



Find out why integrating movement into your holistic health plans is just as critical as eating nutritious food, getting restful sleep, and managing stress.

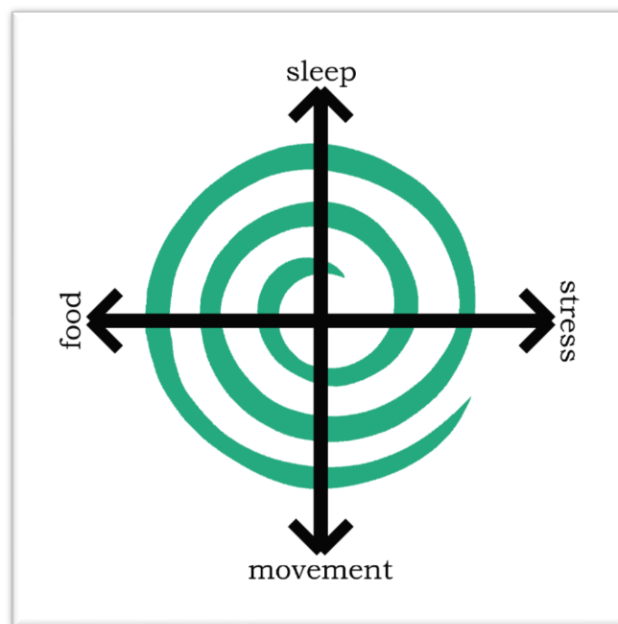
Effective strategies enable the "formulation" of a movement plan for yourself, your clients, or those you care for. Forest bathing hikes, dynamic home and work environments, efficient exercise plans, and constitution-based movement recommendations are all a part of this approach. And of course, herbal allies can enable and enhance movement practices, too!

Start there, then practice some simple, natural movements: getting up from the ground, crawling, balancing, lifting, jumping... With a few pointers, you can improve your efficiency and confidence in moving through the world.

holistic herbalism includes movement

I'm an herbalist. I'm also a human with a body, and I like to move around! I like to teach people to move, too. In fact, my first forays into healthy living were in the context of practicing and teaching martial arts. Since becoming an herbalist, I've been looking for ways to integrate holistic movement practices into my work, because I believe it makes the work much more complete and well-rounded.

There are many ways to practice as an herbalist. In what Katja & I call *holistic herbalism*, we're always thinking not only about the place that herbs have in somebody's plan for health: we're thinking also about nourishing food, stress management, quality sleep – and of course, abundant movement. By addressing each of these factors with lifestyle adjustments, habit changes, *and* herbal supporters, we get better results. Whether our goal is health promotion or the resolution of a specific imbalance, working like this is the most successful and sustainable way we've found.





why movement matters

If people are too sedentary, or don't feel comfortable or confident moving around, a lot of health problems can emerge just from that. Sedentary habits contribute to chronic physical and mental illnesses, and regular exercise improves your quality of life while also extending your lifespan.

But we don't only have to look at movement as a solution or a "fix". In truth, movement is a critical and indispensable part of human health, providing forces and influences the body needs to stay healthy and can't acquire any other way.

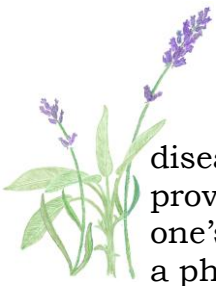
Take the matter of *hæmodynamics*, for instance. This word means "the movement of blood" and refers to how, exactly, blood gets around to all the different organs and tissues of the body. As it turns out, your heart doesn't pump blood out to the capillary level, where the real action happens – nutrient deposition, gas exchange, etc. The heart gets the blood into the arteries, but it's your skeletal muscles that take it the "last mile" to the cells themselves. When you flex or extend a muscle, it creates pressure differentials in the vascular system, and these forces move the blood to the smaller and smaller vessels. The long and the short of it is, if you want to move your blood, take a walk!

This is also true regarding the *lymphatic system*. This second circuit doesn't have a pump like the heart behind it. Lymphatic movement is entirely dependent on muscle movement – your movement. The lymph is home to many of your immune surveillance and response agents, and it's also a kind of waste disposal system for byproducts of cellular metabolism. So movement isn't merely about circulation (as if that weren't enough!); it's also relevant to immunity and detoxification.

There are, in fact, *mechanoreceptors* in every cell. These are reacting to pressure and tension on the individual cell and on the tissue that cell is a part of, and they're critical to healthy function. Bones, for instance, are stimulated to grow stronger the more frequent and intense the loads they are exposed to. When we think about osteoporosis, we tend to think of insufficient calcium intake – which is ultimately a matter of chemistry, in the sense of changing the internal chemical "soup" the bones have to nourish themselves with. But in many cases, it's *physics* rather than chemistry which makes the biggest difference: weight-bearing exercise both prevents and mitigates bone weakness.

Certainly, for muscles themselves to be healthy, they need to move! This is no small issue. We are made up, after all, of about 40% skeletal muscle by body mass! Although historically [underappreciated for its role](#)¹ in health and

¹ The fulltext of this paper is worth reading! Perhaps you are already aware, but if not: [sci-hub](#) is a useful tool.



disease, a growing body of evidence indicates that muscle mass doesn't merely provide some aesthetic benefit. Rather, it actually serves as an indicator of one's overall health and prognosis for healthy longevity. We can sum this up in a phrase: "muscle makes you harder to kill." And not just in combat, either!

