

BACK PAIN

The 6 Habits That Can Change

EVERYTHING

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INTRODUCTION

Bad news first. Most of us have or will have back pain at some point in our lives. If back pain was easy to manage, you probably wouldn't be reading this book. You're not alone. In healthcare there has been significant progress made in our ability to treat various medical conditions that would have been considered a miracle centuries ago. We now have advanced technology and MRIs to visualize the anatomy and pathology of the body and are performing bigger and better operations. Even with this advanced technology, we are only able to definitively diagnose the specific pathology of the spine in a very small percentage of cases making back pain one of the most difficult regions of the body to manage. On top of that, evidence shows the specific 'treatment' one receives depends more on what type of healthcare provider they see rather than what the *root cause* of their back pain is, choose wisely!

Now, on to the good news. Back pain is a symptom, not a disease. While it would be wrong to attempt to 'cure' something that isn't a disease, we can and have most definitely improved in our ability to manage back pain symptoms. Some encouraging statistics show that less than 1% of back pain cases are due to *serious* spinal disease such as a tumor or infection, less than 1% is due to inflammatory disease, and less than 5% is true nerve root pain.* This means that most back pain is what we call ordinary back pain, even if it feels anything but ordinary at this point in time. Most cases won't require surgery, injections, or even pain medications with the proper management and understanding. That is some good news!

Prior to attempting to practice the following 6 habits, be sure you're safe to move forward by reviewing the following signs and symptoms. Please see a physician prior to participating if you are experiencing any of the following 'red flags' including, but not limited to, pain from recent trauma such as a fall, constant or progressive pain that doesn't change or fluctuate with change in position, mid-back pain only, you are systemically unwell such as having unintended rapid weight loss, or you are experiencing difficulty with bowel or bladder function.

*Waddell, G. (2004). The Back Pain Revolution. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Roberts graduated from Liberty University with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Kinesiology. He then earned his Doctor of Physical Therapy from Lynchburg College. He practiced 'Travel' Physical Therapy contracts in Denver, New York, Orlando, Chicago, and Dallas. The variety of clinical experiences and professional mentors sharpened Dr. Roberts' skill set and clinical expertise. Dr. Roberts has settled into Kansas City with his family and his passion for delivering the type & quality of care that his clients deserve has led to his own practice, RobertsPT. With certifications in Active Release Technique, Titleist Performance Institute, and Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, Dr. Roberts is able to provide specialized therapies for a variety of patients. He also has a special interest in decreasing pain, increasing speed, and achieving longevity in the golf community. When not helping patients, Dr. Roberts enjoys spending time with his amazing wife & daughter, connecting with his church community, playing golf, staying active, and studying his Physical Therapy textbooks- seriously!

relational
care

HABIT 1

Just Do It

I'm often asked what is the best thing I can do when experiencing back pain? My first answer is simple, keep moving! I'm going to borrow Nike's slogan and say, 'Just do it.' I have some patients that become very fearful of moving because they don't want to 'hurt' their back even more. This translates into spending weeks on the couch, not exercising or performing activities like they were before, and 'protecting' their back. If you have a back injury that just happened, rest is only recommended for the first few days. Then, returning to prior movements, even when they hurt, is encouraged as quickly as possible. We now know that bed rest has many detrimental effects on the body and laying on a couch or in bed for prolonged periods of time should be avoided as much as possible. In other words, 'motion is lotion for your body'.

