

The Power of Stretching

7 Things You May Not Know But Should!



By Kit Laughlin

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As a living, breathing human being, the entirety of your existence occurs within the shell of your body.

However, many of us spend more thought and effort maintaining our cars than our body. We do regular oil changes, check our fluids and buy new tyres to keep our vehicles healthy and safe. But what about our bodies?

Our system, the Stretch Therapy Method, has been developed over the last 35 years, and we feel it is the best approach for adults to use to become more flexible. In this ebook, I want to share some thoughts about why we might want to do that and, in particular, the aspects of our

system that are unique, and which might not immediately come to mind when you hear the word "stretching".

When I tell someone what I do for work, 'I teach stretching', the first response I almost always get is something like, "I know I should stretch more!" But what's interesting is that no one ever says much more than that – for example, no one ever says *why* they think they should stretch more. If I ever ask that person why they think they should stretch, or stretch more, I get answers like "well, stretching's good for you", or "stretching increases range of movement" or "it helps back problems", but it is clear that deeper questions like, "what kind of stretching?", "how often?", or "why would I want to increase my range of movement?" have seldom, if ever, been considered.

Introduction



I began teaching at our own facility inside the Australian National University where I was a researcher and practitioner, and the method I'm sharing with you today has

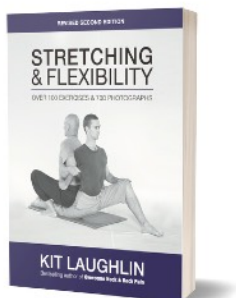
been trialled, tested, and refined over that time with over 30,000 people of all ages and physical capacities. While I was a student, then a

graduate student, I was able to run my own research inside that facility, and I was very ably assisted by the 15 teachers who had originally been my first students. Any ideas we generated were first tested in the Advanced class and, if approved by the teachers and senior students there, were taught to the rest of the student body that week, and results reported back at the next week's advanced class. This simple process developed into an intensive and fast-moving research and testing system.

We estimate that we have abandoned about twice as many exercises as we teach now, for reasons of safety or efficiency. As well, and perhaps more importantly, nothing in the system is immune to revision, and we plan on keeping it that way!

I wrote the first editions of *Overcome Neck & Back Pain, Stretching & Flexibility*, and *Stretching & Pregnancy* in the same facility, and all have become best sellers. All the images were shot in the teaching space using students and teachers as models — real people, in other words. And not a scrap of lycra to be seen!

Everyone knows dancers and gymnasts stretch and we all admire their flexibility, but while they look as though they are stretching if you watch them at a training session, what looks like stretching to you and I is really an extended warmup, recapturing yesterday's flexibility, and for them to feel how their bodies feel today. And, the vast majority of these athletes became flexible as children.

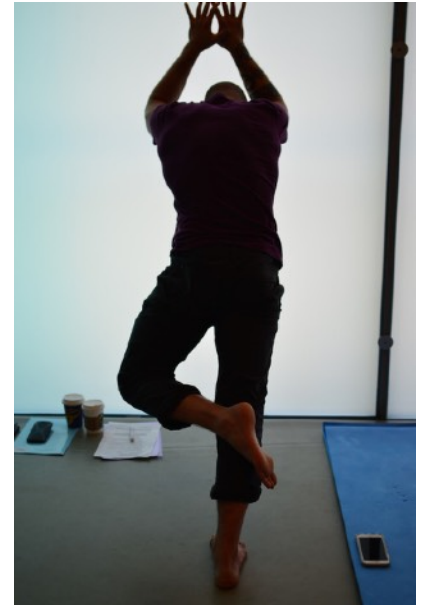


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What about the ordinary person, the non-athlete?

Do inflexible adults need a different approach than what dancers and gymnasts use? And before we talk about this, why should you stretch, anyway? In this brief ebook, I would like to explore some of the less-known (but extremely important) aspects of stretching that might answer the question, "Why should I stretch?"

At the end, I will comment on a number of aspects of our particular approach to stretching and why it is especially suited to helping a stiff adult to become more flexible.



Why should I stretch?



Stretching is an awesome pain reliever!

1. Many common aches and pains can be fixed completely with a few simple stretches.

The most common examples are neck pain, lower back pain, hand and wrist pain, knee pain, and ankle/foot pain. The reason for common aches and pains is that muscles and fascia, the connective tissue that holds our organs, bones, muscles and nerve fibres in place, shorten over time — even overnight — and we need to lengthen these tissues to restore comfort and function.