- Regardless of fat mass², muscle mass is [independently associated with lower mortality](#). More muscle = longer life.
- Skeletal muscle interfaces with proteins and enzymes related to the aging process, including [Klotho](#) (an enzyme named for the Fate who spins the thread of one's life). More muscle = more Klotho = longer life.
- Lifespan is one thing, but "healthspan" is another. (This is the quest to have "more life in your years, not just more years in your life.") Muscle strength is [critical for healthy aging](#), not least because it reduces risk of injury due to accidents and falls.
- At any age, building muscle improves responsiveness to anabolic (building, growing, healing) hormones, and increased production of endogenous anti-inflammatory agents.
- Lean muscle tissue is highly insulin-sensitive and can also take in blood sugar without the mediation of insulin. These attributes make it protective against the development of *insulin resistance*, which is at the root of many inflammatory diseases (like cardiovascular disease and cancers), as well as [psychoneuroimmuno]endocrine disruptions.
- Building muscle also improves a variety of blood parameters, including total cholesterol, LDL, HDL, and triglycerides.

For these and similar reasons, muscle mass has been proposed as [a new vital sign](#), a measure of overall health and vitality.

movement is for everyone

Finding ways to make movement accessible, enjoyable, and exciting is something I'm really passionate about. It's hardly a secret that a lot of people are turned off from "exercise" because they equate it with time at the gym or just pounding out miles on the pavement. There's a better way!

We can begin by focusing on *movement habits*, as opposed to *exercise*. As Katy Bowman put it, "exercise is not the flip side of the sedentary coin – movement is." Movement is the larger domain, and exercise is a subset of movement.

² This bears repeating: when we're looking at the benefits of muscle mass, the concurrent presence and extent of fat mass is of minimal importance. It is very common for individuals with damp constitutions to retain a layer of moisture under the skin in the form of subcutaneous fat, which persists regardless of muscle tone and size. Certain patterns of fat accumulation (especially the belly-only pattern associated with insulin resistance) may be indicators of a problematic metabolic state, but overall fatness itself is not.



There's a lot of time and energy spent moving in a day that is important to your health and doesn't register as "exercise" per se.

Every day has movements in it. Walking, climbing stairs, bending down to tie your shoes – you move, by necessity, in large and small ways all through your day. In between those movements are postures: standing, sitting, leaning. The ways you move, and the postures you hold, shape your body. They leave marks on your bones. They change the flow of your blood.

So the fact is, whether you exercise or not, you're already moving. Whether you practice yoga or not, there are postures you habitually adopt. This is the base you'll build on!

The thing is, not all movements and postures are created equal: [alignment](#) and coordination aren't innate, they require training and practice. (Movement is for everyone, but so is training.)

Furthermore, not all movement benefits scale in precisely the dimension we most expect them to, depending on our existing cultural biases & personal life experiences. Walking a lot is good, but running a lot isn't necessarily better! (Neither is this to say running is "bad": running is an essential human skill! But more mileage ≠ more health-points on a cosmic scoreboard.)

This means there's potentially a lot of room for improvement solely through adjustments to your existing environments & habits. So that's where we start!

(Check out Katja's article, [Movement For People Who Hate To Move](#), for some more inspiration and ways to think differently about movement.)

dynamic home & work environments

Have you heard that "sitting is the new smoking"? People are recognizing that long hours spent in the same position is not healthy – and that 40 minutes in the gym doesn't "counteract" eight hours of sitting down. What to do?

First, *sit differently*. Cycling through a variety of different "[archetypal resting positions](#)" – like the long sit (legs straight out in front), side-bent sit, cross-legged sit, various kneeling configurations, and so on – will [variously & complementarily](#) stretch & compress different muscle groups and connective tissues. Since each of these positions involves some stretch, they tend to get uncomfortable to hold after a few minutes – and that's a good thing, because it compels you to shift position. That changes your hemodynamics, it changes what parts are bearing the most weight, and it helps you not be "couch-locked" mentally, too.



You don't have to memorize these postures and keep a list in your head. Simply sit on the ground instead of a chair – or more generally, on a surface that doesn't offer back support – for at least part of your day. You'll change positions on your own!

A standing desk can be a good option here too, but bear in mind that it's entirely possible to be both standing and sedentary. If you're always at your standing desk with your hips shifted over and all your weight chronically on one leg, that's not much better than sitting down. So while you're standing, stretch. Squat. Stand on one leg! Do whatever. And, do a little work on standing properly – getting the weight into the heels and all your bones stacked up neatly. It'll take some getting used to, but it makes a big difference. And just like the sitting positions, when you get tired of one posture, change it up!

You can always take it in stages. A good progression is to first swap out your desk chair for a yoga ball. This is a more active sitting surface, as you make micro-adjustments to keep yourself centered. Then introduce some standing desk time (all you need is a cardboard box or stack of reams of paper to lift up your screen). But the real goal is to have a *dynamic work area*, where you can alternate between standing, squatting, and all the various floor-sitting positions at your whim.