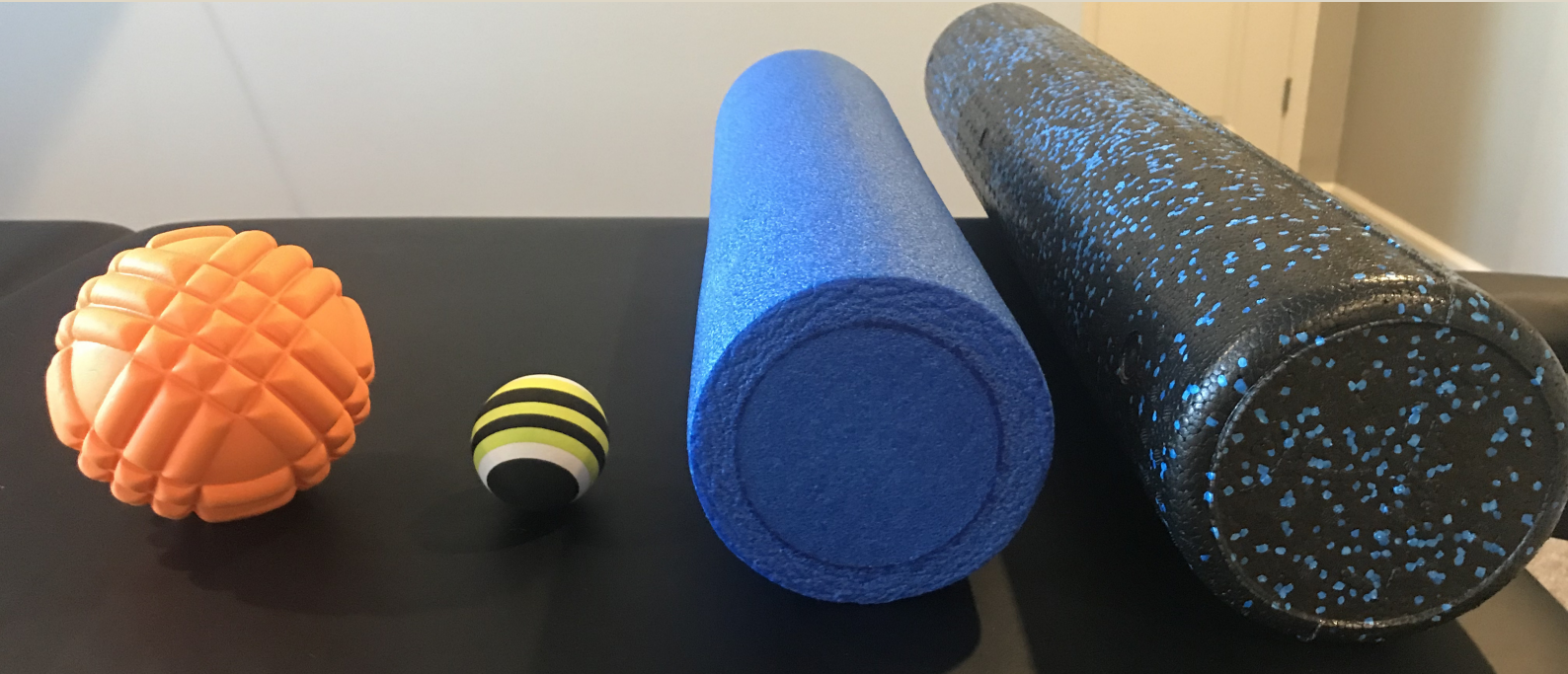
This principle of movement is seen in the following example. An 84-year-old woman who fractured her femur (the long bone in your thigh) after falling had surgery to repair it. The same day of her surgery two physical therapists came to her bedside and said, "Okay Linda, we're here to get you walking again." She looked at them in astonishment: "But I can't walk, I've broken my hip." "We know," they replied, "but you've had your operation, and you've got a pin to hold the bone in place." "But I can't walk," she repeated. "We know, but we're here to help you." In a final protest the patient said, "But it's still painful". The physical therapist replied, "Yes, we expect some pain at this stage but the pain won't stop you from walking."

The physical therapists in our example concentrated on getting the patient walking again, even when it hurt, because they knew that moving gives her the best chance of getting mobile, independent, and back to her home. What a contrast this approach is with how most people handle back pain and think they need to rest more! The same exercise principles should be applied to back pain – keep moving, just do it!



HABIT 2

Roll Out the Muscles



Whenever we injure our back from either a one-time incident, a repetitive movement done over and over, or a constant pressure/tension injury from prolonged faulty postures, our bodies enter what we call the cumulative injury cycle. The cumulative injury cycle is a self-perpetuating and downward spiral of injury characteristics to our muscles. Depending on what the initial injury was, the muscle surrounding that region goes through a cycle of inflammation. Over time inflamed muscles become weak, and weak muscles become tight, which leads to increased muscle tension, which leads to decreased circulation to the muscle, which leads to fascial restrictions. Unfortunately, it doesn't end there. This will now lead to further muscle weakness, tightness, tension, and so on if you don't break out of the cycle.

