Shawn Robek

10 Things Not to Do If You Have Low Back Pain.

Why Hasn't ANYONE Told Me This Before!?

“WHY HASN’T ANYONE TOLD ME THIS BEFORE?”

If you’ve ever said, “Why hasn’t anyone told me this before?” you’re not alone. That exact thought has become the spark behind this book.

I’ve heard it countless times from people who are frustrated, tired, and ready for real answers. They’ve seen multiple providers, tried endless exercises, and still feel stuck in pain. When I finally explain something simple that changes everything, they often look at me in disbelief.

I see the frustration in their eyes when a quick diagnosis reveals what they’ve been missing for years, or when one small proactive suggestion suddenly brings long-term pain relief. Usually, I just shrug, because the only answer I have is that I lived this problem myself. That experience is what makes this real for me. These are the nuances that can’t be taught in school. They come from real life, from being injured, stuck, and forced to figure things out the hard way. I had to own the reality of fixing my own lower back after a snowboarding injury. That lived experience is what allows me to help thousands of people overcome low back pain in a way that goes far beyond textbook knowledge.

Somewhere along the way, the most essential truths about the human body stopped being taught. Our system focuses on treating pain, not preventing it. It teaches people to manage symptoms rather than understand the source. That gap has left millions confused, discouraged, and believing that their back pain is something they simply have to live with, that there’s nothing they can do on their own, and that surgery is their only option.



After over two decades of relentless investment in time, energy, and money, I finally discovered a system that works to heal the lower back. I put it all together in my book and 30-day course called FIXED. This method is the same one I used to fix my own back and to help countless others get out of pain and back to doing what they love.

As the saying goes, my biggest weakness became my greatest strength. Because of my injury, I've been able to help thousands of people overcome their own lower back pain and avoid unnecessary surgeries. My greatest achievement isn't in degrees or certifications. It's in the lives changed and the people who finally get back to who they used to be.



I know you can get there too. What you need isn't another quick fix. You need a system to help you take a proactive approach to your healing journey.

This book is a spin-off of FIXED. While FIXED focuses on structural, internal, and mental performance to create lasting change, this book takes a different approach. It exposes everyday mistakes that quietly keep people from healing. These are the simple things no one ever told you not to do, or things you may be ignoring because you're unaware of the negative compounding effects of poor daily habits. These are the simple things no one ever told you not to do, or things you may be ignoring because you're simply unaware of the growing toll of the negative effects of poor daily habits.

Over the years, I've watched people try to be proactive about healing their back pain, only to realize they might actually be making things worse. It's not their fault. It's what they've been told, what they've seen, what they've learned from less experienced professionals, or what they've pieced together along the way.

I decided to identify the top 10 things I see people doing that hurt their backs more than help. This isn't about blame or judgment. You weren't trained to know this. That's my job.

My goal in this book is to expose the things you might be doing every day that are holding you back from getting better. Sometimes the secret to healing isn't doing more. It's doing less of the wrong things.

If you find yourself making any of the top ten mistakes I discuss in the following chapters, try removing them and see how your body responds. Eliminating even a few of these daily destructive habits could be exactly what your body needs to finally heal.

You might not be broken. Your body might just be waiting for you to stop getting in its way.

Let's start with something simple. Walking.



Everyone knows walking is good for you. Most people even have a "magic number" in mind. Ten thousand steps, five miles, or whatever their fitness tracker tells them to hit. But here's the truth: more isn't always better.

Walking is one of the most underrated healing tools you have. It's free, low-impact, and something your body was designed to do. Yet, for many people with back pain, the way they walk can actually make things worse instead of better.

If you've ever caught yourself shuffling, waddling, or moving like a robot, don't worry, you're not alone. I've seen more "Frankenstein walks" than I can count. Tight hips, stiff shoulders, and lazy feet can turn a simple stroll into a slow-motion pain generator.

But that's also the good news. It means there's room for improvement, and the fix is simpler than you think. When you learn to walk with intention, you retrain your body to move the way it was meant to. Every step becomes an opportunity to heal instead of harm.

Quality always beats quantity. A few hundred mindful steps done well can do more for your spine than ten thousand sloppy ones.

By the end of this book, my goal is for you to never have to ask, “Why hasn’t anyone told me this before?” again. Because now, you’ll know.

In the next chapter, we’ll look at how to turn walking into one of your most powerful tools for healing, not by doing more of it, but by doing it better but by walking better intentionally.



