

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY TO AGING BACKWARDS

By James Litzelman, NCTM





Musician's wellness is a topic that has grown in importance over the past several decades, and today musicians understand the necessity of incorporating wellness into their daily work as teachers and performing musicians. In recent months many of us have been more concerned about our mental health than our physical health, but we must remember that we can't have one without the other. As I near age 60, my lifelong interest in fitness has only grown, and I now appreciate more fully the importance of the mind-body connection. In fact, recent scientific research on aging well clearly demonstrates that daily exercise is the *single most important thing* we can do to keep our brains from prematurely deteriorating. (Gupta 2021, 97.) I have several close friends in their 70s and 80s, and most of them exhibit some of the telltale signs of aging. These include poor posture that causes them to slump forward or shuffling when they walk, taking only small steps. They all complain about their knees hurting, and it's obvious how this pain limits their ability to move freely.

With this in mind, early in the pandemic, I made a commitment to walk or bike outdoors each day regardless of the weather. I also committed myself to an exercise program called Classical Stretch or Essentrics by Miranda Esmonde-White. At age 72, Esmonde-White is a former ballerina who created a science-based stretching workout that has helped people reverse the aging process and lead long and healthy lives. I had done the program intermittently for the last five years or so, but to stave off some of those telltale signs of aging, I decided I would do this program every day. Now, more than a year into doing this program daily, truly marvelous things have happened—and not just in the way you might expect.

I'm a pianist with focal dystonia in my right hand. Dystonia is a movement disorder in which your muscles contract involuntarily (Mayo Clinic), and generally, focal dystonia is known as an overuse or repetitive stress condition. While the symptoms of this maladaptation manifest themselves in the muscles, it is a neurological problem (Altenmüller, Jabusch, 2010). It's estimated that approximately 1% of professional musicians have task-specific focal dystonia, and virtually all of them are classical musicians, with most being male. Furthermore, up to 25% of musicians with this malady can have a family history of dystonia. (Dystonia Foundation).

I first noticed the symptoms in 1993 when I was nearing the end of my doctoral studies. It started with just my fourth finger slipping off black keys, but within just a few short weeks the condition was so bad I was playing on the middle phalange of my third and fourth fingers. It was as though a demon had taken control of my hand because the more I tried to use the hand normally, the worse the symptoms became. I thought I was losing my mind.

Since there is no cure for this neurological disorder, those of us afflicted must find solutions to alleviate the symptoms and heal ourselves. Over time, I have developed a practice strategy that helped me to overcome it, focusing on neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to change itself because of experience. Yet, I'm aware my hand doesn't function exactly as it should—this is where Esmonde-White's program enters the equation.

After about six weeks of doing the program, I had noticeable improvement in my dystonia. Initially, I didn't connect it with Classical Stretch because "How could an exercise program help with a neurological condition?" I thought. But now I feel certain that that is exactly what has happened.

To comprehend how an exercise program could help my neurological affliction, I recently talked with Esmond-White to better understand how an exercise program could help with a neurological problem.

But first, I needed to learn a bit about anatomy. The human body is made up of 650 muscles, 350 joints and an enormous amount of fascia, also known as connective tissue.

Fascia is a thin layer of connective tissue that surrounds and holds every organ, blood vessel, nerve fiber and muscle in place. Despite its importance in literally *every move* we make, fascia has received scant attention until recently (Johns Hopkins 2021). Chuck Wolf, author of *Insights into Functional Training: Principles, Concepts, and Application* further explains, "Fascia is the universal webbing connecting all body tissue. It provides a unified, synergistic network for efficient and economical movement (Wolf 2017, 161).

Fascia-related muscle pain and stiffness has three principal causes: a lifestyle of limited physical activity, repetitive movements that overwork one part of the body, or trauma, such as surgery or injury. (Johns Hopkins). Thus, moving and stretching on a regular basis is crucial if we are to prevent fascia-related problems.

"When we don't move, the fluids in between the layers of fascia become dehydrated, sticky and start to glue together," explained Esmonde-White during



my interview with her. “This is often the cause of stiffness in our shoulders, neck or knees because connective tissue connects every one of the trillions of cells in our body, and must be capable of slipping and sliding, maintaining its natural dynamic web by being strong and hydrated” (Esmonde-White 2019, 21).

“Our bodies are one unit, so even if you’re using the spine, the hips are involved because they’re connected to the back. When part of it is unbalanced, it could be causing a problem indirectly. *Everything* must be balanced. Some muscles can’t be stronger or more flexible than others because the strength and flexibility of our muscles must match each other. You can’t have lots of strength and only a little bit of flexibility—you need to have both equally,” Esmond-White further explained during our discussion.

“One of the most important things that we do in Essentrics to maintain flexibility is to hydrate fascia through gentle slow movements. We draw hydration into the fascia, liberating the muscles so they can move easily. Even though there’s much that’s still unknown about connective tissue, hydrating the joints and keeping them well-balanced is really what Essentrics is all about”

An important aspect of hydrating the fascia involves isolating our joints. “To do Essentrics properly, you must figure out how to isolate *every* joint—isolating the arms from the shoulders, for example,” Esmond-White continued. “But if you haven’t been doing a connective tissue workout your fascia might have hardened around the joints and you might not be able to isolate a particular joint.”

