

Chiropractic, with a Twist

by Alyssa Giacobbe



Plagued by mysterious pain since high school, our writer finds relief in network spinal analysis

BACK ON TRACK
Fixing back problems improves overall health, say NSA practitioners.

It was a week after I got my license. One wrong turn (me), one speeding car (the other guy), and bam—I'd landed in the hospital with two hip fractures, a bruised kidney, and a broken pelvis. I was sentenced to crutches for five months and endured my high school years with the nickname Alyssa Andretti.

About a year later, I began experiencing a pain on the left side of my abdomen. It wasn't in my stomach, it

was too high to have anything to do with my ovaries, and a battery of tests ruled out intestinal disorders. Having found nothing amiss, doctors concluded I was plain old constipated. "Eat more fiber," they said. And that was that.

Sixteen years later, the pain remained—sometimes sharp, sometimes dull. I gave up trying to erase it long ago and instead learned to live with it. Back in high school, no one thought to consider that the discomfort might be related to my accident. But recently, I visited a naturopath who raised this possibility. So I began considering new ways to treat that old injury.

On the advice of a friend, I ended up at the Newton, Massachusetts office of Julie Burke, a chiropractor who has practiced a technique called network spinal analysis (NSA) for nearly two decades. Founded in the early 1980s by chiropractor Donald Epstein and used by more than 400 chiropractors across the United States, NSA employs precise, gentle adjustments (no heavy "cracking") to reduce tension on the nerve tissues

caused by both physical and mental stresses. Easing this tension allows the nervous system to function optimally and opens the “respiratory wave,” the natural movement of the spinal bones that should occur with each breath. The resulting increase in energy and breathing capacity, say proponents, helps sustain all-around good health.

While Epstein developed NSA for use by chiropractors, there’s debate over whether it’s a chiropractic method or a separate healing discipline. (NSA isn’t recognized as an approved chiropractic technique by some state boards, and some insurance companies don’t reimburse for treatment.) While traditional forms of chiropractic rely on standard manual adjustments, practitioners of NSA use a different technique. “A chiropractic degree is required to study and practice NSA, but NSA must be seen as a different discipline,” says Robert Cooperstein, director of technique and research at Palmer College of Chiropractic. Different or not, I’d heard enough good reports that I was eager to give it a try.

Subtle but Powerful

Having never been to a chiropractor of any kind, I had no idea what to expect from my first appointment. Before we began treatment, Burke used a computer-generated analysis to examine my posture and range of motion.

The results were fascinating—and alarming. In normal position, my shoulders and neck were pushed forward from spending long hours working on a computer. The resulting “interference” on the nervous system might be affecting my digestion, causing my abdominal discomfort. What’s more, my back displayed early signs of os-

teoporosis. “But I’m only 31!” I said. “It’s very common,” Burke replied. “Few of us have perfect posture, and early signs of osteoporosis can begin in your late twenties.” But as she explained it, just as having tires aligned on a car prevents wear, correcting posture imbalances now will help prevent long-term degeneration—not to mention ease my immediate pain.

After this assessment, Burke guided me to a cot, where I lay face down, fully clothed, as she pressed her hands to my spine and observed my breathing. Adjustments came every few minutes and felt like fingers snapping ever so gently along the surface of my back. At points, the change was profound: My breathing opened up, as if I could transport air from the lowest depths of my abdomen to the top of my head. This is the sort of change Burke looks for. “Once I see a patient start to breathe more freely,” she says, “I know I’m on the right track.” At the end of a session, which can last from 15 minutes to an hour, I felt revived.

For the first month, I saw Burke two to three times a week. Most days I shared the room with other patients, standard in NSA. At first, I could feel the effects while in the office, but they seemed to fade when I returned to my everyday life. One morning after a major adjustment, however, I awoke to find my entire right side stiff; I called the office in a mild panic and was told it might indicate that my body had begun using muscles differently—a good sign. I spent most of the day lying on my back, but when I got up later that day, I felt more energetic than I had in a long time.

A month into treatment, a computer reevaluation revealed that my

DIY adjustments

We all know that sitting for extended periods doesn’t do our health any favors. “Being in situations in which we’re not allowed to move around freely creates spinal and respiratory tension,” says practitioner Julie Burke. Done regularly, these three on-the-go moves will improve your breathing and the health of your spine.

IN FRONT OF THE TV Lie on your back and place one hand over the other just below the collarbones, palms down. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth three times, and observe the movement. Repeat with your hands at the solar plexus, and again at the navel, directing the breath toward any blockages.

AT YOUR DESK Place one ankle on the other knee. Sitting upright and keeping your spine straight, lean your torso forward. Alternate legs. Do this at least three times a day.

IN THE AIR During flight, place your carry-on in front of you and place one foot on top of it. This changes the angle of how you sit, causing less stress on your body and easing your transition from air to ground.

alignment had improved drastically: My upper back was less rounded, and the curves in my lower back were closer to normal. Had I not seen these improvements with my own eyes, I might not be convinced. But the proof is there, and so is an ever-increasing awareness. I find I stand straighter, and though I still have a tendency to slouch, I’m more aware of how the slouching affects my breathing. Generally, I feel emotionally lighter—happier, I guess—and people notice.

Best of all, my abdominal pain has been reduced to a mere twice a week. And when it does show up at all, it’s much less intense. “Hippocrates declared, ‘Look to the spine for the cause of disease,’” Burke said. That guy was onto something.

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