Alarms are very helpful, especially if you have a tendency to get absorbed in what you're doing and have time fly by, only to realize you've been hunched over in an uncomfortable way for the last few hours. Set a movement alarm to go off every hour or so, and when it does, take a quick walk or do some pushups. Visit a coworker on another floor, and take the stairs to get there. Way better than a smoke break!

Studies have shown that these breaks add up. A 2013 investigation was popularly reported this way: "[study finds](#) taking the stairs, raking leaves may have same health benefits as a trip to the gym".

Another way to get yourself to move more is to set up your home or work environment so that it encourages movement. Let's face it: if there's a couch, you'll sit on it! So reducing the amount of furniture is a good way to go. In our house we sit on the floor for dinnertime. We have cushions and sheepskins and all that – it's not Spartan – but it does make us get up and get down multiple times in a day.

My latest mantra is "leave your toys laying around!" A few lengths of 2x4 in the living room becomes a balance beam to walk on every time we leave the room. A few red strings, taped to either wall in the hallway, become "laserstrings" and we treat them like laser-sensors in a heist movie: go under, go over, just don't



touch them! We were even able to install monkeybars in our hallway! (Our landlord is particularly easygoing, but you never know unless you ask.)

A little bit of all of that in a day – plus your [gardening](#) – and you're actually in a really good place with movement!

walking, hiking, & forest bathing

Working more walking into your life is a good idea for basically everyone who isn't in the process of hiking the Appalachian Trail. Our ancestors walked six to nine miles every day, so the “maximum” amount of daily walking that would be beneficial for us is pretty high. What's the minimum, then – the “minimum effective dose” of walking?

We start at 30 minutes per day. This is the amount at which tangible, substantial benefits begin to accrue – improvements in insulin sensitivity, blood sugar control, cholesterol levels (and various subfraction ratios), and so on. The nice thing is, the walking doesn't all have to be in one big block for this to work: you can break it up into smaller increments.

Some of these should be time specifically set aside for walking, like habitually taking a quick 5-10 minute walk after each meal. (This will improve digestive function and relieve a number of digestive discomforts, incidentally!) But you can also insert a bit of walking into your day by doing things like always parking on the far end of the lot, taking the stairs whenever possible, and getting on or off your bus a stop early. Encourage your coworkers to take walking meetings – they tend to be shorter and more efficient, plus everyone gets a bit of movement.

Walking barefoot, or in minimal shoes, provides other benefits as well. The muscles in your feet work differently when the soles of the shoes are not thick or rigid, and when your toes can spread out fully. This is something to transition into slowly, though – don't go for a 10-mile hike in Vibram Five Fingers as your first excursion. Start small. And of course, watch out for broken glass or other hazards.

A walk is also an opportunity to play. One way to play is to explore different movement patterns. While out walking, try a little jogging, a little running, a little sprinting – each as you're up for it. Practice squatting a few times during your walk, practice crawling. Find a tree or a sturdy fence and try some hanging, swinging, or climbing movements. Seek varied and novel exertion patterns.



Variability really is the key. Runners in particular are prone to monotonous exercise habits. They can benefit enormously from taking “walk days”, running shorter distances at higher speeds than usual, treating your run more like an obstacle course race (the goal’s not just miles, but “stations” for playing/exploring/challenging), or any other strategies you can think of.

Sometimes it can be really good to take your walk in inclement weather, especially if you're a person who gets cold easily. It's just another form of exercise – there actually are muscles responsible for keeping you warm, both by controlling blood flow and making your body hair stand on end. When you expose yourself to the elements, you're letting the body practice that temperature control response. So, once in a while, even if you hate to be cold, it can be good to intentionally go for a walk on a chilly damp day. Start with short excursions, just a few minutes, and have a plan for drying off and warming up when you come in.

Hiking is walking with terrain: rocks, slopes, river crossings, scree, fallen branches... Navigating this terrain requires an increase in the intensity and complexity of the movements you make to move through it, so the benefits of those aspects are heightened. It also usually comes with immersion in nature, be it a forest, seaside, desert, or some other environment in which the presence of biological density, variability, and complexity are much greater than in human-built environments. This immersion is what constitutes “forest bathing”.

Forest bathing has been found to [reduce the physiological effects of stress](#), [improve immune function](#), [lower blood pressure](#), and much more. That’s why I like to say that when we go for a walk, time in nature counts double (whereas [treadmills count for half](#)). How long should our immersions last? Once again, it seems like 20-30 minutes is the sweetspot. On this point, both [scientists](#) & scouts agree!³

efficient exercise

If we were all hunter-gatherers (or herder-gardeners) . . . or, if we were all working on small animal-powered farms, or as foot-going forest rangers, or

³ Every nature school instructor I know teaches that when you walk into the wild, a “cone of silence” surrounds you as the animals go quiet to asses whether or not you’re a threat. If you settle into a quiet position, after about 20 minutes the animals begin to “accept” you and return to their normal routines. The study I linked above demonstrated that the physiological benefits of nature time reach a peak in the 20-30 minute range. (They continue to accrue afterwards, just not as rapidly.) This kind of convergence of scientific data and on-the-ground practice is always a good sign.



some similar variably-challenging & intermittently-demanding occupation of our days, we'd get all the movement we need. "Exercise" would be extraneous.