This might be one of those moments where you’ll catch yourself saying, “Why hasn’t anyone told me this before?” And there’s a reason for that. No one talks about how your walking can either heal or hurt your back.

Most people were told to move more, hit their step goal, or walk it off. What no one ever explained is that how you walk matters far more than how much you walk.

Walking 10,000 steps: Helping or hurting?

If you're going for a leisurely walk around the block, walking your dog, or enjoying time with your spouse, that’s perfectly fine. Using walking as a way to decompress from the day is great. But walking for exercise or rehabilitation and being careless about how you move is a recipe for disaster for your lower back, knees, and hips.

I know your intention is good. You’re trying to stay active, to do the right thing. But here’s the truth most people never hear: walking without awareness can actually hurt your back rather than fix it.

Why? Because we are designed to walk with intention, to use our bodies as tools, and to move with efficiency and precision. Somewhere along the way, we adopted the idea that as long as we're doing something, it's better than nothing. That mindset has to change. This mindset is one of the contributing factors to the growing toll of poor daily habits I spoke to earlier, and in order to help people begin to understand how to heal on their own, there must be a shift in this mindset.

If you struggle with low back pain and you shuffle through your day or walk rigidly like a robot, without activating the muscles that propel you forward, you may be doing more harm than good. Walking, when done correctly, can lubricate your joints, decompress your spine, and take pressure off your discs. When done poorly, it can irritate your joints, compress your discs, and create compensatory problems throughout your entire body.

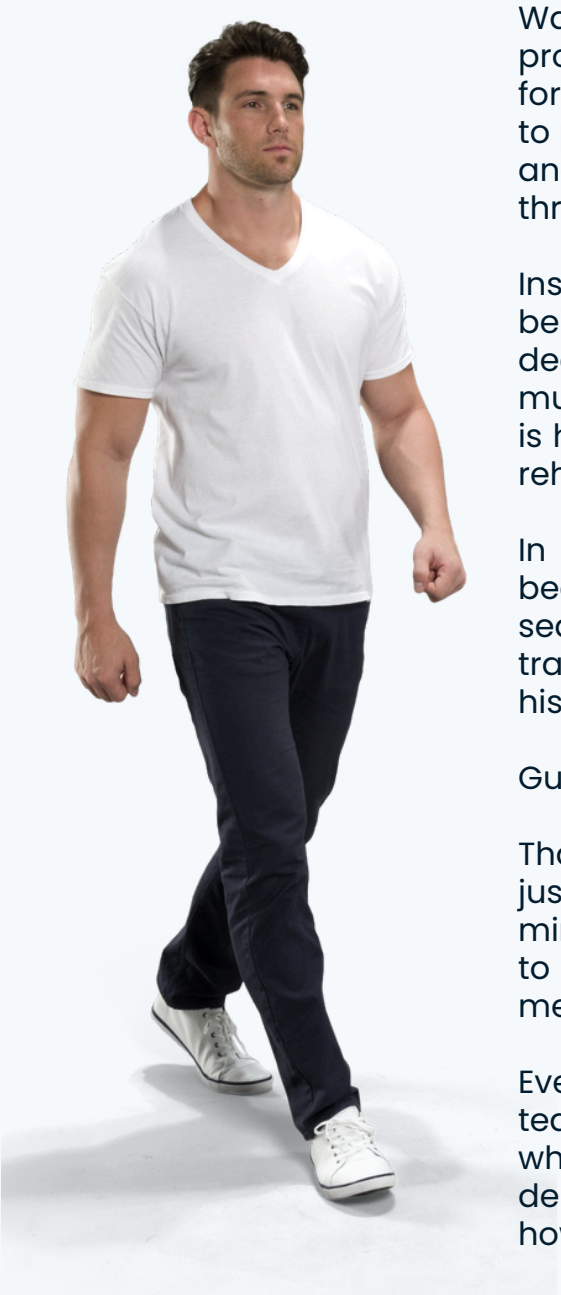
Nothing bothers me more than seeing someone who is proactive about their health but misses the details that matter most. Their good intentions put them in harm's way. That stops here, starting with walking.

When most people walk, they tend to collapse on themselves. Their abdominal muscles and glutes are not engaged. They throw their feet forward using their hip flexors, and their hips and torso move as one stiff board.



