# Massage Therapy Practice.com
## Client Self Care Manual

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Self Care for Neck Pain and Headaches

Neck pain and/or headaches are usually caused by myofascial trigger points in neck muscles, poor posture and stress and tension. These issues are often interwoven with the choices we make in our lives, from what we eat and drink, to how we plan (or don’t plan!) our day.

Massage therapy is invaluable at helping unravel the tangle of tense muscles, anxious thoughts and bad habits that set the stage for neck pain and headaches. Your massage therapist can help you relax and let go of tension. After each treatment she can teach you one or two strategies that you can use to deepen and prolong the effects of the massage. Over a treatment series you can gradually release your pattern of stress.

Stretching exercises can help release trigger points and tension that create pain in the head, neck or face. Stretching is probably the commonest strategy to release tension.

Muscles that commonly produce pain are the upper trapezius, levator scapula and the suboccipital muscles.

Breathing techniques release tense thoughts and feelings. When we breathe with the neck and shoulder muscles, breath re-training promises the first holiday these muscles have had in decades! This can be especially important if you are trying to recover from a whiplash injury.

There are three common breathing techniques: diaphragmatic, pranayama and sandbag breathing.

Postural improvement can take excessive loading off the neck muscles and spinal joints. This mechanical unloading decreases the physical stress on the neck and jaw.

Postural improvement is achieved by stretching short muscles, strengthening weak muscles and increasing body awareness.
Self Care for Neck Pain and Headaches, cont’d

**Relaxation** and shifting the balance of the nervous system toward reflection, balance and healing is vital in overcoming long standing neck pain and headaches.

This is a complex task that is supported in the massage therapy process as well as through self care such as periodic Epsom Salts baths, serenity rolling and cold abdominal washes.

**Diet** is very important in controlling stress and tension.

Regular meals, plenty of water, avoidance of candy, coffee and alcohol are vital habits for people wishing to improve their health and well being.

**Good self care habits** are important. Pacing to our day, regular exercise, sufficient sleep and the ability to say “No” are basic skills and habits most of us need to practice.

Everyone needs time for family, friends and relaxation. Sometimes we need to book this time and guard it protectively!

**Massage therapy** should be part of everyone’s wellness plan! The following questions are important to consider in terms of your treatment plan:

What frequency of massage is necessary when you are trying to change old patterns of long-standing tension and stress behaviors?

What frequency is necessary to support continued wellness?

What frequency is necessary when you are experiencing increased stress or challenges?

Don’t make taking better care of yourself something to get tense about!

There should be increasing ease and lightness in both your body and your mind if you are going about this the right way!
Improving Head and Neck Posture

The postural alignment of the neck is very important in terms of avoiding neck tension and headaches. Poor posture can even cause pain, tingling and numbness in the shoulders, arms or hands.

How we hold our body day-to-day is an automatic process. This is good, because we have many other things to think about! However, if we have awkward patterns or bad habits, they tend to be maintained over the months and years of our lives. This is true even if we exercise at a gym. Whatever posture we have when we exercise will tend to imprint itself further in our body.

There is also an intimate relationship between how we think and feel about ourselves and how we hold our bodies. If we are tense and anxious, then we tend to carry our shoulders up around our ears and draw our head forward. If we try to stretch tight muscles, but we don’t dismantle habitually anxious thought patterns then we will not make lasting change in our bodies.

Sometimes it is tightness or weakness in muscle that is maintaining poor posture. Sometimes it is tense and anxious thoughts that are the key factor. Usually it is a bit of both factors. Recognizing this helps both the client and massage therapist assume their rightful roles in the therapeutic process. The massage therapist doesn’t have to become a muscular steamroller squishing and stretching stubborn muscles. And the client doesn’t have to be a passive and dependent recipient of therapy.

Breathing Techniques Most people with head forward posture use their neck and shoulder muscles to breathe with. This pattern of breathing pulls the head down and forward. And the posture will not change if the breathing pattern doesn’t change. There are three common breathing techniques: diaphragmatic, pranayama and sandbag breathing.

Stretching releases tension within the muscles that are pulling your posture out of alignment. The muscles that normally need to be stretched in head forward posture include the upper trapezius, levator scapula, scalenes, suboccipitals and pectoral muscles.
Improving Head and Neck Posture, cont’d

Strengthening muscles

Once tight muscles have stopped distorting our posture, we still need strength to hold ourselves up! Muscles that commonly need to be strengthened include the inter-scapular muscles and the muscles at the back of the neck.