But we don't all have jobs like that, and sometimes there are real limitations on your freedom of movement in a day. At a progressively hip workspace, you might have a standing desk and a dynamic workstation, and take walking meetings with your colleagues, and so on. As we've seen, those will have big benefits – primarily in terms of alignment, flexibility, circulation, passive bone loading, and such. But a lot of workplaces are more buttoned-down than that.

Even in such a lucky situation, though, you can't exactly go and give yourself a solid [7-minute workout](#) between tasks, let alone an all-out Tabata session.⁴ And *these* have unique, considerable benefits in terms of building muscle, stimulating mitochondrial biogenesis, and rapidly improving insulin sensitivity.

The movements aren't the same, so the physiological signals aren't the same. A hike doesn't build explosiveness. You do need to work up a sweat sometimes. It's one of the indicators you're under stress! In this context, exercise is what we'd call a *hormetic stressor* – one that makes you stronger (provided you rest & recover – that's still non-negotiable).

To summarize:

- Extended low-exertion movement, like walking, utilizes fat stores for fuel, restores metabolic flexibility, reduces cardiovascular strain on heart, and has many more benefits besides these.
- Strength training is significantly more effective than endurance training for increasing muscle mass.
- Brief, high-intensity exercise is more effective than steady-state cardio for reducing insulin, blood lipids, and inflammatory markers, while also increasing the activity of growth hormone.

All together, this adds up to the following *walk>lift>sprint* picture:

- **Walk** at least 30 minutes every day. A few days each week, walk longer: 60-120 minutes, or even much more. Remember, this can be spread out over multiple smaller walks, and more benefits accrue if you can go minimal/barefoot over natural terrain.
- **Lift** some heavy objects for anywhere from a half hour on up, a few times a week. The heavy object in question might well be your body! Crawling, climbing, jumping, and throwing/catching movements qualify here, as do certain styles of yoga and martial arts, along with the true

⁴ A Tabata session involves 20 seconds of sprintwork followed by 10 seconds rest, for 8 rounds. This 4-minute session is a classic and potent sprint workout structure.



lifting/carrying movements. Perform locomotive or balancing movements with a load, and voilà: you're doing liftwork again.

· **Sprint** for a few intense minutes, about once a week. Maybe you increase that to twice a week, if you feel great on a random day and have the urge to bolt out a few sprints. Sprinting doesn't have to mean running – you can use an elliptical or exercise bike, you can swim-sprint, you can skip rope at maximum speed, you can bang out as many burpees as you can in x number of seconds . . . there are lots of ways to sprint!

That's enough.

appropriate exercise

More than that, actually, might be too much!

The thing to know first is: what are your movement motivations? For example, if you're interested in strength training, what is your understanding of strength? What will it look like when you achieve it? Are we going for a Mr Universe or Cirque du Soleil kind of thing, or [something else entirely](#)? Just as “healthy” is a moving target and specific to each person, so is “fit”. Having a clear goal in mind is important for all the decisions that follow.

The exercise you choose to get you there is best if it's appropriate for you in a number of ways: it needs to match your goals, of course, but whenever possible it should also match your constitution, the current state of the body (in terms of nourishment status, stress load, etc), as well as any injury or weakness. In all cases, start where you are. Taking small steps and striving to maintain a steady consistency is the best way to get where you're going.

This is one reason I prefer to emphasize movements practices (and teachers) that actively develop deeper embodiment. Both *specific movements* individually, such as an efficient jump landing pattern, and *habits of movement*, such as maintaining focused awareness and unrestricted breathing while moving, can become “trained instinct” or “unconscious competence” with enough repetition.⁵ At this point they're accessible to you without your conscious, thinking mind's input. This is the best place from which to build on and expand that movement – increasing the challenge you can meet. This process is

⁵ The progression is: unconscious incompetence -> conscious incompetence -> conscious competence -> unconscious competence. Incidentally, the implication here is that trained instinct + embodied cognition = implicit mutually reinforcing mental parallels to bodily movement patterns. To put it another way: when you practice moving in a particular manner, you practice thinking in that manner as well. Moving differently, then, allows you to think differently.



accelerated if you pay attention to it, so practices that make it a point to engage this kind of attention bring it about more rapidly.

There's something to keep in mind called the 80/20 rule, which has a number of formulations. One of them relevant to exercise goes like this: 20% of your theoretical maximum effort gets you to 80% of your theoretical maximum performance.⁶ Which is good news! It means that you can make big improvements early on, with relatively minor efforts. Optimizing this is a matter of finding the right 20% of all the possible types of effort you could put in, which will depend on your goals.

On the other hand, the 80/20 rule also implies that after you get to about 80% of your maximum potential, the return-on-investment ratio starts dropping fast. That means you have to work harder and harder to gain less and less. Is it appropriate to keep pushing at this point? That depends, again, on your goals. If you're a professional athlete or trainer, absolutely – that's what professional means: it's your job. Otherwise, remember you need to keep this in balance with all the other stressors in your life – because even though exercise is a stressor-that-makes-you-stronger, at the end of the day it's still a stressor.

