

Aging Does Not Cause Stiffness: Stiffness Causes Aging

Jon Burras

You might feel burdened by the many aches and pains in your body that have besieged you for so many years now. You hobble through life with a depressed sense of your old self and a hopelessness that you can ever feel better. You blame your situation on "*Father Time*" who has finally caught up with you and has ripped your youthful body away. Each morning is a curse just to get out of bed. You avoid traveling or putting yourself in situations that might be too risky for a frail body like yours. You live on pain-killers just to get through each and every day.

This is how most people are taught to think about their bodies as they age. The common myth being told is that you are supposed to harden and stiffen as you age. This wide scale belief has put the finger of blame on the aging process for the decay of your body. From the media to the medical culture, you are taught to believe that you are supposed to stiffen and harden as you age and that pain and joint failure are natural.

The absurdity of this belief is rather pronounced. The reality is that aging is not responsible for the stiffening of your body. The aging process will intensify as the body becomes stiffer. The actions and thoughts one engages in throughout one's lifetime are chiefly responsible for the hardening and stiffening of the body. The number of calendar days one accumulates over time have little to do with the degeneration of the body. Stiffness comes first and then you will quickly age after that.

The human body is essentially like soft plastic. It can be shaped and contoured based on the forces being applied to it. Most people spend the majority of their lives practicing movements and activities that lead to stiff and hard bodies. This includes our current popular exercise practices of joining a gym and practicing cardio workouts and strength training. As you continue this practice you will only be adding more stiffness and hardness to your body. We are besieged by lies like the popular adage that "*a hard body is a healthy body.*" This is the furthest notion from the truth. Hardness is death to the body and all of its corresponding tissues.

If aging were responsible for the hardening and stiffening of your body then *everyone* who is alive or who has ever lived would have a hardened and tight body. This is not the case. There are many people who have many calendar days behind them who have maintained a youthful and flexible body. This would be impossible to achieve if age were solely responsible for the hardening of the body. In fact, the aging story is used so often to place blame on situations or conditions that are the direct result of our own doing. It is easy to blame age; it is not so easy to take personal responsibility for what is happening to you. "Age" has become another popular mythological entity, just like "*Mother Nature*" or "*The Grim Reaper.*"

There are five key reasons why the body hardens and stiffens as we get older. None of these reasons however has to do with the aging process itself. The five key ways

the body hardens are the following: *Trauma, repression, stress, inactivity and contractive movement.*

1. *Trauma*

A trauma to the body is any blow or fall that you have incurred. This could include sudden impact injuries like those that occur while engaging in competitive sports, repetitive impact like running, falls, car crashes, impacts by flying objects (like being hit by a baseball) or just slipping on an icy sidewalk. When the body experiences an impact trauma it does not just let it go right away. Some nagging pain or limitation in your movement that you have been blaming on the aging process might just be an old trauma injury that you might have even forgotten about. This injury is still alive in your body and creating enough stiffness to warrant your attention.

2. *Repression*

Repression is the action of using your own muscles to hold back your emotions. Muscles are used to express emotion. For instance, when you see a child or even an emotionally alive adult grieving, these individuals are using a full array of muscles to express that emotion. When you have learned to fear your own emotions you then utilize your muscles to hold back the waves of emotion. The longer this process ensues the stiffer your body becomes. In essence, you are now using your body to harden and contain any expression of emotion. What you might be calling the scourge of aging might be your own years of repression.

3. *Stress*

Stress is the emotion of fear. When you are engaged in a fear response, whether the fear is actual or imaginary, one of the consequences is for your muscles to harden. This is a self-protective process that was designed by nature to help protect one from a danger to one's life. The problem arises when most of our dangers are now imaginary (like worrying about not having enough time) and not actual threats (like a wild animal chasing after you). The longer your body remains in the stress response the harder and stiffer it becomes. What many refer to as a natural stiffness as they age is actually a life-time of constant fear being held tightly in the musculature.

4. *Inactivity*

Movement is one of the essential keys to life. With movement comes a natural warming and expression of the muscles and connective tissue. As muscles are used in activity, heat is created which keeps the tissues warm and in a fluid state. Inactivity will not allow this heat to be created and the muscles begin to harden and the connective tissue glues together. We have seen this phenomenon with people who are bed-ridden and develop bed sores. Inactivity begins a slow hardening and decay of the body that is often blamed on aging.

5. *Contractive Movement*

There is nothing worse than inactivity except the wrong kind of movements. Most of us were taught to move our bodies from the examples created by scientists in laboratories and warriors in training called athletic trainers. These

movements tend to harden and stiffen our bodies. They are called contractive movements. This is the classic gym workout where one is attempting to harden and tighten the body. Constant contractive movements over time only develop a hard and stiff body. While one might proclaim an acclivity to fitness, this type of movement will actually create a body that ages very quickly.

What most people do not realize is that the current trend in movement has created a stiffening, shortening and hardening of the body. This process is referred to as "*Hydrogen Bonding*." In hydrogen bonding, the layers of fascia in and around the muscles have fused together, dried out and have become something akin to "beef jerky." As this process continues over time, the muscles are denuded of moisture and they tend to dry out and compress the joints. Fitness, while much acclaimed as the antidote to aging, will actually increase the rate at which one ages because its fundamental principles entail that one harden and tight his or her body. What you have is a procession of people who have followed this principle only to continue to harden as they age. While strengthening the muscles might be one element of our overall health strategy, it should not be the primary element. A flexibility practice will create a more dynamic and alive body as one ages.