Only humans, among all animals, are too smart to stretch. If you watch your cat or dog, they will do a simple three-part stretch whenever they get up off the floor (arch the spine, flex the spine,

and extend each leg in turn as they walk away). And at some time in each day, a longer, more leisurely process is entered into (think of your cat licking itself: no square inch of the body is untouched). In fact, it is the most elaborate yoga routine the planet has ever seen, and it's different every day. Notice, too, that cats do not need to warm up for stretching, and neither do you. Cats don't worry or suffer from anxiety either.

This natural tightening processes in muscles and fascia is *the* main cause of all the changes in the body we normally label as "ageing". I am talking here of function, digestion, inner feeling state, capacity to move well, mental state, and maintenance of the strength we need for daily life.



I want to start stretching

The Stretch Therapy Starter Course is a proven system of stretching exercises for adults regardless of prior experience.

Start here



I'm stuck and want more

Have you reached a plateau in your journey to maximum flexibility? The Stretch Therapy Mastery Course is just for you.

Learn more



I just want to stop hurting

Over 30 years of real-world success overcoming back and neck pain, the Stretch Therapy Healing Series just plain works.

Start now



As humans, if we have a lifestyle that is mostly sitting, *and* we experience our life as stressful, this process of shortening and ageing is accelerated. Think about the big-picture perspective on 'what is the main characteristic of ageing'? I am talking here of trees, animals, and humans — any living thing, in fact. Ageing is a slow reduction in the range of movement of all the component parts. Young things bend; old things don't. This is the deep truth behind the old saying, 'use it or lose it'.

Yet there is nothing programmed into us that triggers these changes, from a genetic perspective. It is all in what we do, and more

importantly sometimes, what we *don't* do. The aches and pains I spoke of are just the most obvious markers of these changes; there are many more that we don't see or feel on a daily basis. Nonetheless, these all add up, and in time, become 'set' in the body.

A very modest amount of stretching, just like a dog or a cat does, is all we need to do to keep ourselves loose and functioning beautifully into old age. You don't need to be yogi- or dancer-flexible, either — you only need enough range of movement to feel comfortable, and to take away the tensions that accumulate in everyone's daily life. And this leads us to the next point.



Sleep better

2. Becoming more supple and relaxed is the fastest way to better sleep.

So many people tell us that they wake up at 3:00 am thinking about something. And it works like this: if you go to bed relatively tense, you will awaken worrying about one problem or another. We all know how poor sleep patterns affect every aspect of daily life. If you go to bed in a more relaxed state, your sleep will be enhanced enormously.

Repetition of a poor sleep cycle over time creates an unhelpful feedback loop and this creates a new habit. In the beginning, when in a state of anxiety, the mind is controlling the show (and you feel it in the body too: the mind instantly sees this as evidence that the root of the anxiety is real); you worry and the mind throws up one worry-object after the other. Because the worries are multiplying, the anxiety gets worse. If you cannot interrupt this, then waking up in the middle of the night worrying about something provides further evidence that the causes are real ("I would not be waking up like this if there weren't a reason for it" — I am anxious for a good reason).

But a tiny act of will — "I will get down onto the floor and do just three exercises" — interrupts this loop. Try it and see what happens. So, in the beginning, that small amount of willpower is needed, and less is needed each subsequent time. There is one more thing you can do in the service of this goal, and I will come back to this below.



Reduce anxiety

3. Stretching reduces anxiety.

Stretching your body gently will lead to a state of deep relaxation. The larger the muscles stretched, the sooner this effect is felt. Why is this important? Because in the present era, the whole of one's environment conspires to create more tension in the body and the mind; there is no difference between the mind and the body in this regard. This is because the tension of one's body is mirrored by increased activity in the brain — and beyond a certain point, this is experienced as a feeling of being 'under pressure' or feeling anxious. Normal daily life, in fact, teaches us to be tense. A huge fraction of the population uses medication to control this experience, but this may not be necessary.

