



BodyWork Will the Real Normal Please A s s o c i a t e s Stand Up! By Douglas Nelson

“Hey, I didn’t think I was sore until you started exploring my shoulders!” How many times I have heard those words. How is it that we could have such tightness and tenderness in our muscles and yet be so unaware of it? Is tension still a problem if we don’t know about it?

The answer is really fascinating (OK, everyone says I am easily fascinated) and lies in very interesting facets of our nervous system. It is said that the brain is always asking two questions of every stimulus; (1) What is it? and (2) What does it mean? Once the brain assigns meaning, the appropriate response can be acted upon.

Imagine muscular tension resulting from a period of overexertion or tension such as long hours in front of a computer trying to complete a project. In this case, the muscle tightness is assessed by the brain as having no impending threat, harmless in the short term. In such cases, the brain shoves the muscular tightness to the background, since it is not urgent and there are other things to concentrate on (like finishing that project!). The process of putting the muscle tension on automatic is called **habituation**.

Logically, you would assume that once the project is finished, the muscular tension would also recede. You would be wrong! You can only change what you notice. Once the process of habituation takes over, the brain considers the tension normal. To make matters even more intractable, mechanisms are also at work to solidify the tension, making muscle contraction economical to sustain. When the body/brain senses lines of held tension/stress, additional tissue is accumulated to lock in the tension/holding without sustained muscle contraction. That is why areas of tension can feel thickened. Ironically, both neural habituation and the tissue remodeling are supposed to conserve energy, but the net effect is to lock in the tension.

During your massage at BWA, your brain rediscovers the tension left in the tissue and amazing processes begin to affect change. Essentially, the brain resets the tension at a level that is appropriate to *current* data, rather than *historical* data. Perhaps it has been your experience to arise from the massage table feeling quite different; lighter, looser, moving with more ease.

A recent client remarked how different her shoulder felt after the previous session, but reported losing her sense of freedom of movement over the next week. Since we measured her shoulder range last session, I measured it again. Not only did she retain the gains we made, she actually increased them slightly. Plus, she had forgotten that she had not taken any pain meds, because she did not need them. While she thought she lost the freedom of movement, her brain habituated the new gains as “normal”. The process works in both directions!

Will the real normal please stand up!