If you walk 10,000 steps every day with this form, you are reinforcing the very patterns that are hurting you. Stop now until you learn how to walk with intention.

Walking with intention means being focused on the mechanics of walking as you move. You engage your abdomen to decompress your spine and stand upright with your hips positioned underneath you. As you move, your hips rotate in one direction, and your torso rotates in the opposite direction. Your chin is gently retracted, and you visualize a cable pulling the crown of your head toward the sky.



Walking this way activates all the muscles that propel you forward. Instead of throwing your feet forward with your hip flexors, you use your glutes to push your legs backward. Instead of being stiff and rigid, your hips and torso generate energy through rotation to move you forward.

Instead of compressing your spine and joints by being slouched and collapsed, you're actively decompressing your spine by engaging the muscles that elongate and rotate your body. This is how we should walk for recreation, fitness, and rehabilitation.

In FIXED, I spoke about an NHL athlete who had been struggling with back pain throughout the season. By the time the offseason arrived, his training staff reached out to ask me to help with his rehabilitation.

Guess where we started first? Walking.

That probably surprises most people. We spent just five minutes breaking it down. After a few minutes of practicing this new pattern, he turned to me and said, "Why hasn't anyone ever shown me this before?"

Even professional athletes, with full medical teams around them, often say the same thing when I teach them to walk correctly or demonstrate simple corrective exercises. That's how overlooked these fundamentals really are.

From that day on, the NHL player made walking with intention a daily practice, not just for exercise or warm-ups, but as a cornerstone of his lower back rehabilitation.

If you want to see examples of proper hip and torso rotation, watch a YouTube video of Olympic race walkers or even runway models. They're dramatic examples, but the mechanics are real. Watch how their hips and torso rotate. Then observe yourself or people around you and notice what's missing.

The point is this: if you are trying to fix your back and your body, walking with intention is essential. Quality over quantity, every time. Half a mile of intentional walking can do more for your spine than 10,000 lazy steps.

WALKING WITH INTENTION GIVES YOU CONTROL.

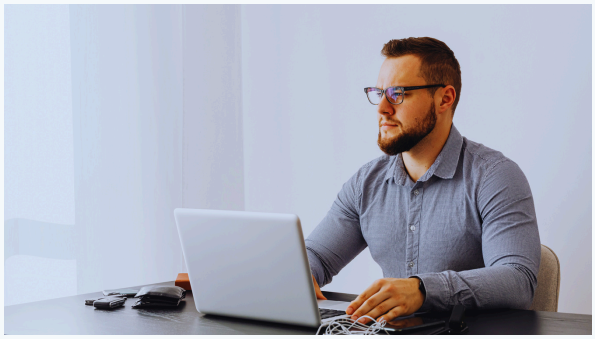
IT'S ONE OF THE SIMPLEST WAYS TO START HEALING YOUR BACK TODAY.

Now that you understand how walking can either heal or harm your body, it's time to look at something most of us do far more often: sitting. Sitting affects your lower back and posture, and if you don't have a strategy around sitting, those minutes quietly add up and can lead to long-term damage.

In Chapter 2, we'll break down how sitting negatively affects your body and how to position yourself to support healing instead of degeneration.

DON'T SIT FOR LONG PERIODS WITHOUT MOVING

YOU MIGHT BE THINKING, EVERYONE KNOWS SITTING IS BAD FOR YOUR BACK. BUT WHAT MOST PEOPLE DON'T REALIZE IS JUST HOW DAMAGING IT REALLY IS, ESPECIALLY IF YOU ALREADY HAVE BACK PAIN.







This is another one of those moments where people look at me and say, "Why hasn't anyone told me this before?" Because no one ever breaks down how sitting quietly erodes the spine over time, or how to fix it with a few small, consistent habits.

What might surprise you is how much time we actually spend sitting without realizing it. Take a moment to do a "sitting audit" of your day. Start from the moment you wake up until you go to bed:

- Breakfast
- Bathroom
- Drive to work
- Coffee break
- Work itself
- Drive home
- Dinner
- Couch for TV or screen time

When you add it all up, you may realize it's easier to list the times you stand than the times you sit. For most people, the standing list is much shorter.

To understand why sitting causes problems, we have to look at how the lumbar spine is designed to function. The lower back is designed primarily for two movements: bending forward (flexion) and arching backward (extension). The bones in your spine, called vertebrae, are meant to be stacked on top of one another so the joints between them, called facet joints, and the discs that sit between each vertebra can do their job.