It was as if a lightbulb went off for me. Now I understood that my improvement came, in part, from having well-hydrated connective tissue, allowing everything to move in a more natural way. As an example, in my discussion with Esmond-White, she said, “Jim, you simply don’t know where any blockages might be. You think it’s in your hand, but it could be in an entirely different place.”

Well, this turned out to be true. I had long felt a blockage in the palm of my hand, causing me to obsess about it. But after several months of doing the program, I became aware of a different blockage in my upper arm. Previously, I was completely unaware of this obstruction, but little by little, these stretches allowed me to remove it. And here’s the real kicker: A few weeks after the blockage in my upper arm was gone, the blockage in my hand



disappeared! It had been there for so many years, and now it's gone!

I find this so exciting, because if a stretching program like Essentrics can help a problem as intractable as dystonia, how might it help more traditional musician's injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome or tendonitis? Non-surgical therapies for these kinds of injuries typically involve rest and limiting the movement of the affected area. Could it be, however, that by *not* moving we're doing the one thing we shouldn't be doing to heal these types of injuries?

Certainly, Thomas Mark, author of *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body* would agree. When speaking of injured pianists, Mark says it beautifully: "Where free pianists make thousands of movements, injured pianists make hundreds." (Mark, 2003, 6). Mark clearly states that all injuries pianists encounter are caused by one of four factors—either alone or in some combination:

- Playing in a state of co-contraction (lifting the fingers and excessively curling them)
- Awkward positions (think ulnar deviation)
- Static muscular activity (simply not moving the playing mechanism enough)
- Excessive force (playing fortissimo for too long a time) (Mark, 2003, 141).

Although significant strides regarding musician wellness have been made, I believe that **traditional pedagogy** is still lacking, otherwise we wouldn't have so many injured musicians. A *Wall Street Journal* article cites a study by Kris Chesky of the University of North Texas

in which 86% of piano majors participating in a survey reported having pain associated with their playing. (Isacoff 2007).

"Many people tend to overtrain their bodies, causing their bodies to age more rapidly than necessary. The reality is that overtraining damages muscles, bones and connective tissue," says Esmond-White.

She asserts that "Relaxation is the new strengthening," and at first, such a statement seems counterintuitive. After all, how can one strengthen a muscle when one is relaxed?

"It took me awhile to realize the immense power of relaxation," she explained. "What is surprising is that *relaxation*—the opposite of overtraining—is an extremely powerful and safe strengthening technique. This means that there is more than one way to gain strength, and the beauty of using relaxation to strengthen is that it doesn't lead to injuries and damage; quite the opposite, it is healing and age-reversing."

Regarding the noticeable improvement in my dystonia as a result of doing the Essentrics program, Esmonde-White agrees with Gupta, saying "Movement is the number one way to keep our brain healthy and keep away any signs of dementia. In short, we need the body to keep the brain sharp.

"Essentrics uses the body to *stimulate* the brain, and there are four principal elements used in each workout to accomplish this: body awareness, an ability to isolate joints, complex body movements and emotions," she explained. "First and foremost is body aware-

ness. That’s a broad statement, but it means that you have to be aware of what’s going on with your body at all times. The brain has to multi-task; it has to be able to work the fingers, work the toes, wiggle the hips, turn the head and do it all at the same time! This is quite important when it comes to keeping the brain stimulated, and the body must figure out how to do everything rapidly so that you don’t fall over. The brain must be able to command the body to do what the brain wants the body to do—that’s body awareness.

“Complex body movements are an essential component of Essentrics. Walking is a great exercise, but it’s not a brain exercise, because it’s easy to do. So, you need to do something more complicated that the brain isn’t used to doing. That’s one reason why we do large, sweeping movements in Essentrics,” she continued. “And when we add imagery to the complex movements—like grabbing a rope or lifting a heavy weight—the brain has to figure out how you’re going to do all of this without falling over. This is how Essentrics uses the body to challenge the brain and stimulate all the connections to the neurons.”

The emotional component of the program is of particular interest to me because the overall sense of wellbeing I have after doing each workout is immense, and I asked Miranda about this aspect of her program.

“We work with emotions to help liberate the body, because emotions are part of the brain and our being. Imagery and music all help with this. In movies, we know when something bad or something good is about to happen because the music is warning us,” she said. So, we use music with our physical body, imagining that we’re the conductor, or perhaps there’s a cloud that you can actually touch. For me, the emotional part of this program is very liberating. And they say crescendos in classical music do amazing things for our endorphins, flooding the brain with good feelings!”

Any exercise program is destined to fail if you don’t enjoy doing it, and one reason this program has worked for me is that I look forward to doing it each morning. Esmonde-White says that “we change our bodies one cell at a time,” and this experience has made a believer out of me. ♡

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