

fighting BACK

It happened slowly, insidiously, when a dull ache crept between my shoulder blades and stayed there. At first it didn't bother me. Then I noticed that turning my neck too quickly produced a sharp twinge. My day of reckoning arrived when I dropped a pen and was unable to grab it if I bent at the waist. I, once as pliant as a ribbon during my yoga phase a few years back, had to squat down. I even made the same groaning noise my father does—understandable for a 60ish retiree, but pitiful when you're in your 30s. If I bent over while keeping my legs straight,

my hands dangled a full foot from the floor.

How could I regain my once-strong, flexible back? I phoned a few friends with similar problems. Eight out of ten Americans will experience back pain at some point in their lives, and yet relief is often elusive because it's maddeningly hard to pinpoint the source, so each friend had crafted a custom cure.

"Xanax," advised one. "Half a milligram." Another made weekly visits to a chiropractor and an acupuncturist. A Los Angeles acquaintance had a saner proposal: super-slow weight training.

"I'm obsessed," she said. "Every ache and pain is completely gone."

Super-slow was developed in the eighties by trainer Ken Hutchins for a study of older women with osteoporosis. Because their bones were fragile, they needed a safe, low-impact way to build muscle. Rather than using short, two-second repetitions, which is riskier for

joint and muscle injuries, their trainers had them work on weight machines very, very slowly. When the young instructors noticed how quickly their subjects became stronger, they started using the method themselves. It was soon embraced by professional athletes and celebrities such as Brad Pitt, and is becoming a favored option at the country's hipper gyms.

I found a place near home called Threshold, a gym in an indus-

trial West Chelsea neighborhood that specializes in super-slow training. Husband-and-wife team Eileen Kelly and Lowell Boyers custom design private 45-minute sessions to be conducted several times a week. "Even with such minimal commitment, clients see and feel remarkable results," their Web site reads. Forty-five minutes? I've waited longer for an iced skim macchiato. I was in.

Threshold is not your stereotypical gym. When I arrived for a consultation, a boxer dog and a Siamese cat named after Itzhak Perlman hurried over to greet me. The place was blissfully silent: no blaring club music, no CNN. Boyers's artwork covered the walls (he is an accomplished painter, and most clients have a creative bent: photographers, poets, fashion executives).

Nor were Kelly and Boyers the spandexed drill sergeants I had envisioned. Boyers, 39, was laid-back and barefoot in a white Paul Smith sweater and pristine white jeans, while 44-year-old Kelly, lively and quick to laugh, was clad in leather Daryl K pants and a black cashmere wrap ("You thought I'd be in head-to-toe Nike, right?").

Kelly led me briskly into a workout room, replete with a lush wine-colored Persian rug, Moroccan doors, and six weight machines. We sat on a bench—her posture crisply erect, my back slumped into a C shape—and I explained my deceptively simple goal: to bend and touch my palms to the floor without wincing. I did a demonstration while she struggled to keep a straight face.

"Wow," she burst out. "That's all you can do?"

She quizzed me on my exercise regimen (usually, a slog on the treadmill or ski machine) and swiftly devised a four-point plan: super-slow training, three times weekly, supplemented with yoga

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stretches, massage, and improved eating habits.

"You can definitely manage chronic back pain through exercise," she said. "Full-body exercise is really the way to strengthen your back." Recent findings published in the *American Journal of Public Health* bear this out: Researchers discovered that most people who performed exercises specifically for their backs seemed to make their conditions

Plagued by persistent pain and unable to bend over without wincing, Jancee Dunn turns to exercise for relief and, along the way, unveils a strong and sexy back. Photographed by Irving Penn.

worse, either by doing them incorrectly or having the wrong ones initially prescribed. Most physicians recommend general aerobic activity because it's easier on the spine, prevents pain-aggravating weight gain, and improves your body's core strength, which can lessen the chance of re-injury.

Time for the machines. My regimen was simple and easily adaptable for anyone who does strength training: Lift the weights, taking ten seconds to reach the top position, then lower them at the same glacial pace, using a smooth, even turnaround between repetitions. Each stint lasted two and a half to three minutes, or until "muscle fatigue to failure" was reached. Kelly set up the first machine, a leg press. I pushed forward—slowly, slowly. It seemed easy enough. Then, abruptly, it was not. Take away the momentum gained from the quick repetitions I'm used to, and the weights seem twice as heavy. After the second minute, my legs shook uncontrollably from the exertion, and I was panting sharply, Lamaze-style.

As the three-minute mark loomed, Dali's painting of melting clocks floated dimly through my mind. Finally, my muscles simply gave out. I made my wobbly way to the other machines—leg extension, leg curl, chest press, row, and lateral raise. The effect was the same—torrents of sweat and twitching, jerking limbs. Kelly ended our session with yoga stretches to loosen my hamstrings, key to improving my overall flexibility.

Over the next two weeks, the shaking diminished, but I was still steeped in pain as I struggled to maintain the correct form. The upside was that I grew stronger after only a few sessions. The thinking behind super-slow is that decelerating and control-

and substitute hummus or a boiled egg for sugary snacks to balance my energy levels. "Stimulants like caffeine and sugar increase your stress, contributing tension to your spine," she said.



or added insurance, Kelly tacked on a weekly Thai massage, a sort of effort-free yoga in which she vigorously stretched and folded my body into intricate shapes. "Massage is really medicine for your spine," she said, ticking off its advantages (increased circulation, tension release, bumped-up endorphin levels) as she pulled my legs over my head.

One month into the program, I noticed real progress. My back muscles, once as firmly toned as veal, were taking real shape. "Your back gets strong very quickly," said Boyers one morning. "And we store less fat there, so the muscles might look more defined early on." As I became conscious of my sturdier spine, I made a concerted effort to stand up straight (the simplest way in the world to look like you've shed a few pounds) and gleefully plotted to buy some of this season's ubiquitous backless tops, in particular a camel Doo.ri halter I had been eyeing.

As the weeks rolled on, my routine grew easier to manage. I dropped a size, and although the U.S. women's gymnastics team is not calling anytime soon, I can bend and turn freely without reflexively bracing myself first. Best of all, the back pain had disappeared.

Two months from my first day at Threshold, I walked in, bent easily from the waist, and placed my palms on the floor.

Kelly was jubilant. "You did it!"

"I did it," I said, grinning like a kid. □

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ling the process makes for a workout that is more intense but also more streamlined. Although it can be tedious, the method suited me perfectly. I will never be the woman that you see smiling beatifically as she does two-hour wind sprints on the beach. I prefer how exercise makes me feel . . . after it's all over.

Kelly, who is a trained nutritional counselor, also made diet recommendations, telling me to lose my afternoon cappuccino