The lumbar spine has a big job. It absorbs shock, transfers force throughout the body, allows for movement, and protects the spinal cord and the nerves that run through it. That's a lot of responsibility for a structure that spends most of the day under load.

The best way we can support this system is to use it as it was designed. Unfortunately, most of us do the opposite. We spend hours sitting, compressing the spine into a rounded position that stresses the discs and joints. Over time, this leads to breakdown, injury, and pain.



When you sit for long periods, you shut down the muscles that stabilize and support your spine, especially those in your hips and abdomen. These muscles act like a natural brace for your back, keeping your spine supported. When they deactivate, your body collapses into a rounded, compressed position.

This constant collapse creates pressure on the joints and discs. Over time, it contributes to degenerative changes in the spine, often referred to as arthritis. Many people don't realize that arthritis is not simply an age-related condition. In most cases, it's the result of poor daily movement habits like sitting, compounding over time.

I know the readers of this book are proactive. You wouldn't be here if you weren't trying to improve your health. But the real challenge often falls on those who must sit for hours each day because of work or home responsibilities. These are the weekend warriors.

All week long, your spine is under compression while your stabilizing muscles remain inactive. Then the weekend arrives, and you jump into activity. You play with your kids, join a pickleball tournament, or catch up on house projects. A spine that's been in "off mode" all week suddenly has to absorb force and move dynamically. That's when injuries happen.

Most people don't connect the dots between sitting all week and getting hurt on the weekend. No one ever explained that the spine can't go from "off" to "on" overnight.

It's rarely the activity itself that causes the problem. It's the contrast between prolonged sitting and sudden movement. Think of it like leaving your car parked for months and then trying to drive it hard without letting the engine warm up. Think of it like leaving your car parked for months and then trying to start it one frigid morning. Eventually, something gives out.

Eventually, something gives.

Some of my clients work with me virtually, so I need to adjust their daily routines because I can't provide hands-on care. One of those clients, whom we'll call Todd, is an executive who sits most of the day and was struggling with back pain and weight around his abdomen. At the time, addressing weight wasn't our primary focus.

Instead, I created a simple routine he could perform during the workday that required movement every 30 minutes and took under 45 seconds.
That adds up to under 15 minutes of total movement in an eight-hour day. After just two weeks, the change was dramatic. His lower back decompressed to the point where he could sit comfortably, and he had significantly less pain at home with his family.

The surprising part was that he lost seven pounds in those two weeks, simply from consistent movement. That's the power of commitment. Small habits done daily compound into meaningful change.

Here are a few simple habits that can help protect your spine, keep you mobile, and reduce back pain even if your job or lifestyle requires long hours of sitting.

1 **Sit with proper ergonomics and body positioning.**
This seems like common sense, but even when people know how to sit correctly, they gradually slip back into poor habits. Set yourself up for success from the start.

Your hips should be slightly higher than your knees.
Keep your feet flat on the floor or on a small footrest.
Sit tall with your chest lifted and your shoulders relaxed.
Make sure your screen is at eye level to avoid leaning forward.

2 **Move every 30 minutes.**
Set a timer to remind yourself to stand up every 30 minutes. Even 60 seconds of movement can make a difference. Walk with intention, do 20 air squats, or perform one minute of standing posture work. These micro-breaks restore circulation and reactivate your stabilizing muscles.

3 **Use a posture sensor monitor.**
Technology can work in your favor here. A posture sensor connects to your phone and gently vibrates when you've been sitting poorly for too long. It builds awareness and helps retrain posture and your brain without constant mental effort.

4 **Try a posture shirt or elastic straps.**
Elastic posture shirts or straps provide light resistance, encouraging muscle engagement. Avoid rigid braces, which can weaken muscles over time by doing the work for you. The goal is to train your muscles, not replace them.



Sitting itself isn't the enemy. Sitting without movement or awareness is. The body is built for motion, not for sitting in a chair. By standing, stretching, and moving regularly, you give your spine what it needs to function.

Remember, your spine is resilient when used correctly. Every time you move with intention, you remind your body how it was designed to work.

The small habit of standing and moving every 30 minutes could be the difference between chronic pain and a strong, mobile spine.

Most people don't think twice about how they sit until their back reminds them. Now that you understand how sitting quietly breaks you down, it's time to look at another hidden factor that does the same thing: excess weight.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how carrying extra weight affects your lower back and what you can do to reduce the pressure it places on your spine.

