

# Relieve neck pain

**CAROL KRUCOFF**, a yoga therapist with Duke Integrative Medicine, was an editor and reporter for the *Washington Post* back when the transition was made from typewriters to desktop computers. “When they converted to computers, there was little or no ergonomic sensibility,” she recalls. Long periods of sitting with poor posture, aggravated by the tension of constant deadlines, led to chronic neck pain and occasional headaches.

Regular yoga practice made a dramatic impact on Krucoff’s pain—and inspired her to write about health and wellness issues and eventually train in yoga teaching and therapy. Her recent book, *Healing Yoga for Neck and Shoulder Pain*, describes the physical and emotional mechanisms behind a common—and sometimes disabling—problem. Here, Krucoff offers helpful guidelines for alleviating pain and improving alignment:

## How forward holds us back

Ideally, the head should be balanced on top of the spine, but our everyday activities tend to drive it forward. “Almost every task we do, working on the computer, driving, picking up our children, cooking, rounds us forward,” says Krucoff. That awkward head posture, where the head protrudes in front of the shoulders, creates a great deal of tension in the neck and shoulders. “The average head weighs about 10 pounds—imagine a bowling ball perched forward on your neck for hours. The neck muscles must stay engaged to keep you from falling on your face.”



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## Crick fixes and shoulder soothers can be easier than you think.

Add to that precarious posture the physical effects of stress and tension. “We tighten in response to stress; when we’re frightened, a typical startle reaction is that our shoulders jump up to our ears. Many of us live in a chronic tension state, and this physical reaction becomes habitual—no wonder so many people are walking around in pain.”

### Tweak your settings

Modest adaptations to the spaces we inhabit most can help reduce harmful postures. Krucoff uses an editor’s desk, which angles her paperwork upward for optimal viewing, resulting in less craning forward on her part. “Look for ways to make your environment support what you’re doing,” says Krucoff. “I worked with a chemist who was using a microscope that she really had to contort her body to use. After a couple of years, she had terrible back and shoulder pain.” Part of the solution? A step stool. “It was simple, but it made a big difference.”

### Bad breath?

Deep, full breathing can enhance posture and promote relaxation—and it doesn’t always come naturally. “Perhaps the single most important thing I do is help people re-learn how to breathe properly,” says Krucoff. “Infants are masters—watch a baby breathing, and you’ll see the belly rise and fall with the breath. But many people forget this with age and become shallow chest breathers, sucking in their stomachs. Singers and musicians who play wind instruments are among the few who recognize that a full deep breath goes into the deepest portion

of the lungs, so that the belly rounds and the rib cage expands. It also really brings you into the present moment.”

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### Pay attention

That state of present awareness is the foundation of yoga, which Krucoff describes as “a discipline of getting to know yourself. It teaches being present in the moment and noticing what’s going on in your body, mind, and spirit.” She suggests these simple initial steps to help heighten awareness of how tension is affecting the body, especially the neck and shoulders:

1. Lie down or recline comfortably in a chair and find your breath, observing the body’s sensations as you breathe in and out.
2. Pay exquisite attention to your body, especially your upper body. Identify any areas of discomfort or tension and see if you can relax and release them.
3. Recall a distressing memory and notice what happens in your face, neck, mouth, shoulders, back, belly, and breath as you mentally relive it. Make note of your discoveries.

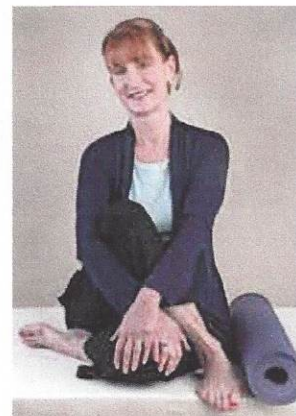
Recognize that the stressful event isn’t really happening; just thinking about

it is enough to create these effects in the body. Creating self-reminders can help counter them, says Krucoff. “Tell yourself, ‘Lips together, teeth apart,’ or, ‘Shoulders relax’—Cues that help break those habitual patterns of tension.”

### Movement as medicine

Krucoff’s book outlines a series of yoga-based activities to ease neck and shoulder pain, but you need not be an experienced practitioner to benefit. Yoga is accessible to everyone, Krucoff emphasizes. “A common excuse I hear is, ‘I’m not flexible enough,’ but it’s not just for the fit and flexible. I teach yoga to seniors regularly; if they can’t get down on the floor, they can practice sitting in a chair. Yoga is about balance and union—about strengthening what’s weak, stretching what’s tight.”

It doesn’t have to require a huge time commitment, either. “Even a five- to 10-minute daily practice can help you relieve pain and enhance health. Yoga helps us reconnect with body, mind, and spirit—and then we take those lessons off the yoga mat and into daily life.” ■



Carol Krucoff

### EVENT

Free talk! Hear Carol Krucoff discuss yoga for chronic pain at Duke’s Teer House. See page 23 for details.