

Shoulder-Heart-Lungs

Saraswati-Priya

Case Studies with Fred & Lila

Fred and Lila both have chronically tight upper chest-shoulder regions. For both of them, careers have been big contributors – decades of accounting for Fred and many years as a hairdresser for Lila. Although both have extreme tightness in the same areas, Fred's is much worse as his entire upper chest-shoulder region moves as one solid, rigid unit. It has been a challenge to try and get him to move some parts independent of the others.

In both cases, the trapezius and pectorals are incredibly tight and the shoulder blades are chronically hiked. They have both experienced much difficulty in their practices because they seem to be held back by this particular tightness. Not only has it adversely impacted their flexibility/movement, but their breathing is significantly restricted.

The following overall arc has worked nicely with both of them:

1. Soften and release previous holding patterns
2. Begin with micro-movements to start loosening up some of the tightness
3. Deepen the stretches when the body is more ready
4. Return to the starting points to reinforce the softening and the new patterns

General helpful principles:

- ⇒ Longer exhalations to encourage more releasing
- ⇒ Work in descending the shoulder blades
- ⇒ Stretching the pectorals
- ⇒ Bringing the breath higher up in the chest (rather than strictly belly breathing)
- ⇒ Minimal or no reaching the arms overhead as that seemed to bring more rigidity in the neck and keep the shoulder blades hiked up
- ⇒ Most work done sitting in a chair or on the floor (standing seemed to increase tension and make it too difficult to release)

Some specific postures and movements include the following:

1. Resting Pose with Breath

What? Lie in supine position, knees up and feet flat on the floor. Widen feet so that knees rest on each other. Therapist helps client tuck the shoulder blades and external rotate the upper arms so that the palms face up. Tuck the chin and begin with finding a long, smooth breath, extending the exhalation.

Why? This is a very non-threatening way to begin. The iliopsoas (which is so intimately related with our fight or flight response) is relaxed and we are supported by the earth. We set up the idea of descending shoulder blades right from the start. The long exhalation helps to encourage the letting go of habitual holding patterns.



2. Resting Pose with Block & Neck Movement

What? Same position as above. Block or sandbag on abdomen – breathe trying not to lift block but rather pulling abs/diaphragm straight up. Head turns to one side for a few breaths (first time not very far); repeat other side; then further if the neck allows.

Why? We begin with small movements to just start a gentle stretch for the neck/trap. Allow the breath to start ascending.



3. Supine Arm Reach

What? Still supine, knees bent, arms begin at the sides of the body and then lift straight above the shoulder. Keep the arms lifted with minimal effort required and soften the shoulders and scapulae to the earth.

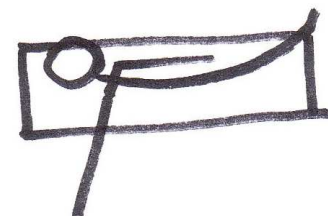
Why? By starting with arms along side the body, we keep the shoulder blades descending and resist the temptation to hike them up by coming from the sides. We begin to move the arms and shoulders independently from each other.



6. Gentle Supine Crescent Moon

What? Begin with legs outstretched on the mat, right arm extended straight out to the side in line with shoulder. Slowly walk heels to the left, keeping hips level. Inch shoulders and head to the left as well. Repeat other side.

Why? This stretching the intercostal muscles between the ribs, encouraging better breathing. Yet by keeping the arm more in line with the shoulder, we avoid lifting the scapula as in traditional crescent moon.



7. Robo Arms

What? From any seated position (floor or chair), hold left shoulder with right hand, left arm hanging down. Begin inhaling left arm out in front (no higher than the left shoulder). Repeat a few times each side.

Why? This encourages independent movement throughout the upper chest-shoulder region. This came out of desperation to try and get Ted to stop tightening up his neck each time he went to lift an arm.



8. Attitude Swoops

What? From seated, bring right arm out to the side with elbow bent and palm facing forward. Swoop chin and nose in towards chest and then out to look beyond left shoulder. After a few breaths, it may feel comfortable to pull back gently on the right arm and increase the stretch. Repeat other side.

Why? Again, this pose came out of Ted's specific needs to try and get him to stop moving his entire neck-shoulder girdle as one solid unit.



9. Shoulder Circles

What? In any comfortable seated position, place fingertips on shoulders and circle the arms/elbows several times in both directions.

Why? This helps to warm up the area tissues and get more movement, and encourages the independent movement of neck and shoulders.



10. Cormorant

What? Standing in a regular sized doorway, place hands on the door jambs at or below shoulder height. Keep the spine long by slightly tucking the chin and engaging the core. Press elbows down and away.

Why? This helps to encourage shoulder blade descent.



11. Pec Stretch

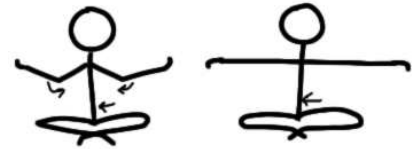
What? Still in the doorway with hands holding in the same spot, allow the torso and the weight of the body to release forward out of the doorway.

Why? This is a tremendous pectoral stretch. It also encourages shoulder blade descent.

12. Bowling Ball Breath

What? Return to a seated position. Bend arms out to the sides and in line with body. Exhale elbows forward; inhale arms straight out from shoulders; exhale repeat (imagine bowling ball delicately stuck to palms in order to keep the engagement in arms).

Why? This brings some movement across the clavicular region, stretches the pectorals, and encourages movement and descent of the scapulae.



13. Kapalabati breath

What? From a seated position, breathe fully a few times and then completely exhale. Inhale partway and force the exhale, bringing the diaphragm up to expel breath from the lungs. 20 times and then full exhale with locks, and full inhales with locks (inhale hold not as long).

Why? This encourages more of that upward movement of breath that is needed with these students. It also helps address their issues with restricted breathing resulting from tightness. They have also really responded to this, saying that it feels very cleansing and compelling.



14. Deep Breath Opener

What? Place 2- 3" blocks at the head of the mat (with about 1 block's worth of space between the two). Lie in a supine position, with legs outstretched, allowing one block to hold the occiput and the other to catch just below the base of the shoulder blades, allowing the scaps to release down in the space between the blocks.

Why? This is an intense stretch for the upper and middle chest. By stretching this region, breath will be allowed to flow more smoothly. By flowing the breath into this area, the tightness can begin to release.



15. Resting Pose with Block

What? Same as #2 but without the head turning.

Why? Come full circle and return to the tucking of the shoulder blades. Try once again to bring the breath up higher in the chest. This reinforces the learning and provides another opportunity to elongate the exhalation.