One thing to help break out of this cycle, is to utilize a foam roller or trigger point massage ball, both of which can easily be found online or at your local sporting goods store. The purpose of applying a prolonged pressure to the area helps the muscle to relax. By allowing the muscles to relax, blood flow begins circulating better to that area reducing the painful stimulus and stopping the downward spiral by allowing for normal movement in that muscle to take place. Typically, this is best done in the morning when your muscles are stiff after waking up, and in the evening when your body has gotten tight and uncomfortable from the demands of work and lifestyle throughout the day. If you don't own a foam roller or trigger point ball as pictured above, you can also use a tennis ball, or a 2-5 inch inflatable toy ball.

Begin by laying on the floor with the foam roller or trigger point massage ball underneath a tender area in the muscles of the low back or hip region. If this is too painful to tolerate, stand up and place the ball or foam roller between you and the wall. Lean against the wall to modify the pressure. Hold this position for 1-3 minutes or until you feel a releasing sensation of the tissue for a total of three times on each point of tenderness. To progress after the muscle relaxes from the prolonged pressure, add in arm movements and leg movements while you're on your back such as reaching arms overhead into a "V" for the upper back or alternating leg lifts with the knees bent 90 degrees. Repeat these movements 3-5x each or until mobility increases and symptoms decrease.

HABIT 3

Live in Neutral Spine

Neutral spine is THE position to live in. Medically it's defined as the midrange of a spinal segment in which no stress is placed on the passive osteoligamentous structures supporting the spine. In other words, our spine has natural curves from the upper part of the neck, all the way down to our tailbone. These natural curves are incredibly designed to aid in absorbing shock and forces through the spine and it's imperative that we maintain these natural curves throughout our day. Your job is to find the exact neutral spine position for your spine that relieves all tension from the passive support system structures. With time and practice, you will learn to know exactly where this is for you.

Finding the neutral spine is possible for each region including the lumbar, thoracic, and cervical regions and involves first learning how to isolate that region. If one region is out of alignment, it is likely that there are compensatory deviations in the alignment throughout the spine. Therefore, total alignment correction of all regions of the spine should be emphasized. Here, we'll discuss the lumbar region.



Pelvic Tilts - First in sitting, try to roll the pelvis forward and backward to isolate an anterior tilt (increased lordosis or increased curvature) and posterior tilt (decreased lordosis or decreased curvature). This can also be done in a quadruped position (on hands and knees) which may be easier to 'feel' the difference in the spinal alignment due to the effects of gravity. Practice the full ranges of anterior and posterior tilts. Then, from the anterior tilt position, go halfway flat or to the mid-range of your spinal motion. Congratulations, this mid-range, mild lordotic position is the neutral spine. This position can be further confirmed in two ways: One, you may experience a decrease in symptoms or no symptoms at all if maintained. Two, if you were to stand against a wall, slide your hand between the small of your back and the wall. You should be able to feel pressure on both sides of your hand putting your lumbar spine in that mild lordotic or neutral spine. If you're having difficulty getting into this position, it may be due to a motor control dysfunction of your body not knowing 'how' to disassociate the lumbar spine from the rest of your spine. It may be due to not having the mobility in the muscle, connective tissue, or vertebral segment to physically get into that position. In these scenarios it is advised to see a physical therapist who has a good understanding of proper spinal alignment. The goal of neutral spine is to maintain that position throughout your everyday tasks of sitting, standing, bending over to pick things up off the floor, playing golf, etc. Basically, you need to live in neutral spine.

HABIT 4

Progress With a Plan



Now that your muscles are rolled out and you're ready to keep moving, even if it hurts, while maintaining a neutral spine position, how often and how much should you move? For this answer, I want you to apply the principle of progressive overload. Progressive overload means your activity levels should increase through planned fixed increments over time to consistently challenge your body with a new stimulus to produce positive change. This is so important because our bodies are incredible at adjusting to the demands we place on it.

The starting point of your plan depends on your initial level of conditioning. If we were to take walking for example, for some individuals, a great place to start is 10 minutes a day at a pace that you can easily hold a conversation with someone. Every week or two, increase either how long you walk, how brisk you walk, or a combination of the two. After each day of walking write down in a simple notebook how far you walked, and how long it took you (even if its “to the mailbox” or “to the end of the road and back”) rounded to the nearest minute or half minute. The most important part of your plan is that you track your activity. Tracking is the key to seeing how you are progressing and provides an element of accountability. The hope is that through tracking, you will begin to see small steps of consistent progress over time.

