

Back, neck pain: The missing piece

I see a lot of patients with back and neck pain who are frustrated with their condition. They've tried yoga, Pilates, lifting weights, core training — nothing seems to help. And sometimes exercise even makes it worse. They are at a loss about their pain, and are ready to give up, just assuming they have a "bad back."

But this isn't usually the case; they are just coming at it from the wrong angle.

They assume that their pain comes from muscles that are too tight or weak, so the answer must be to exercise them, strengthen the core, stretch the tight hamstrings, etc. And when that doesn't work, well, the problem must be structural — arthritis, ruptured disk, torn tendons, etc — so there really isn't much to be done.

The reason for this dilemma is most patients (and doctors, for that matter) do not consider the joints when they think of back and neck pain. This makes sense; most doctors are not trained to evaluate spinal joints. But they are a major cause of pain, and if they are not treated, the patient will not recover completely.

For years, doctors of chiropractic have compared joint alignment with car tire alignment. The comparison is oversimplified but can be used for our purposes. If your tires are out of alignment, it only makes sense that the harder and faster you drive the car, the more stress there will be on the tires and all their supporting structures. The same is true for our bodies. If a joint is not working properly, and you increase the demand on it by exercising, the result is more inflammation and pain. This also affects the nearby structures. Conditions such as tendonitis, bursitis and even arthritis (the "itis" at the end of the word means inflammation) are often caused by secondary stress from a joint that is dysfunctional.

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MICHAEL NOONAN

The safety net at the corner bar

It was only 5:30 in the evening, but Rollie's was already packed when Douglas and I stepped in for a pre-show cheeseburger. If you're not from the midcoast, you may not be familiar with this raucous Belfast sports bar, a long-time fixture on Main Street that attracts the locals with a bunch of big TV screens, a menu of reliably good bar food, and a friendly, fast-moving staff that makes you feel like a regular even if you only drop in once or twice a year.

We hoped we would be ahead of the Friday night crowd, but the place was hopping. All the booths were taken, and all the bar stools, too. So we sidled into a couple of open seats at the long center table where you find yourself nestled up next to total strangers. Many conversations and casual friendships have been struck up at this convivial communal table.

On this night, we found ourselves chatting with a quiet, bearded gentleman somewhat older than we are. He was there on his own, nursing a beer and keeping an eye on a college football game. Gradually, we learned that he was retired after a long career in teaching. He had been active in local government and was well known about town. He was divorced and lived alone. A few years ago, he had suffered a stroke that left him weakened but still able to walk, drive and live independently.

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MEG HASKELL



ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

Gerry Saunders (left) works with Colby Johnson, 15, to shape boards at the Penobscot Marine Museum's Hamilton Educational Center in Searsport recently. A group of retirees is working with students from Searsport District High School to build boats.

A hands-on heritage

Retirees work on boat-building with high school students

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

SEARSPORT — One at a time on a recent weekday at noontime, a handful of older adult volunteers filtered into the quiet workshop of the Hamilton Learning Center at the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport. Anticipation hung in the air as the group — four men and one woman — slipped dusty work aprons over their heads and tied the strings behind them.

Hand tools for woodworking — planes, chisels, mallets, screwdrivers — were neatly organized along the wall. Large worktables held strips of high-grade marine plywood and more tools. A bandsaw stood in one corner. Two wooden forms held the upside-down beginnings of a couple of small wooden boats — graceful, 11-foot sailing dinghies designed by the late Joel White.

Watch the video
bangordailynews.com

Promptly at noon, a yellow school bus pulled up outside. Out spilled 10 sophomore geometry students from nearby Searsport District High School, along with their teacher, Kyle Kuvaya, who teaches an elective class called The Geometry of Boatbuilding. "It's showtime," called one of the volunteers, and the action began.