DON'T IGNORE YOUR WEIGHT

Weight management is essential when addressing a low back problem. Extra weight adds compressive force to the spine, which is exactly what we are trying to avoid when treating lower back conditions.

In a world where carrying a few extra pounds around the midsection has become normal, I'm here to tell you that it's not harmless if you're struggling with back pain and trying to change your life. Extra weight creates a chain reaction inside your body that goes far beyond appearance. It increases systemic inflammation, meaning your body becomes stuck in a constant state of low-level fire. When inflammation is high, the systems responsible for healing are forced to focus on putting out the fire rather than repairing your lower back.

If your body is inflamed and overloaded, your nervous system and immune system will always prioritize survival. That means your back pain is pushed to the back burner while your body focuses on what it sees as the bigger or more immediate threat.

This is why progress can feel so slow when inflammation and weight aren't addressed first. Working on a painful back through therapy while ignoring internal health is like taking two steps forward and one step back. Sometimes it's two steps forward and two steps back.

If you're going to invest your time, energy, and money into correcting the pain you're experiencing, let's do it the right way. Let's address the internal issues that might be holding you back. This book isn't about weight loss, but your body doesn't heal in isolated parts. To fix your back, you must also support the systems that enable healing.

In our office, we often begin with internal health programs before intensive rehabilitation. One of our most effective programs is called the RESTART Wellness Program. It's a structured 90-day system designed to reset the body through detoxification, nutrition, hormone optimization, and fitness.

Let me share a story that shows just how profound and powerful this approach can be.

A patient of mine named Cliff came in with severe lower back and neck pain. He arrived with his wife, and it was obvious the pain had taken a toll on him. His wife came along to help listen and remember the details because Cliff was exhausted from poor sleep and constant discomfort.

All he wanted was relief. But I had to be honest with him. Until we addressed his weight, we wouldn't make meaningful progress. He needed to lose about thirty pounds before he would see dramatic improvement. I explained that we could manage his pain temporarily, but true healing would have to come from within.

Cliff thought he was coming in for a few chiropractic sessions and some physical therapy. Instead, he left with a personalized 90-day wellness program focused on internal repair, along with a treatment plan designed to decompress his spine.

Within the first week, he dropped eleven pounds, most of it water weight that had been driving inflammation and pressure in his body. His face looked brighter, he was sleeping better, and his energy started to return. As the weight came off, our treatments became far more effective.

After thirty days, Cliff looked like a different person. His posture improved, his pain decreased dramatically, and his personality returned. He stood taller, laughed more, and was excited about what the next sixty days would bring. By the time he completed his program, Cliff had transformed not only his back and body, but his entire outlook on life.

Cliff's goal was simple: to be active with his kids again. Together, we made that happen, without drugs or surgery. His success came from taking responsibility and putting in the work. He said that familiar phrase I hear so often when people finally see the full picture:

"WHY HASN'T ANYONE TOLD ME THIS BEFORE?"

YOU DON'T HAVE TO OVERHAUL YOUR ENTIRE LIFE OVERNIGHT. START WITH THESE THREE SIMPLE STEPS AND COMMIT TO THEM FOR THE NEXT 30 DAYS.



Drink a detox shake every morning.
Start your day with a detox shake to help support your liver and heal your gut. Your gut health and liver function influence how well your body absorbs nutrients, eliminates toxins, and regulates inflammation. This is a foundational step toward reducing weight and healing from the inside out.

Avoid eating past 6 p.m.
When you stop eating earlier and avoid late-night snacking, your body can focus on repair instead of digestion while you sleep. This simple habit supports overnight recovery and prepares your gut for the next step: taking a probiotic.



Take a probiotic before bed.
A high-quality probiotic supports healthy gut bacteria. Taking it at night on an empty stomach allows your digestive system to reset and replenish while you sleep.

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If you want your back to improve, your entire body has to improve with it. Healing your back isn't just about stretching or strengthening. It's about creating an internal environment where healing can actually occur.

Remember, we're working toward a permanent fix, not a temporary solution.

Now that you understand how internal health and weight management support spinal healing, it's time to shift our focus back to movement. In the next chapter, we'll explore some of the most common exercises and machines found in the gym that can make back pain worse instead of better.