Changes in Awareness

We need to become conscious of our posture. Balancing a book on the head is a good way to do this.

We may also need to slow the pace of our lives (e.g. Epsom Salts baths) and re-framing how we conceive of the challenges in our lives are very helpful.

Many people start the postural improvement process in order to avoid neck pain or shoulder tendonitis. However, as the cat’s cradle of tense and tangled muscles unravel and the breath flows in a more relaxed natural way the body starts to decompress and people often find a lightness, ease and calm that they have never experienced before. Feeling good rather than avoiding feeling pain then becomes the motivational force for better self care!

Postural Improvement Checklist

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Sit with a comfortable upright posture. Allow your head to fall slowly toward your chest until the first feeling of tightness at the back of your neck. At the same time breathe out slowly and deeply.

Now, slowly roll your head and neck toward the right shoulder as you breathe in (arrows # 1, 2 above). Roll your head as far as you comfortably can, guided by a feeling of pulling on the opposite side of your neck (the left) or a bit of compression on the same side of your neck (the right). Stop at the point where your head is beside the shoulder. **Don’t roll backward from here!**

At this point, allow your head and neck to slowly roll toward the centerline again, as you breathe out (# 3, 4). Time your exhalation and your motion to coincide so that you have finished breathing out by the time your head is flexed forward in the midline of your body.

Continue the rolling motion toward the left shoulder as you begin inhaling again (# 5, 6). Complete the inhalation and the rolling at the same time. Now neck roll toward the midline and exhale at the same time (#7,8).

Continue rolling from side to side, inhaling as you roll toward the shoulders and exhaling as you roll toward the midline. As you proceed with the movements, let yourself breathe and move more and more slowly. Eventually, it should feel like your neck is moving without effort, almost as if it is the breath that moves the neck. Do the serenity roll for a couple minutes the first time and slowly work your way up to 5 minutes.

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Your next appointment is ___________________ at ___________________
Suboccipital Release

Purpose

To unlock tension in the muscles at the base of the skull

To relieve headaches at the base of the skull

To begin to change head forward posture

We can use our reflexive responses to breathing and eye movements to unlock muscles in this frequently stubborn region. As we look upward and breathe in, the muscles at the base of the skull become more tense. As we relax our gaze and breathe out these muscles relax.

To release these muscles allow your head to fall toward your chest to the first feeling of tension in the neck and/or the base of the skull. At this point—without changing the position of the head and neck—look up into your eyebrows. Take a deep breath in. Hold the gaze and hold the breath, just as long as you comfortably can (5 – 10 seconds is usually sufficient). Then exhale and let your eyes relax and unfocus.

You should feel that your head and neck fall gently to a lower position. Allow this to happen. At this point, look up again and breathe in. Study the tension in the base of your skull and back of the neck, for a moment. Then relax by exhaling and allowing your eyes to relax and unfocus.

Repeat this exercise several times until you feel substantially more relaxed at the base of the skull.

You should talk to your massage therapist if your suboccipital region doesn’t stay released. You may need more precise guidance or you may need to unravel a pattern of head forward posture that is putting chronic tension into these muscles.

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Your next appointment is _________________ at ___________________
Upper Trapezius Release

The upper trapezius is released by anchoring the shoulder girdle (by gently holding the chair seat) and pulling the head and neck away from the tight side. As you do this you should rotate your head toward the direction you came from (i.e. the tight side). You should feel a gentle pulling from the base of the skull and along the neck outward to the top of the shoulder girdle.

Breathe steadily and fully. As you breathe in you should feel the upper trapezius tensing slightly. As you breathe out the muscle should soften and lengthen slightly. Your head will naturally move a little more fully into the stretch position. Allow this to happen and continue for several breathing cycles.

Make sure all the muscles in your body that are not needed to hold you in this position are fully relaxed. If you feel pain during this process you are probably pulling too firmly.

