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THE GOOD LIFE

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Healthy Connections

*By Dr. Kate Clayton-Jones, PhD, RN, CFCN,
and the founder of FootCare by Nurses*



Dr. Kate Clayton-Jones, PhD, RN, CFCN, and the founder of FootCare by Nurses

I recently had the sad but wonderful experience of traveling to Australia to be with my cousin who was dying from a very fast-growing brain tumor. At age 65, three months ago, he had just finished building his dream house. Now non-verbal, he was lying comfortably in a nursing home bed with televisions flickering and blaring. As I held his feet, gently rubbing them with coconut oil that contained a little essential oil, I watched the tension in his face and body slowly evaporate, and I felt mine release too. Despite the noise from the television, and all the comings and goings, I felt connected to my cousin and could also sit with my love for him.

Connection in the present moment is often hard to find, but it is a gift to one's self and others. It is good for us and might be why many of us have cats and dogs. Our furry friends consistently offer gentle, non-verbal connection, and it is sustaining. Life is not always fair or reasonable, but human connection remains an incredibly valuable and meaningful experience. Nothing can replace it, but many things, including posture, can get in its way, and posture can be influenced by the condition and tension of a person's feet. The way you hold your head is directly related to your feet and how well they can move to adjust for balance.

Here is how it works. The head is quite heavy—on average it weighs about 11 pounds. Our feet, particularly our toes, are designed to keep our heads balanced at the top of our spine. If we tip forward or sideways, our toes act like little outriggers and gently push our bodies and heavy heads back into alignment, and the way the head is balanced impacts our spine and nervous system. If the shoulders are up and forward, the head goes forward too, which changes the connection between the spine and the skull. Forward head tilt activates the sympathetic nervous system and is a confrontational flight and fight posture. In response to this, the body creates a stress hormone called cortisol which is the hormone for the fight/flight response system. When we drop into this state, we become super aware, can feel anxious, defensive, reactive, and sometimes we behave a little aggressively when we don't mean to. Balancing our heads with the help of our flexible toes, so that the head is not bent forward, opens nerves which travel down the

spine and activate our parasympathetic nervous system, often called our rest and digest system. In that state we feel calmer, think better, and our immune and digestive systems work better so that our bodies get to recharge.

At the palliative care center in Australia, the pillows behind my cousin's head, positioned to keep him comfortable, pushed his head forward, and I could feel the tension in his body when I touched his feet. While I held his feet, I felt him relax and surrender the weight of his legs. This is not new to me. In my practice, patients say their legs and feet feel much lighter after gentle touch. I also observe a lot of postural tension in people when they are sitting in recliners, or on couches, or using walkers. While a soft chair may feel comfortable to sit in, often the bones in the body are not well supported so we tend to hunch forward or abdominally collapse. Collapsing reduces circulation, causes aches and pains, and places the head in an uncomfortable position.

To unwind tension and find a little more balance, it turns out connecting our heads to our feet is good for us. If you stand with your head straight, shoulders up and back, with relaxed toes and feet, your body language will appear friendly and welcoming. You will be better balanced which also means your chances of falling will diminish, and you will feel more balanced and calmer in your body.

- *Good posture with the head in a balanced position helps prevent aches and pains, looks welcoming, and increases the potential for human connection.**
- *Human connection enhances health.**
- *Healthy, flexible feet and toes are essential to good posture.**
- *A simple "rock, paper, scissors" exercise for feet can create flexibility and strength.**

Our feet hold the nerves, muscles, and bones that are involved in the operation of our balance. Toes that are gripping indicate a foot that is tense and ready to run. A relaxed foot (toes down) is indicative of a resting foot. Where is your foot now? How do your toes feel? Can you wiggle them? Can you gently rotate your knee out a little to open up your hips and loosen your ankles? If you roll your shoulder (not the arm but the shoulder) up and back, does that make breathing easier and how does it feel in your body? The goal is to find a place in your body that brings ease. It's not that complicated, and most people can do it. It is amazing how much better we function when we take a moment to connect our feet to our heads.

In a previous column, I discussed a daily exercise for feet—rock, paper, scissors—which helps the feet stay connected to the brain. It is important enough to repeat. The motion is to clench your toes (to look like a rock), spread the toes wide and flat (like a piece of paper), and wiggle the big toe up and the little toes down in a scissor-like motion. Just a few repetitions will operate the intrinsic foot muscles, allowing you to then relax your feet, and by doing so, improve flexibility, circulation, and your ability to use your toes to balance your head.