emotions in the healing process have proven very successful in working with orthopedic patients.

A common result of surgery is for the patient to withdraw from their body, the source of pain and trauma, or to deny it. It is this separation that makes healing difficult, if not impossible. The author says "Moving back into your body mentally and emotionally after surgery or trauma is critical for complete healing...and requires increasing your bodymind awareness."

The chapter headings are intriguing: A Question of Balance: a discussion of mind-body research and the need to balance the technology and drugs of conventional medicine with appropriate "soft" care, using bodywork and meditation; Moving Back Into Your Body: you must be "present" to heal completely; Love and Acceptance: the author considers the "heart of health"; Supporting Yourself: your inner architecture, describing how the skeleton works; The Bermuda Triangle: pain, fear, and depression; Listening to the River: keys to self-awareness; Self in Motion: a set of tools for comfortable movement; Keeping Your Balance: An approach to maintenance; and Nourishment: spiritual "soul" food.

The chapter on pain, fear and depression is central to this book; fear and depression, in response to pain, accompany most orthopedic problems and these are rarely addressed by the patient's physician. Learning facts about anatomy and physiology helps the patient to appreciate the body's innate wisdom and systems of self-repair, and how techniques of stress reduction such as meditation

enhance the healing process. Ms. O'Shea gives clear explanations of how our bodies react to pain and fear, and how the practice of *awareness and nurturing attention* to the body greatly reduces pain and stress.

The author uses the Rosen Method of bodywork, which is based on the principle that *relaxation is the gateway to awareness*. Listening to the body with your hands, listening to your inner dialog, breathing techniques, and meditation and imagery, are all used to enhance the awareness, and compassion for oneself. The illustrated exercises and client histories make this book easy to read and understand.

I was very impressed with *Healing Hip, Joint, and Knee Pain*. The growing weight of mindbody research is apparent in the many recently published books incorporating this "old/new" knowledge, and Ms. O'Shea's book shows how it can be applied specifically to greatly improve recovery from orthopedic trauma and surgery. I would like to see this book recommended to every orthopedic patient after surgery, and it could undoubtedly enhance the quality of life for anyone suffering from orthopedic pain and disability.