Purpose:

To relieve neck pain and temple headaches

To bring the shoulders down from the ears

To begin decompressing a very tense neck

To help unravel head forward posture that may be causing headaches, jaw problems and nerve problems in the hands

Don’t try to force the release—you need to work with your body; not against it. If you get pain, tingling or numbness in the neck or hand, you should stop doing the exercise until you can check in with your massage therapist. You may need to do the stretch differently or do a less challenging neck stretch such as Serenity Breathing.
Levator Scapula Release

Purpose:

To relieve neck pain and burning at the shoulder blade
To relieve neck stiffness that occurs when you turn your head toward the tight side
To bring the shoulders down from the ears and decompress the neck
To help unravel head forward posture

The levator scapula muscle is released by lowering the scapula or shoulder blade as we turn our head and neck away from the tight muscle. The head is always turned toward the armpit opposite the side of the muscle you are releasing.

Make sure all the muscles in your body that are not needed to hold you in this position are fully relaxed. Make sure you breathe fully, deeply and slowly. As you feel the muscle relax you will notice your head moves more fully into the stretch position. Allow this to happen, as this signals that the muscle is relaxing and lengthening.

There are several options to the stretch position. The first option is to wrap your hand around the side of the neck to stabilize the facet joints that the levator scapula muscle attaches close to. Another option is to rotate your shoulder upward. This actually lowers the attachment point of the muscle on the shoulder blade. This variation can be a little tricky. If it doesn’t work for you, that is fine. You’ve got the other two options to work with.

If you are on the phone a lot, consider purchasing a hands-free head set. Then you won’t be tempted to hold the phone with your shoulder and tense up the levator scapula muscle!

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Your next appointment is __________________ at ___________________
Scalene Muscle Release

**Purpose:**

- To relieve neck pain and tingling/numbness in the arms/hands
- To decompress the neck
- To help unravel head forward posture.

The scalene muscles are released by stretching the head and neck to the opposite shoulder. Allow your head and neck to move just far enough to feel a comfortable stretch in the side you are moving away from. Hold the position for several breaths. If your breathing is full and relaxed, the scalenes will often release of their own accord. The first component of the release is for the middle scalenes (upper picture at right). Just allow your ear to move toward the opposite shoulder.

After you have achieved some good release with the middle scalene, turn your face to the direction from which you came to release the anterior scalenes (middle picture at right). These are the two parts of the muscle that are capable of compressing the nerves to the hands, so if you have carpal tunnel syndrome, it will be most important to achieve release in these two divisions of the muscle.

The last scalene you may need to release is the posterior scalene. From the middle scalene release position, rotate your head slightly toward the shoulder that you are leaning toward (picture at right).

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Your next appointment is ______________________ at ______________________.
**Strengthening the Neck**

**Purpose:**
- To strengthen the neck
- Help undo head forward posture
- Relieve chronic post-exercise soreness and fatigue in the back of the neck
- Provide stability for people with hypermobile neck joints

Put one or two hands behind your head and let your head tip forward slightly. At this point, slowly breathe in and push your head upward and backward against the resistance of your hand(s). Bring your head and neck fully upright as you complete the in-breath.

Then let yourself exhale as the hand(s) slowly overpowers the neck and the head is brought to the original forward position.

To summarize: Inhale, let the head overpower the hand as your spine lengthens and is brought to a tall position. Exhale, let the hand overpower the head and go forward into the head forward position. Repeat the cycle 8 – 12 times.

You should do this exercise once or twice a day for two weeks or until you can easily carry your head with good posture.

**At first, give your head and neck only gentle resistance with your hands since your neck muscles are not used to this type of exercise. At no point should you feel any buckling or straining sensations in the neck!**

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Book Balancing

Purpose:

To increase awareness of head and neck posture

To learn a new habit of carrying the head and neck with a relaxed buoyancy

Balancing a book or a bean bag or bag of rice on your head is a time-honored way to become aware of your posture. Place the object on your head and gently push it up toward the ceiling by lengthening your neck muscles. Hold this position for a minute or two.

When you can easily lift the object toward the ceiling whether you are standing or sitting, you can practice holding it in this way when you transition from sitting to standing and standing to sitting. Also practice while you walk.

Practice this awareness intervention with a “light touch”, making sure your body isn’t rigid but light and flexibly responding.

When to Practice:

Once or twice a day for two weeks or until you automatically carry your head and neck with good alignment.

Imagine the book on your head during the course of the day. Let your body respond to the invisible book whatever you are doing.

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