

Standing up for yourself

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ABSTRACT

When was the last time you stood up to watch TV alone at home? I don't commute by car, and I'm a little weird in choosing to stand on the T, in airports, and in waiting rooms (which leads to receptionists asking repeatedly if they can help me), but, still, like a lot of people who work in an office or at home, on a typical work day I nail myself to a desk chair first thing in the morning, move to a different chair for lunch, then nail myself to the desk chair again for the rest of the day.

FULL TEXT

"So all we could do was to Sit! Sit! Sit! Sit. And we did not like it. Not one little bit."

- Dr. Seuss,

"The Cat in the Hat"

I'M WRITING this column while standing, which may seem like a trivial change from the norm, but it makes a world of difference.

Once you become aware of just how much you sit, just how completely the design of our environment enforces the expectation that you will sit, it's hard not to see our culture as a chair manufacturers' conspiracy. In school, at the office, in cars, when we eat or use computers or watch TV, we sit, sit, sit, sit.

Sometimes you have no choice. You can't do anything else in a car; if you get up and walk around at the wrong time in school, you'll end up in the principal's office; and if you do it on an airplane you'll get sent to Homeland Security's equivalent. But even when we do have a choice, we usually do what's expected of us and take a seat. When was the last time you stood up to watch TV alone at home?

I don't commute by car, and I'm a little weird in choosing to stand on the T, in airports, and in waiting rooms (which leads to receptionists asking repeatedly if they can help me), but, still, like a lot of people who work in an office or at home, on a typical work day I nail myself to a desk chair first thing in the morning, move to a different chair for lunch, then nail myself to the desk chair again for the rest of the day. I may take a break for a run at some point, and I leave the chair for a few hours in the evening to hang out with my kids, but I return to it for one more extended session before bed.

I know there are studies that show exactly how bad so much sitting is for me - and that they show that even regular strenuous exercise won't cancel the effects of too much sitting, and that the consequences extend deep into debates about health care costs and obesity. But I don't really need the scientific support to be persuaded that

all this sitting is killing me. It feels as if my spine's going soft and toxins are pooling in the middle of my body and gradually poisoning me.

Self-defense is in order. Steps at the margins are relatively easy to take. I started walking the kids to school instead of putting them on the bus, and I walk to and from work if I have time. I look for excuses to get up during the day - for instance, instead of Googling the quotation from Dr. Seuss that serves as my epigraph, I went upstairs and found the book. And I just found out about the fad for "walking meetings," which strikes me as a great idea, especially if it leads to fewer and shorter meetings.

But that still leaves the bulk of the day, which I spend writing or reading on a laptop. The remedy is to either lie down or stand for significant periods. Lying down has at least one major drawback: unplanned napping. So that leaves a standing work station as the obvious option. I just started using one a couple of days ago, alternating between it and a regular desk as I get used to the increase in standing time.

Despite the ache in my feet (temporary, I hope), it feels so good not to sit while I work that I fear I'm about to turn into the worst kind of zealot convert. I realize that the mediascape is awash in preachment from such types, and I don't want to be yet another columnist telling everybody how to be as healthy and ergonomically well-adjusted as the columnist is. So let's leave it at this: I was dying a slow death from sitting, and standing up is making me feel a lot better.

Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

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Illustration

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