This is the crux of the concept of *overtraining*: training too much (or not resting enough) for your current state of health and stress load, resulting in negative rather than positive effects on your health and well-being. Overtraining is most strongly associated with endurance training and “chronic cardio” type exercise, but the truth is, you can do it with anything.

Whenever you workout, you damage your muscles and stress your connective tissues. Your body responds to this stress with inflammation, which heals the damage and signals the tissue to grow stronger (so that it can cope with a similar stress in the future). When you don't rest enough, or don't have the nutrients your body needs to rebuild, or your anti-inflammatory stress-response hormones are all used up in dealing with other types of stressors, troubles abound. Inflammation goes unchecked, blood sugar regulation is impaired, discomfort & pain present themselves, and ultimately there's tissue breakdown. Basically, all the opposites of what we want out of a workout!

Signs of overtraining include:

- flare-up of any chronic inflammatory or autoimmune condition (fasciitis, tendonitis, arthritis, eczema) following an exercise session;

⁶ Take “theoretical maximum effort” to mean: what you would do if you had all the resources and support required to devote all of your time, energy, and attention to training that skill – as if it was literally your only job. “Theoretical maximum performance” means: the best you could possibly do, giving your best record-setting effort under ideal conditions, given your genetic and circumstantial starting points.



- musculoskeletal compromise, e.g. excessive soreness in the days following a workout, or frequent pulls, strains, & sprains;
- hormonal imbalances, water retention (due to inflammation);
- weakened or misdirected immunity, allergies;
- feeling fatigued, sluggish, easily stressed (without other apparent explanation);
- fat gain in spite of workouts, especially around the midsection (which indicates insulin resistance and excess cortisol activity);
- regression of performance – being unable to complete the same workout at the same level of performance you previously maintained; and
- exercise resulting in negative mood – feeling worse after your workout, instead of better.

Always keep in mind that *excess training* is the mirror image of *deficient resting*. If you get deep restorative rest, you may become able to handle a quantity of exertion that's currently overtraining for you. It may be that herbs to improve the quality & quantity of sleep you get are just what's needed in this case, along with good practices for making an environment that's conducive to good sleep. Just as often, though, the problem is simply too many workout days and not enough rest days. For every good workout day, give yourself a solid rest day afterwards.

An important clarification here is that rest days don't mean sedentary days! A great thing to do on your rest days is stretching. For one thing, it is a good idea to keep your stretching and your strength training somewhat separate. For functional movement or sports purposes, deep stretching beforehand seems to [confer no particular benefit](#) and may increase risks; there, use dynamic range-of-motion stretching for the actions at hand. This can be as simple as lightly practicing the same kinds of movements you intend to engage in during your workout or game: a bit of jogging if you're running, a bit of shadowboxing if you're sparring, and so on. Sounds obvious, right? The point here is that additional static stretching isn't ideal there – but it's great on your rest days.

One more time, the takeaway here is: move frequently, lift regularly, sprint occasionally. And *rest!*

constitution-based movement recommendations

As herbalists, we match herbs to people, not to diagnoses. As the old adage goes, “it's more important to know the person who has the disease than what disease the person has.” This is true for all aspects of health, actually! Certain foods, habits, and movements will either exacerbate or ameliorate your constitutional imbalances.



If you're new to constitutions and the world of herbal energetics, you just need to know the basics. Each person is an amalgam of various qualities. These come in opposite pairs: hot & cold, dry & damp, tense & lax. Each individual has their own mixture of these elements. Where one is dominant, those kinds of imbalances will be most prevalent for the person.

Your constitution will play into the type of *difficulty* you have with movements. Each of the following represents a particular pattern of diminished efficiency, to which each type is prone.

HOT – overpowered movements resulting in “throwing out” and injury, or simply overexpending energy; lacking **position** and relying on force

COLD – underpowered movements, insufficient generation of force; often because **breathing** (the bellows) is lacking

DRY – a loss of **sequence** and flow, movements jerky; frequently due to distraction or getting too caught up in single details

DAMP – caught up in the flow, where eddied & lost to the correct **timing**

TENSE – prone to excess tension, inability to achieve required degree/distribution of **relaxation**, resulting in “working too hard” to achieve effective movement

LAX – lack of structure, a failure of attaining/maintaining necessary **tension** where needed

In the energetic model, all exercise builds heat; extensive exercise heats & dries. But each type of exercise or style of movement has its own qualities, as well – a slow barefoot walk in the woods is very different from a timed climb at a rock-wall gym, and some of those differences can be described in terms of heat and cold, moisture and dryness, tension and relaxation. This makes each one more or less well-matched to an individual, depending on their constitution.

Following are some exercises & movements it may be helpful to emphasize for each constitutional type:

HOT – tai chi & qigong, walking & crawling in nature (ideally barefoot), swimming & water exercises

COLD – sprinting, HIIT (high-intensity interval training), reasonable running, rucking (hiking with a heavy pack), throwing & catching movements



DRY – swimming & water exercises, rowing & paddling, barefoot walking & crawling in nature, tree climbing

DAMP – yoga (styles focused on deep stretching & long holds), striking & grappling in controlled environments (sparring), rock climbing

TENSE – stretching of all kinds, tai chi & qigong, yoga (styles focused on flow), aerial silks & circus arts (if you're local to Boston, check out [Esh!](#))

LAX – pilates, barre (ballet-influenced workouts), lifting & carrying movements, balancing movements & practices (handbalancing, partner acro, slackline, etc), hanging & climbing movements

As these are balancing to one's innate imbalances, they are in some cases the least comfortable! We tend to get “comfortably uncomfortable” in our place of imbalance, so things that push us out of it can be difficult, even if they're good for us.