Eventually, your goal for a walking/jogging program should be 20-30 minutes for 3-5x/week. If you like riding bikes or swimming, the same principles of progression and tracking apply. If you feel like you have progressed as far as you can in one particular activity, maintain that level or get creative and try another form of exercise to continually challenge your body for positive results. Not only does our body respond the best to these variations, but it keeps exercising fun and encourages you to keep moving and not become ‘bored’ with your routines.

HABIT 5

Work Smarter, Not Harder

Most people that I know, health conscious or not, would not walk into a weight room and try to lift the heaviest weight they can on their first repetition of their first set, for fear of injuring something. Most people would acknowledge it would make more sense to warm up the muscles through a quick and simple warm-up with a few lighter or easier movements first, right? Unfortunately, this exact scenario takes place outside of the weight room all of the time with active adults. They try lifting things around the house such as a couch when something slides underneath it, moving heavy boxes overhead from upstairs to downstairs, lifting a lawnmower from the ground to the back of the truck, or stepping up to the first tee and swinging a driver as hard as possible after sitting in their car for 30 minutes.



Working smarter not harder means pausing and asking yourself if you are putting yourself in the above weight room scenario. If you think you are, work smarter by doing these two things. First, warm up. Give your body a chance to acclimate to the intended task by performing easier/lighter movements first, even if it takes 30 seconds and you feel silly doing it, trust me, there's benefit. Secondly, modify the task. From the examples above, modifying would mean to use a dolly to lift the couch, pay someone \$40/hour to move the boxes for you, use a ramp to get the lawn mower in the back of the truck, or make a point to arrive earlier to the golf course to get some swings in. Be creative, there are numerous ways to give your muscles and body a quick warmup prior to a task and countless ideas to help modify a task to prevent injury. These steps might sound like common sense but working smarter not harder takes a conscious effort, your back will thank you later!

HABIT 6

Talk to Dr. Roberts



My hope is that you will see progress just by implementing the five habits above. However, I understand that it may not work for all of you, or get you that final 10% you're looking for. There are a number of you who are health conscious and aware of your body, your anatomy, and how to look up exercises and videos to 'self-treat'. You may have even tried a variation of these strategies in the past but are not happy with the results you've seen or felt. While it's one thing to consume more information like this book and watch more self-treatment videos online, it's another to implement it correctly. Perhaps conceptually you are on the right track, but what positions you think your body is in, and what positions your body actually is in, may be totally different. I see this often when I complete an evaluation and show the client video feedback of themselves and hear the all too common, "Oh wow, I didn't know I looked like that!"

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, did you know that back pain may be the *source* of your pain, but that doesn't always mean that your back is the *cause* of your pain? This is a concept known as regional interdependence. Basically, movement dysfunctions from anywhere in your body can potentially affect what goes on in the lumbar spine. For example, some people come to see me and say they have a 'low back' problem. When in reality, the low back was the good guy, that was being perceived as the bad guy, because it was being asked to do things it wasn't designed to do because of dysfunctions in the surrounding regions such as the thoracic spine and hips. These individuals already had a great 'low back core strengthening' program, but until they addressed the limitations I identified during my evaluation of the regions surrounding the low back, only then were they able to see results.

WHY PHYSICAL THERAPY

Physical Therapy is the most cost effective, most conservative, and most effective treatment for back pain.

A PERSONAL NOTE FROM DR. ROBERTS

I became a physical therapist because connecting with people is what I enjoy doing most! On your first visit, we go through an in-depth evaluation from head-to-toe in order to assess how you are moving and give you a picture of the current state of your body. After the evaluation, we discuss what activities and tasks you desire to do more efficiently with reduced pain and how we can keep you doing those activities you love for years to come. Once we establish these two components of where you are currently and where you would like to be, I help you bridge the gap with my services.

DID YOU KNOW

You don't need a referral from a physician before speaking with me?
Call 214-998-9904 today to learn more about a FREE Discovery Session to discuss the best options to end your back pain.

I look forward to serving you soon,
Dr. Wade Roberts