We'll start with one of the biggest offenders, the barbell squat, and uncover why it might be sabotaging your progress even when you think you're doing everything right.

DON'T DO BARBELL SQUATS

Barbell squats can be detrimental to your lower back if they're not performed with near-perfect form. In my experience, most people squatting without a trained professional supervising do so incorrectly and place harmful stress on their spines.



Let me be clear: squats can be an effective exercise when performed correctly. The problem is that "correctly" usually means being trained as an Olympic lifter or working closely with someone who truly understands Olympic lifting mechanics. Without that level of coaching, the risk to your lower back increases significantly.

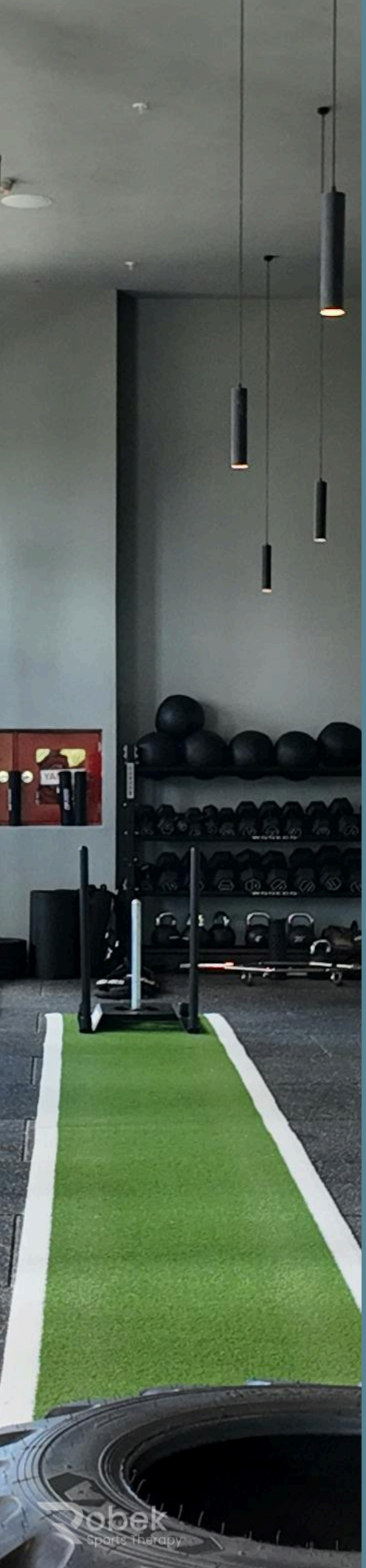
The biggest issue with back-loaded barbell squats, and even more so with front squats, is that they load the spine directly. This compresses the spinal discs, joints, and surrounding structures. What I commonly see is someone squatting with their torso leaning forward, allowing their knees to drift too far past their toes, and lifting more weight than their body is prepared to handle.

In an ideal barbell squat, the spine stays neutral, the abdomen and glutes are engaged, the hips drive backward, the knees track over the toes, and depth stays controlled rather than forced.

If you're struggling with lower back pain, an improperly performed squat can worsen your condition, even though you may have been told that squats are good for your back. The truth is, squats can be beneficial, but unless you're training specifically as an Olympic lifter, there's little reason to perform Olympic-style lifts while trying to heal your spine.

When I work with clients rehabbing lower back pain, most already have squatting ingrained in their training routine. The first thing I often do is ask them to temporarily remove barbell squats and instead use safer alternatives, such as the air squat or the hex bar deadlift.





One challenging case involved a CrossFitter named Claire. She was passionate about CrossFit, and I completely understood why. When I practiced in California, I had offices inside three CrossFit gyms. The community, culture, and results are powerful, and for many people, hard to walk away from.

Claire loved the intensity, but her form and loading patterns were contributing to her lower back pain and slowly breaking down the structures in her spine. When I suggested she modify her workouts, I encountered some resistance, which is understandable. For athletes who love their training, being told to change what they love can feel like a step backward.

I introduced her to the hex bar deadlift and showed her how to perform it safely. After a few coaching sessions and gradual increases in weight, she realized she was not only in a safer position but could also lift more while engaging the correct muscles.

She felt stronger, more stable, and most importantly, pain-free.

Now, when squats appear in her CrossFit programming, Claire either performs a visualization squat with a heavy imaginary load or uses the hex bar as a substitute for the barbell squat. That single adjustment made a massive difference in her recovery and performance. Once we made that change, we were able to move on to addressing her running mechanics, but we'll save that for a later chapter.