The teenagers trooped through the door, donned their own work aprons and crowded around one of the big work tables, with the volunteers looking over their shoulders. Master boat-builder Greg Rossel of the WoodenBoat School in Brooklin, who heads up the collaborative project between the high school and the Penobscot Marine Museum, led a quick math lesson in measure-



Lora Mills (center) supervises while Shane Reynolds (right), 16, makes anchors and David Estes, 15, watches.

ment and perspective, using a graphic tool he called "the incredible diminishing pyramid" to illustrate.

Then the students — both boys and girls — picked up their eye goggles and earplugs and split into groups of two and three, each assigned to one of the volunteers.

Getting to work

The boat-building collaborative in Searsport is in its sixth year, and is seen by some as a precursor to a proposed magnet school for the marine trades. Students enroll in Kuvaya's class as a hands-on alternative to the standard geometry curriculum. They spend half the school year in the high school classroom.

"Then they come in here for the second half to learn the practical applications and gain a better understanding of the concepts they've been learning in math class," Kuvaya said.

Each session in the workshop starts with a short lesson in mathematics, chemistry, physics, navigation or other topic related to the boat-building process. The students also learn about the marine heritage of their hometown and other cultural aspects of the seafaring world.

Two different groups of volunteers come in to help each week — one on Tuesdays and one on Thursdays, with a mashup of whoever is available on alternate Fridays.

On this day, at one of the big tables, Pete Jenkins, 69, a retired industrial arts teacher from Prospect, supervised the measuring, marking and chiseling of a tapered rabbet, or recess, along the edge of a plywood piece for the side of one of the boats.

"I haven't actually done this before, so I'm just learning, too," Jenkins confided to his students, eliciting smiles.

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Husband's pocket junk revives an old grief

I opened the box filled with my husband Jim's "pocket junk" and bric-a-brac from the kitchen. I'd filled it shortly after he died of pancreatic cancer in December 2010, and then tucked it away. But now, it was time to sort through it, save what I must and throw out what I could.

I wasn't prepared for the sensations I experienced when I opened the box. I suddenly could feel Jim's presence in the kitchen that I'd claimed as my own. I could hear his voice, smell his scent, feel the warmth of life pulsing through him and the touch of his skin. The last five years I've lived without him melted away, and I felt like he would walk into the kitchen from the living room at any moment and ask me what I was doing with his stuff.

I was sitting at my kitchen table with my friend Alice when I

opened that box. Goodness, I'm glad I was sitting.

Many of the things in the box were "signature" items I considered part of Jim's identity, and they brought him back to me so tangibly that I felt grief-stricken all over again. I looked at Alice, whose calm demeanor buoyed me to the present, and to my appointed task. With my stomach in a knot, I picked up each item, felt it in my hands and decided its fate.

The miscellaneous screws, new and bent nails, molly bolts, wire nuts, and the like were easy to keep or discard, depending on how specialized they were and my need for them.

Other things were more personal and more difficult: Jim's blood glucose monitoring stuff, his mustache trimmer in its charger, the many almost used-up and slightly bent Xacto knives he brought home with him from work in his pocket, his watch with its broken strap, an old pair of glasses, a steel measuring tape he prized, various jackknives and cigarette lighters, loose change, earplugs



JULIE HARRIS | BDN

Julie Harris' dogs Sassy and Bullet settle next to her husband Jim's hunting boots after Julie found them in the hall closet. Jim died of pancreatic cancer in December 2010.

(he was a retired pressman), his MP3 player, and his old Leatherman multi-tool that had a broken tip.

I kept one Xacto knife, one jack-knife and one cigarette lighter, and they, along with his watch, old glasses and Leatherman, will go into his jewelry box for now. When I can, I will donate his glasses to help someone else. Earplugs are useful at flyball (remember the dog relay-racing sport)

tournaments where dogs bark with abandon. The steel measuring tape stays, as does the MP3 player. The rest was discarded.

Is this what we come down to? A box of bric-a-brac? Life felt so futile in those moments of deciding what stays and what goes, yet I managed to take comfort in the signature items, even as they tore at my heart while I held them lovingly in my hand.

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