



Sense Your Spine's Support

Support is an ongoing issue for trauma survivors. Lack of support makes an event more traumatic, and there is often inadequate support afterward as well. Trauma leads to dissociation, separating us from sensing internal and external physical support.

Many of us think of our spine as the knobs we feel running up the back of the torso, forgetting the sturdy column at our center. The back part of the spine protects the spinal cord which runs continuously from brain to sacrum, with nerves branching off at each vertebra. The central part of the spine is interleaved with supportive disks, providing responsive, flexible, weight-bearing support.

The spine is composed of 24 vertebrae plus the sacrum and tailbone. Four gentle curves provide springy resilience.

- 7 **cervical vertebrae** in the neck balance the heavy skull from its center.
- 12 **thoracic vertebrae** in the mid and upper back support 12 pairs of ribs in a beehive shape.
- 5 large **lumbar vertebrae** in the low back provide stable, central support for the whole torso.
- The **sacrum** is formed from 5 fused vertebrae. The sacrum transfers the torso's weight to



Thoracic spine highlighted

the pelvis and down to the legs. The **coccyx** (tailbone) contains 3-5 small vertebrae and continues the sacral curve.

Solid support. Notice that the lumbar spine curves in to the center of the body. If you point your fingers in at the sides of your waist, you are pointing at your lumbar spine. Your body surrounds your spine, rather than being in front of it.

While seated, rock forward and back on your sit bones, and sense the movement of your lumbar spine. With small movements, push your lumbar spine toward the backrest, and then let it arch forward. Can you sense the flexible column of living bone within you? Say hello to it, and listen for any sensations, emotions, or images it shares with you.

One percent. When the body is in emergency mode, we expect support to loudly demand our attention. Settle into the surface under you, and allow one percent of the support into your body. Support might be easier to find when you listen for whispers rather than shouts.

Gather and lengthen. In addition to familiar bending and twisting motions, our spine gathers and lengthens, the vertebrae moving closer together and farther apart, with each breath and movement. The motion is intrinsic to your body, something to allow rather than make happen.

The lungs and heart nestle around the upper thoracic spine. As the surrounding ribs move up with each in-breath, the whole spine moves back and compresses slightly. As the ribs relax back down, the spine moves centrally and expands again. Lie face down over an exercise ball or pile of blankets and relax into a few big breaths to feel your spine gather and lengthen.

Lifted head. The cervical spine in your neck is aligned

vertically over the support of the lumbar spine. The top-most cervical vertebra, known as C1 or the atlas, cradles the skull and allows a slight nodding motion forward and back, as well as side to side. Can you feel your skull sliding gently on the atlas? When you curl your tongue inward, it points back along the roof of your mouth to where the base of your skull rests on the atlas. You can also point in just below your ear holes toward that central support.

The body is structured so our head can move freely wherever our attention directs. Tense muscles in our neck and shoulders pull our head down and back, interfering with effortless movement. Some of that tension may be left over from past startle reactions. Experiment with letting your jaw point down more than usual, drawing the back of your head up. Shoulders can relax when they are not responsible for the head's position.

Full movement. Gently explore the range of motion of your whole spine in all directions, bending forward and back, side-bending, and twisting. Are some movements more comfortable and familiar than others? Do you notice differences between your right and left sides?

Say hello to any pain you notice. Does it change as you continue to explore?

Allow your torso to move in relation to your legs, and your head to move in relation to your upper back. Do you feel more connected to some sections of your spine than others? Feel your continuous spine along the full length of your torso, from the bottom of your pelvis to your neck. Allow movement to ripple all the way from the base of your skull to the tip of your tailbone.

Swim through air. Next time you go for a walk, notice how your spine moves with your steps. Experiment with

allowing motions to be larger. Can you allow your head to float on a lengthened spine? Let your movements originate from your spine, like a fish swimming through air.

Ease and comfort. After trauma, it can feel like everything is difficult. When we feel our bones reliably support our body and movement, we regain a long-lost sense of ease and comfort. As we remember how to trust our structure, our muscles can do less work and the whole body relaxes, expands, and breathes more easily.