Try a few out, introducing each one at a comfortable pace, and see how your body responds. (Observe especially *after* you get over any initial hesitation or awkwardness, which is to be expected with any new activity.)

But remember: the most important thing is your enjoyment & engagement with the movement. If you hate it, don't think it's “necessary”, and if you love it, don't think it's “forbidden”. Move with what moves you!

movement enhances herbs

Movement plays a big role in how we are herbalists because – while herbs can do a lot – pumping blood to all your muscles and keeping lymph flowing through the body are just two of many functions which are entirely dependent on you physically moving your body. And furthermore, every cell in your body is responsive to physical forces, dependent on movement and challenge to maintain vitality. Herbs alter your chemistry, not your physics: health depends on both!

Movement is especially helpful when we want to enhance the effects of our herbal *circulatory stimulants*, *lymphatics*, *diuretics*, and *alteratives*. These are all herbal actions that “move fluids” of one kind another, so it makes sense that bodily movement will increase their effectiveness.

It's not just these, though – even nutritive herbs will be more effective in a body that moves regularly. Remember the mechanoreceptors, and how physical



forces influence the way all your cells function, repair, and grow? The herbs provide the nutrients; movement provides the signal to use them.

herbs enhance movement

Herbs might help remove an obstacle that interferes with movement, whether by healing injury, reducing pain, releasing tension, or otherwise making movement more comfortable and attainable. This is one of my favorite things about the intersection of herbs and movement, because the herbs help us make movement more available to everyone. If we can loosen up a chronically spasming back, or ease a long-standing headache, or improve blood flow and sensitivity to the toes, we can make movement safer, more comfortable, and more enjoyable for someone who might otherwise not have felt free to move.

Alternatively, herbs might help you generate motivation, or *movement on the inside*, to get that flow going with all the things you want to do (and all the things you have to do!). Herbs are great for building, harnessing, and directing motivation on all levels of the self.

Here are some of the herbs I find most important to enable & enhance movement practices:

- GINGER (*Zingiber off.*) – A warming, relaxing, anti-inflammatory circulatory stimulant, ginger brings fresh blood in to accelerate healing and recovery while relieving tension and pain. Effective in simple topical preparations like a poultice or compress, or with the tincture or infused oil as an ingredient in an herbal muscle rub, liniment, etc.
- CAYENNE (*Capsicum annuum*) – Powerfully rubefacient, a fiery circulatory stimulant, helpful topically for similar purposes as ginger. Has stronger pain-relieving activity, especially with ongoing application. Also helpful as a “get-up-go” vital stimulant, and a heart tonic especially for cold constitutions.
- PRICKLY ASH (*Zanthoxylum spp.*) – Another herb to warm the cold and stimulate the hesitant, a prime “get-off-your-butt” herb. Warming & diffusive nervines don’t come around every day, you know! Think of this herb if you experience shooting/searing nerve pain, especially if also with numbness; these are effects of insufficient blood supply to the nerves. Prickly ash gets the blood moving again, and so restores nerve tissue.
- SOLOMON’S SEAL (*Polygonatum biflorum*) – A lubricating relaxant with an unparalleled affinity for connective tissues and joints. Improves fluid movement through collagenous tissues and into joint capsules, limiting inflammation and accelerating healing. An herb to restore or develop flexibility. Excellent for sprains, strains, tendonitis, repetitive stress injuries. Helps rebuild cartilage. Also helpful for mental inflexibility &



stubbornness. Combine small internal doses (e.g. 10 drops 3-5 times per day) with external application to affected areas.