Relaxation of the major muscle groups is in fact exactly how Valium (Diazepam) and related drugs work. If you look up any of the benzodiazepine drug family, they are described as "anxiolytics"; that is, they reduce the experience of anxiety. What is usually not mentioned is how this effect is achieved. These drugs are, in fact, *muscle relaxants*, and they are used in operating theatres every day for this purpose.



Learn to relax and your life will never be the same again

4. 'Relaxation' practices enhance the stretching exercises.

If a focused relaxation practice is added to the stretching exercises, the effects of one practice supercharges the other. We practise relaxation in two ways. The first is by doing the exercises with a particular focus: once we are in the end position of an exercise; we take in a breath, and while breathing out, we relax completely. We then ask ourselves, 'What do I feel?', "Where do I feel this now", and "How can I relax more?".

When you stretch the right way, muscle tension reduces, and this reduction in tension is experienced as relaxation — and this feeling in the body is the opposite of anxiety. If you feel relaxed, in other words, you are not anxious. The effects of taking one of the benzodiazepines, and the effects of stretching, are the same in this respect — but one is passive, and the other is active.

In short, stretching will make you feel better and much less anxious. The unexpected additional payoff though is that in time and with a bit of practice, you become aware of the increase in tension in key muscle groups that always precedes the experience of anxiety — and this new awareness triggers the new habit, and you relax. Your anxiety melts away.

Experiencing the feeling of being deeply relaxed, and achieving this by your own hands, so to speak, has far-reaching, lasting benefits that taking a drug can never provide. And this new state, the state and experience of being relaxed, becomes a new habit, and most importantly, the state becomes easier to achieve over time.



Each time we breathe out we ask ourselves, “How can I relax more?” We hold our attention on the physical feelings that are generated in the process — and doing this both strengthens the capacity to direct and hold our awareness on what we are doing and we become more aware of what the body is saying to us. Stretching this way is an extremely powerful *mindfulness* practice (the practice of staying present with ‘what’s happening now?’). This has immense benefits for ordinary daily life.

The second way is by practising effective relaxation exercises as a stand-alone activity. For beginners, we use prerecorded audio programs, between 10 and 25 minutes in length. These feature directed breathing techniques, visualisation techniques, body scanning

techniques, and a host of others. Relaxation can be done after the stretching practice sessions, or at any other convenient time of the day. In a similar way to how we do the stretching, the recordings direct the listener’s attention to physical sensations (like the feelings of breathing) and holding one’s attention on physical sensations likewise holds one more firmly in the present.

The relaxation exercises are done lying, standing, or sitting, so once learned, can be easily incorporated into one’s daily life. Because the student’s attention is being directed and re-directed to physical sensations, attention is taken away from thoughts and worries, and mental clarity, surprisingly, is an added benefit.



Breathe easier

5. Breathing problems respond almost miraculously to stretching the rib cage.

We recommend passive back bending in a relaxed way — this means ‘draping’ yourself over a suitable household object, like a rolled up towel on the floor, or the arm of a couch, and just letting yourself unwind over it. As well, this effect can be enhanced by learning how to direct your breathing into different parts of the chest while

lying there, and this also helps the spine to become straighter over time.

The goal of opening the rib cage and the lungs can be enhanced dramatically by stretching the hip flexors (the large, deep muscles that connect the front of the lumbar spine and the diaphragm to the upper legs). Everyone has tight hip flexors these days, and I can say this confidently having taught literally many tens of thousands of people how to loosen them.

And the sitting we were talking about above has brought about most of this change – when you sit in a car or at a desk, you have put the hip flexors in their most shortened position. Spend enough time sitting, and the brain tells the body ‘this must be the shape and length I want in the body’. And when you stand up, the pelvis tilts forwards rather than the muscles lengthening, and the bottom ribs are pulled down slightly – and the shape of your rib cage changes to reflect this over time – the upper back become more curved, and the head and neck held in front of the shoulders. These are the most common physical changes accompanying ageing.

And we all know that gravity pulls everything down... it's no wonder breathing problems are on the increase! Opening the rib cage and restoring the hip flexors to a desirable length allows everything to sit in a relaxed position against gravity. Breathing becomes easier, which contributes to a much more comfortable feeling in the body.

Look and feel younger

6. Stretching and relaxing together will make you look and feel younger.

We have seen this thousands of times in workshops around the world: we ask the participants at the end of a two-day workshop to look at each other and describe what they see – and they all report this – some people literally look ten years younger. This is easy to understand: there are 42 muscles in the face and 26 in the neck, and it's only tension in these muscles that create the lines in the



face. When these muscles relax, it's an instant face-lift: lines are smoothed away and you smile more often.



