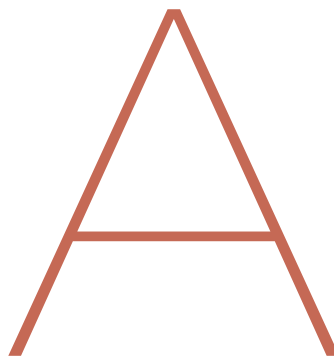


The Long and Short of It

Strategies for Softening Tight Muscles

By Art Riggs



DEAR TUG,

It is excellent that you distinguish between these two situations; many bodyworkers automatically dive in to soften tight muscles without considering their length and how that might influence structure and movement. Either short or long muscles may present the same uncomfortable symptoms of pain or spasm in our clients, but each arises from very different causes that will necessitate different strategies.

Most muscles have an antagonist that has the opposite action for movement or stability. Often, these opposing muscles vie for dominance, creating chronic tension and fatigue in the body. This attempt for a compromise in comfort or posture is a bit like having the heater and air conditioner blowing at full power.

The Freedom from Pain Institute's Erik Dalton often points out that we have a flexion-based culture that creates imbalance between the front and back of the body. Feldenkrais Method originator Moshe Feldenkrais and many others also have pointed out that the flexors usually win the battle, especially as we age, so that our bodies morph into a forward curve of flexion. This results in *short* and tight flexors that dominate *long* extensors, which are equally tight in their unsuccessful attempts to create balance. Your clients may experience similar discomfort in these opposing muscles, but the causes and resolutions will be markedly different.

COMPETING PATTERNS

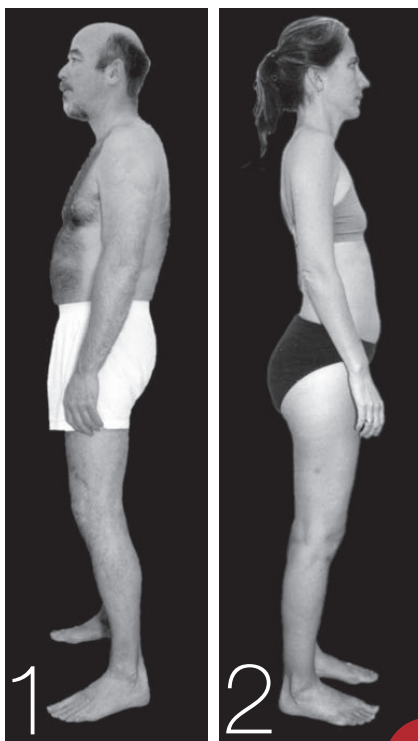
Let's look at a couple of simplified examples of this phenomenon and how posture and, therefore, tension in the body are affected.



DEAR ART,

Can you please explain the difference between a short and tight muscle and a long and tight muscle and how each affects your strategy in a bodywork session?

—TUG OF WAR



Treatment Suggestions

1. I usually address the primary tightness (shortness) first, rather than working on the long and tight muscle to prevent it from lengthening and moving the body into a greater imbalance.
2. Facilitate lengthening in short muscles by working away from the origin in the direction of lengthening. This is another example of the benefits of sometimes directing strokes distally, rather than arbitrarily always working in a proximal direction because of the emphasis from some early training.
3. Work perpendicular to or toward the origin in the direction of muscle contraction with long and tight muscles. This will promote better circulation, release long-held adhesions, and activate the muscle toward more power to offset its antagonist, rather than having it actually lengthen, exacerbating the imbalance.

In Image 1, which shows a posterior pelvic tilt, notice the battle between a few of the agonists and antagonists:

1. In the legs, the hamstrings are short and tight (winning the battle), pulling the ischial tuberosity down into a posterior tilt of the pelvis. At the same time, rectus femoris is stretched upward by its attachment at the anterior inferior iliac spine and is long and tight (losing the battle).
2. The abdominal muscles are short and tight, while the posterior muscles and fascia of the lumbar region are long and tight.
3. In the upper body, muscles of the chest are short and tight, pulling the scapula wide and causing a slumped posture both downward and toward the anterior midline. Conversely, in the thoracic region, the rhomboids and upper erectors are long and painfully tight as they unsuccessfully attempt to help the body stand up straight and pull the scapula medially.

In Image 2, which shows an anterior tilted pelvis and erect posture, many of the previous patterns are reversed:

1. The hamstrings are long and tight, while rectus femoris is contracted and tight, moving the pelvis into an anterior tilt.
2. Rectus abdominis is stretched long between the pubic symphysis and the rib cage, while the lower back tissue is short and tight.
3. The chest fascia and muscles are long, while the upper erectors and rhomboids are short, fibrosed, and painful.

Ironically, both of these patterns may present pain in the same areas, with both the winners and losers paying a price for their competitive struggle.

This demonstrates the importance of considering postural patterns when strategizing treatment. Lengthening a long and tight (secondary tightness) muscle that a client complains of may actually increase symptoms if proper attention is not directed at lengthening a short antagonist (primary tightness) that is responsible for the imbalance.

CLOSING NOTE

Remember that postural patterns are influenced by many factors, including emotional states, work and recreational activities, compensation for injuries, and other causes. A holistic approach to considering and altering precipitating causes will often be the icing on the cake for lasting change.

Many instances of the conflict between long and short muscles are very complex and well addressed by the growing number of structural integration trainings. There also are increasing numbers of excellent books being published. I'm very impressed with James Earls's and Thomas Myers's book *Fascial Release for Structural Balance* (North Atlantic Books, 2010) as a great example of fascial and muscular theory combined with specific strategies.

I hope this helps a bit with your question, and good luck! **m&b**

6 Art Riggs teaches at the San Francisco School of Massage and is the author of the textbook *Deep Tissue Massage: A Visual Guide to Techniques* (North Atlantic Books, 2007), which has been translated into seven languages, and the seven-volume DVD series *Deep Tissue Massage and Myofascial Release: A Video Guide to Techniques*. Visit his website at www.deeptissuemassage.com.