- ASHWAGANDHA (*Withania somnifera*) – An adaptogenic herb which improves your capacity to cope with stress of all kinds, ashwagandha specifically helps restore circadian rhythms. It boosts energy during the daytime and when exercise is most beneficial, and helps one relax and release in the evening to get better sleep.
- ELEUTHERO (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*) – An adaptogen especially good at helping one build and maintain stamina. Eleuthero is the endurance athlete’s best friend, but also for those whose life is an endurance sport. Speeds recovery, improves alertness and cognitive function under severe stress or long hours. Great in a pre- or post-workout formula.
- GOJI (*Lycium chinense/barbarum*) – A nutritive adaptogen, and my favorite post-workout recovery-enhancing herb. Its effects on circulation and blood vessel integrity help to strengthen weak muscles and ligaments. Stabilizes capillaries, veins, and arteries throughout the body. Infuse into tea, or just eat the dried berries by the handful or in trail mix.
- KAVA (*Piper methysticum*) – A warming relaxant and analgesic. Loosens up tight and spasming muscles, relieving pain. Also relaxes the mind, helping one release stress and anxiety held in skeletal muscles. Kava does this without impairing cognitive function. Helpful for muscle pain, tension headache, post-workout soreness, and also for easing “injury anxiety” when returning to exercise after a mishap.
- LOBELIA (*Lobelia inflata*) – A powerful topical relaxant and antispasmodic. Lobelia is the herb for severe spasms, when a muscle has seized up and locked down. Apply externally: rub dropperfuls of tincture directly into the tight areas. You can also take small doses internally, but be aware that lobelia may cause nausea in doses as small as 10-15 drops of tincture (depending on your individual sensitivity).
- SEaweEDS, especially NORI (*Porphyra umbilicalis*) – All seaweeds are dense, broad-spectrum sources of bioavailable minerals and vitamins. Nori is particularly excellent as a wound-healer, anti-inflammatory, and joint restorative. Seaweeds are moistening & relaxant herbs of flexibility, and are very effective as topical remedies. Simply rehydrate the seaweed and wrap it over the affected areas, then rest and allow the herb to work for 20 minutes or more. Repeat twice a day for best results. Soup is the best internal method for working with seaweed – put it in bone broth!
- ROSEHIPS (*Rosa spp.*) – Rosehips are a magnificent source of vitamin C and its accompanying bioflavonoids. These nutrients are critical for collagen formation, stability, & recovery. They’re also rich in antioxidants to help keep inflammation in check. (If you don’t have rosehips, most berries will also provide these benefits as well.) Include in daily nourishing tea blends.
- HORSETAIL (*Equisetum arvensis*) horsetail – This nutritive tonic herb is uniquely rich in silica, a nutrient critical to connective tissue and bone



building. (Incidentally, it also helps with also thin hair and split ends.) Include horsetail as a component of long-infusion tea formulae, but only as a small portion – too much can irritate the kidneys. A little bit, taken consistently, is plenty.

So-called herbal “performance enhancers”, by the way, are either formulas containing caffeine (or similar stimulants), or else purported “testosterone boosters”. Be highly suspicious of any such product until you have researched it thoroughly and are convinced it’s wise to be any degree less so.

formulating your movement plan

No matter who you are or where you’re starting from, you can learn to move your body and move through the world in ways that are safe, effective, and efficient – so you can feel confident moving around freely in your environment. Everyone’s path there is different.

To build a plan that is best suited to your personal situation, you’ll want to consider and account for many factors: your movement goals, constitution, preferences, limitations (such as your work schedule, other commitments, etc), ... but don’t overthink it! ☺

Some examples will help here. Let’s say:

- **You have a stressful but sedentary job.** Start with creating dynamic work & home environments. Make the space to go walking for 10 minutes, 3 times per day – *especially* walks in nature. Do a few small things: carry a ream of paper around the office with you, put laserstrings in the hallway at home, visit your neighborhood park every day. Scale up from there, slowly. Find a nervine herb that suits you – chamomile, tulsi, catnip, and linden are worth trying if you’re not sure where to start – and drink it often.
- **You work on your feet all day.** Focus on alignment & efficiency in your work movements, and watch for “stuck” postures at work. Instead of “exercise”, think about restorative movements, like stretching. Add a burst of lifting when you can (short intense workouts, not long grinds). Prioritize rest. Work with circulatory stimulant and relaxant herbs in the form of a footbath or full bath, with Epsom salts, at least a few times a week.
- **You perform manual labor.** As above, focus on alignment & efficiency in your work movements, especially any that are producing repetitive stress injuries. It's reasonable to expect that at the end of the day, your body is tired. Let your work-day evenings be about recovery: feeding yourself something nourishing, going to bed on time, taking 10 minutes to



meditate, doing something you enjoy and find fulfilling. Know that your work is helping you meet your baseline human need for movement, and that for basic health maintenance goals, additional exercise may not be necessary. If you have movement goals that require exercise, plan your workouts for off days or, if necessary, in the mornings before work. Be sure to carve out time for extra sleep the night before and the night of those workout days, though! Apply topical rubefacients & relaxants, or [an herbal joint liniment](#), to problem areas regularly.

- **You chase after kids all day.** You can move with your kids! Take them outside, teach them the same stuff you're learning about movement, alignment, and efficiency. Give them open-ended challenges: "can you find a way to get taller than me?" (Try this instead of "climb that thing.") Facilitate their ability to spend hours on a playground, even if it's one you build with scrap materials in your yard or living room. At the park, try to do what they do. Give everyone a gentle relaxant tea after playtime, something like linden, and make space for them to rest or nap. That includes you, if possible!
- **You don't like to exercise, but you know you need to move more.** First, think through your normal day, from when you wake up, do whatever morning routine you do, go to work (whatever that looks like for you), have lunch or don't, take breaks or don't, sit or stand or gesture or carry in this or that way, etc. Try to identify some simple movements that you can incorporate into your day, like some stretching you can do while washing dishes, or standing on one leg while brushing your teeth. Can you transition to a standing or dynamic desk? Can you convert some of your commute to walking? Is there some furniture you can get rid of? Is there a sport or game or movement practice that is fun for you, so it doesn't *feel* like "exercise"?
- **You don't have time in your day to go to the gym.** Same as above, let's work on what we can add to your normal day in terms of movement variety. Basically, we're looking for ways to bump up the amount of movement you get, without setting aside specific "exercise" time. You might also try a "distributed workout" – take 5 minutes out of every hour to do a few pushups, squats, lunges, etc. Breaks help you focus anyway, and it'll really add up!
- **You're starting to exercise and you're worried about injury.** Start out with a focus on alignment. Learning a few biomechanical fundamentals – where "learning" includes *feeling the difference* in your own body – will serve well to protect you from preventable injury. Finding a neutral pelvis, stacking your weight over your heels while standing, dropping the ribs, releasing the traps, and ramping back your head (the opposite of "turtle neck") are some of the most important for correcting our cultural habits of posture. Your muscular chains are only as strong as their weakest links, so if you have particular trouble spots – like a bad knee,



or an ankle that you've sprained multiple times over your life – focus on strengthening and establishing flexibility there.