It is always the case that when held tension leaves the body, you feel better, in many, many ways. leaves the body, you feel better, in many, many ways.

One of our sayings is “no unnecessary tension”, but suggesting to someone that they ‘you should relax’ has never had that effect! And you will need to generate considerable tension if you want to do a chin-up – the difference with the Stretch Therapy method is that you will learn how to generate force and, even more importantly, how to let go of that force completely when it's no longer needed.

And as I mentioned above, relaxation is simply a habit, and like all habits, can be learned. And over time, your individual muscle tension ‘set point’ (your habitual resting tension) will lower, too. In other words, as we learn to relax, we learn to relax more, and this becomes the new you.

These changes are much deeper than cosmetic, though: hypertension, often described as the “silent killer”, is increased blood pressure. High blood pressure is strongly associated with an increased risk of heart attacks, strokes, and aneurisms. Tension held in the body raises blood pressure, via the simple mechanism of increased resistance to blood flow in the blood vessels. Reducing held tension can lower blood pressure, and the physical stretching exercises combined with practicing the relaxation exercises can have a strong beneficial effect on this problem. If high blood pressure is a problem for you, I would recommend seeing your physician before starting a stretching exercise program (but the relaxation exercises can be started immediately) and I will further recommend that you walk 20 minutes 3–4 times a week, too.



Enjoy your body

7. Stretching gently simply feels fantastic to do.

I have saved what I consider to be the the most important aspect to last. I am not talking about the *effects* of stretching here, even though I have argued that the immediate effects are relaxation, mental clarity, and enhanced awareness; medium term effects are that you notice that all daily life movements are easier and more fluid and new movement patterns appear by themselves; and long-term effects are the slowing of the normal ageing process.

No: what I want to point to now is that the activity of stretching itself changes in its very nature — positions that felt awkward, or painful, transition though neutral to being positively 'good-feeling'. When you first start stretching, you will likely not believe this to be true! But in time, as relaxation becomes the new habit, you will be straighter, more effortless, your face will become smoother and you will be happier for no particular reason more often!

Why is there a couple of cows on the cover?

First, because we love cows. Second, because cows are surprisingly more flexible than you might imagine! Third, because stretching is for everyone!

The Stretch Therapy System

The Stretch Therapy system is different to other stretching systems in three main respects: one is that we practice contracting our muscles at the *ends* of the ranges of movement (and this turns out to be a surprisingly effective strengthening regimen as well as a technique to enhance the stretching effects). Learning how to exert your strength at the end of your current range of movement is both strengthening in a part of your ROM that no other strength training touches, and it also is the quickest way we have found to tell the body how much tension it needs to hold in any part. We are, in fact, using what look like 'stretching exercises' to remap a part of the brain (the somatosensory cortex), which is out of conscious control, and this is the part of the brain that tells the body how tense to be. You will be literally changing yourself from the inside out!

The second difference is that we explicitly practice exercises that show the body how to let go of its habitual tension, using guided relaxation exercises. We also direct attention in every stretching exercise to the suite of feelings that accompany practicing these, and this redirection of attention itself (from what's going on

in our minds to what our body is feeling, right now) is extremely relaxing. So many times at the end of class I have heard a student say, "I came in feeling dreadful, and now I feel like a goddess!" – it is no coincidence.

The third part is that we have designed a large number of new exercises for key parts of the body, urgently needing addressing in modern daily life – new neck and hip stretches for one, and jaw muscle stretches for another. Stretch Therapy has an exercise for every muscle in the body, in fact. Over the 35 years of development, the ST system has become so much more than stretching, but it is still the most effective way for adults to learn to become more flexible, with all the other benefits mentioned.

The number seven seems important for some reason, so I decided to talk about the seven things. In reality, they are all the same thing: what I am talking about is the walking, talking you, and how learning some new things will lead to a happier, more relaxed you, who enjoys the experience of being alive more than they used to!

Please start this wonderful journey today. I promise you'll be glad you did!

Kit Laughlin,
Stretch Therapy Founder



Kit Laughlin



Olivia Allnutt

Contact us:

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