As most people harden and stiffen in their bodies, they begin to lose hope that they will ever return to their youthfulness. They live on pain-killers, high-tech treatments and the replacement of their joints. It is commonly believed that joints are supposed to fail as one ages. They are not. Joints are designed to remain healthy and pain free for the entirety of one's long extended lifetime.

When the body begins to fail people often give up and stop participating in activities that brought them joy in the past. They stop golfing and playing tennis while they discontinue swimming and hiking. They fold up their dancing shoes, put away their bowling balls and just sit back and hold on tightly until the end. They age more rapidly when the body begins to stiffen and harden as they now have lost what used to provide them fun and now feel hopeless in their body.

There is a better way. This better way is to follow the laws of nature and watch animals move. Animals often will stretch and move their bodies to loosen up. We should follow their examples. We need to move our bodies in order to maintain our optimal health. However, the right kind of movement will be most beneficial and will reverse the affects of aging. This type of movement is what is called "expansive movement."

There is a very simple recipe to keep the stiffness away. This recipe is *bodywork* and *expansive movement*.

Bodywork

Stiffness does not have to harbor in your body. There are many healing therapies that begin to open up and release the tight and restrictive patterns that have settled into the musculature and connective tissues of the body. These healing modalities might include (but are not limited to) such techniques as Swedish massage, Thai massage, Connective Tissue Bodywork (like Rolfing, Hellerwork or Myofascial Release) or Reiki energy healing. The traumatic injuries and layers of repression must be escorted out of the body for the freedom of movement to be attained. No matter how young or old, a

consistent bodywork practice will greatly reduce the stiffness in the body and return the body's tissues to a healthier state. (It has been reported that noted comedian Bob Hope received a massage every day. He lived to be one-hundred years old).

Expansive Movement

For movement to be an effective healing modality it needs to be considered "expansive" in its nature. The emphasis in these practices is to energize and liquefy the body tissues and not harden and stiffen them. The goal is to bring fluid and elongation to a body that has begun to petrify into a "beef jerky" state. Some of these expansive movement practices might include yoga, Feldenkrais, expressive dancing or Continuum movement. The essence of expansive movement is to repair and stretch the hardened and stiffened body. In some instances, you will be re-educating muscles that are frozen in a contractive state and have lost their ability to fully function.

Yoga is not just another form of exercise; yoga is a way of life to stay healthy and ward off the stiffness that most people begin to experience as they age. I have often heard it said by many people who consider themselves to be very logical, "I can't do yoga because I am already very stiff." Where is the logic in that statement? If we were to follow that same logic into other aspects of our lives (like money for instance), we would say, "I have never had any money so I guess I will never have any money." Again, not very logical.

You have to start somewhere. When you begin to move your body in an expansive fashion you begin a lifestyle of aliveness and vitality. Injuries begin to disappear and a renewed sense of youthfulness will enshroud you. With consistent bodywork treatments you will isolate old injury patterns and begin to heal them. A cautionary note, this is a long-term process and not a short whimsical experiment.

When it comes to our bodies, most people are being guided off course like a giant cargo tanker adrift in the ocean. It may take awhile to get your body back on course and moving in the right direction. Over night success is not the goal; long-term aliveness is the goal.

Here is a lesson on how to transform your body and your life using the gym workout example. If you have one hour to spend at the gym the vast majority of people will divide that time between a series of (1) strength training exercises and (2) cardio fit workouts. How much of that one hour is spent in expansive movement or stretching? For most people, very little time is actually spent stretching their bodies. A more life-giving use of your time would be to spend ten minutes doing cardio workouts, ten minutes participating in strength training *and forty minutes stretching or practicing yoga*. Your body would be better served in the long run with this kind of stimulation. If you continue to harden and tighten your body with your workouts you will end up with a hard and tight body and continue to worry about how aging is quickly eroding your once youthful shape.

No matter what exercises or activities you might engage in, most people do not spend enough time stretching. Whatever name you might call it (yoga, athletic stretching etc.), this is often a missing link in our health and wellness. The long-term consequences can be quite alarming when you allow your body to continue to harden and stiffen.

The lessons are very simple. Like a flock of birds flying in the wrong direction, we have been off course for many years now. We have been guided into practices and routines that have only increased how rapidly we age by deliberately tightening and stiffening our bodies. This does not have to happen.

Age does not cause stiffness. The beliefs and practices that you are engaging in are the underlying factors in a stiff and tight body that begins to decay as one ages. There are some very simple solutions to this dilemma. Stop blaming aging on why you are so stiff and in pain. Start taking the steps to reverse this predicament.

Everything in life changes, including your body. How you change as you age is completely up to you. You can live a life where you get stiffer, tighter and more decayed in your body. You can also live a life where you become more alive, more flexible and more joyful in your body. The choice is yours. Aging is not the problem. The choices you are making on a daily basis might certainly be at the root of your problem. There is no better time than today to begin turning your ship in the right direction.

Resources

Feldenkrais (Feldenkrais.com)

Rolfing (Rolf.org)

Hellerwork (Hellerwork.com)

Continuum (Continuummovement.com)

Myofascial Release (Myofascialrelease.com)

The Power of 10, Adam Zickerman (book)

Reiki.org

JonBurras.com