You're already sporty, but you're injured. You can't sport in your usual way and you don't want to atrophy, so let's design a program that will keep your body trained even if we're avoiding an injured area. While we're at it, let's see if there are any alignment or overuse issues that lead to the injury in the first place, and see if we can work those out. Oftentimes the solution is the same for both ends: athletes are [more prone to injury when they overspecialize](#), and cross-training builds resilience.

Whatever your situation, rest assured: there *is* a way to work toward your movement & health goals. Finding it may be a matter of thinking outside the box – and in most cases it also means thinking outside the gym.

natural movements for everyone

Whatever movement you love is great, but I must admit I'm biased towards practicing “functional movement” and view these as better than mechanistic isolation of muscles. This is the difference between a Nautilus workout and a Crossfit workout – both make you sweat, but the latter involves more complex, full-body movements rather than laser-focused isolations.

Why is this better? Because it more closely reflects *real-world demands*. A bicep curl never happens by itself in the real world, but a complete lifting motion does. You never execute a leg extension in real life without also lifting, climbing, jumping, kicking, or otherwise propelling your body through space. Training the actual movements you need gets you a greater benefit than training segmented pieces of it, in just the same way that St John's wort has more to offer than hypericin – complex natural contexts are richer than isolated extracts.

So if you love to hike, take a hike! If you love watching soccer, start *playing* soccer! If you're inspired by Bruce Lee, take some kung fu classes! Don't let a lack of experience stop you. You can learn to dance – I mean not just “you, anyone”, but you, *you specifically* can learn anything you want to. Don't let anyone – especially your inner doubting voice – tell you you don't belong at a yoga class, or a boxing gym, or a playground. So what if you don't look like everyone else there? Diversity is strength. What these activities have in common is, they all develop deeper proprioception (your inner perception of your own body in space) at the same time as general conditioning and endurance.



When muscle isn't merely mass – when you can perform varied complex natural movements effectively & efficiently – it's not only a marker of good health, but means you can be ready for anything, whether that's tracing through an ad hoc obstacle course at the playground, or carrying your child to a safe place when a flood hits.

So, pursue the movement you love! But, while you're at it... you might also want, and probably also need: some experience and training in ideal alignment & practical biomechanics, along with some general conditioning & building movement competence. These will help you add more movement to your life safely. Fortunately, training based on natural movement can provide what you need! Let me highlight a couple of helpful organizations in this regard. (There are lots more great methods & practitioners out there, but these are the ones I know best.)

[Nutritious Movement](#) is the current incarnation of biomechanist Katy Bowman's work. Over her career, Katy has addressed optimal alignment and "posture", the impacts of movement on cellular health and DNA expression, and the place for a movement-rich lifestyle in achieving good health. Her books and training courses will expand your understanding of movement and give you tons of ways to improve your movement "diet".

[MovNat](#) is a system of physical education for teaching & practicing natural movements. It includes alignment and coordination principles to help you develop your movement skills so they are safe, effective, efficient, and – ultimately – adaptable to the demands of natural environments. MovNat training starts from the very basics, like various ways to sit on the floor, to stand up, to crawl and walk, to lift and carry light loads; progressing from there through things that can get a lot more exciting – climbing trees, swinging on monkey bars, hefting logs, and vaulting over obstacles. It's a generalist approach, which can therefore be of benefit to a wide variety of specialist pursuits.

Here's where to start:

- [From the Ground Up](#) video series – A progression of follow-along videos which introduces some fundamental movements and ways to link them together.
- [Restoration Series](#) video – A 30-minute "gentle flow"-like session of natural movements.
- [30-Minute Floor Flow](#) – For something a little more aerobic, try this. It's a more active, exercise-like session built up of archetypal movements.
- [Natural Movement Fundamentals](#) – This collaboration between MovNat and Nutritious Movement isn't free, but it's a fantastic place to start – especially if you have any pre-existing injuries or physical limitations. It



integrates biomechanics and natural movement in way that is highly accessible and welcoming.

- In every one of [our online courses](#), we teach the relevance of movement to the topic at hand. We highlight specific movements relevant to supporting the health of a body system or correcting for a physiological imbalance, and share strategies for integrating movement into your holistic protocols.
- If you're local to Boston, I teach a [Holistic Movement](#) skills class every Wednesday evening – join me!

Integrating movement into your practice as an herbalist and your life as a human is a potent strategy for recovering from injury, preventing illness, and maintaining health for the long haul. I hope this article has provided you with a few insights about how to do this for yourself and your clients. Now close your computer, get out there, and get moving!

Ryn Midura
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