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With the right lean and swing, you can walk and run better

ChiWalking and ChiRunning apply the principles of tai chi to walking and running to make those activities more efficient and injury-free.

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I DID AS I was told. I pulled my core in and leaned forward until I could see my shoelaces. I rounded my upper back and let my arms hang by my sides. I lengthened my spine by lifting the crown of my head up.

I felt like I was hunching forward. It was uncomfortable and weird.

Proper alignment for ChiWalking and ChiRunning often feels awkward, master instructor Laura Houston reassured me. My body was used to staying upright one way, and rewiring it to stand in a new alignment can feel confusing. Or, for someone who spends a lot of time thinking about alignment, humbling.

I met Houston to learn about ChiWalking and ChiRunning. It was created by Danny Dreyer, and applies the principles of tai chi to walking and running to make those activities more efficient and injury-free.

Injury-free, you say? Most of my runner friends perk up once I mention it.

Most people walk leading with their pelvis and strike the ground with their heels first. ChiWalking teaches you to lead with the upper body, using the dual forces of gravity and the movement of the road under your feet to propel you forward. Instead of using so much muscular effort to walk or run, ChiWalking teaches you to use your body and those two forces to your advantage. The focus is also meditative.

“It turns running and walking into a practice,” Houston said.

First, we had to work on my posture. A lot of us naturally stand with our dominant foot turned slightly out. Houston had me lift my right foot to bring it parallel with my left. I centered my weight right over my feet, and pulled in my “dantien,” or energy center. Houston noticed right away that I had a tendency to thrust my front ribs forward and my shoulders back, creating tension in my low back, which I’ve heard before. She told me to round my shoulders, let my ribs soften and breathe into my low back.

The next step was to get me to relax my lower legs while walking, learning to use them for structural support, rather than propulsion, between strides. She had me walk slowly at first, keeping my core engaged and shoelaces in view while letting the road move under me. I had never focused quite this hard while walking, even racewalking.

Running backward is also a quick way to get back into alignment, she said. Our body naturally aligns running backward.

We also worked on arm swing, using the swing of the upper arm only, which works like a pendulum where your legs follow the swing of the upper arms.

She also had me run and walk using a metronome, keeping my eyes fixed on a point ahead as I moved, reminding me to soften my back and let the road take my feet.

At the end, she videotaped me. She had me walk my normal way first, which suddenly felt weirder post ChiWalking. Then she had me realign forward and walk the new way.

ChiWalking also has a principle of “gradual progress” and doing the work slowly, so I’ve been practicing while standing around, shifting my weight to center myself over my feet, rounding my back and checking for my shoelaces. It’s a strange new world, and an exhilarating one. I want to bring in these new principles as a lasting change to the way I stand, walk and run. I want my body to work for the long term.

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