Here are a few simple alternatives that build strength, protect your spine, and still deliver the benefits of lower-body training.

1 **Air Squat**
Learn how to perform a proper bodyweight squat and practice it for repetitions. Air squats help decompress your lower back and build strength in your glutes and abdominal muscles, which play a critical role in supporting your spine.

2 **Hex Bar Deadlift**
This is one of my favorite barbell squat substitutes. With the hex bar, you lift the weight from the floor instead of placing a compressive load on your back. When performed correctly, the hex bar deadlift becomes a powerful rehabilitation and strength-building tool for the lower back. Progress slowly and work with a trained professional to ensure proper technique.

3 **Visualization Technique**
One of my favorite tools for clients who love lifting is visualization. If you enjoy squatting, get into the proper position and imagine there's a heavy load on the bar, choosing a weight that feels significant to you. Once you're fully focused, move through the lift as if the weight were real.

When done with intention, this technique stimulates the nervous and muscular systems in a way that closely mimics actual loading, without placing dangerous compression on the spine.

"Effects of Mental Imagery on Muscular Strength in Healthy and Active Individuals"

This study shows that imagining lifting heavier weights produces measurable muscle activation patterns through electromyography (EMG), indicating neural and muscular pathways are engaged during motor imagery.

https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4974856/

Squats can be helpful for a small number of people dealing with lower back pain, but for most, they cause more harm than good. I say this with full respect for those who love to train hard. Statistically and clinically, barbell squats are not the best choice for most people recovering from back pain.

Avoid movements that load your spine from the top down. Instead, prioritize exercises that train your body from the ground up. This approach supports spinal decompression, joint and disc protection, and the development of true functional strength.

In the next chapter, we'll take a closer look at another common gym exercise that may be working against you: the leg press machine. You'll learn why it can put unnecessary stress on your lower back and how to replace it with safer, more effective alternatives that promote healing rather than compression.

DON'T USE THE LEG PRESS MACHINE

You've seen it and maybe even used it. It's in most gyms and has been since the 1970s. The leg press machine is the one where people lie on their backs and place their feet on a large plate to press the weight away from them. It rose to popularity during the Arnold Schwarzenegger era of bodybuilding and still shows up in nearly every gym today.

You'll often see people loading several plates on each side and pressing an enormous amount of weight away from them. On the surface, it appears to be a safe way to strengthen the legs, especially for people with back pain. After all, your lower back is supported against the pad, and nothing seems to be moving, right?

WRONG.



There is actually a lot happening in your lower back when you use a leg press machine, even if you can't see it. If you pay close attention, you can feel it. It's called pressure. The leg press creates a massive, unnatural amount of pressure on the discs of the lower back, often while the spine is forced into flexion.

When I say "flexion," I'm referring to the moment your knees come toward your chest and your lower back begins to round. That rounding dramatically increases pressure on your spinal discs. At first, this position can feel good because it creates the illusion of a stretch or decompression. But over time, repeated pressure can cause microtrauma in the discs, leading to pain or injury.

If you're going to use the leg press machine, my general rule of thumb is to cut the weight in half of what you think you should use. But if you're open to eliminating this machine altogether, there are far better options that will help you build strength without putting your back at risk.

Here are a few safer and more effective alternatives.

Hex Bar Deadlift
We talked about this movement in the last chapter, but it's worth repeating because it's such a powerful exercise. The hex bar deadlift trains strength from the ground up instead of overloading the spine from the top down. Unlike a barbell, the hex bar keeps the load centered along your midline, keeping your center of gravity directly over your base of support. This positioning dramatically reduces compressive forces on the lower back and allows you to lift in a more upright, stable, and safer position. When coached properly, it's functional, safe, and builds power while respecting spinal mechanics and avoiding excessive compressive stress associated with the leg press.

Step-Up Goblet Squat with a Kettlebell
This exercise allows you to use the weight as a counterbalance while performing a deep squat. The step platform lets you achieve greater depth than squatting on the floor alone. People who enjoy the leg press often like the feeling of depth in the movement, and this variation provides that sensation in a much safer way. Instead of a heavy sled pressing into your spine, you're lifting weight from the ground up, engaging your spinal stabilizers and strengthening your legs, hips, and abdomen.

Bulgarian Split Squat
If you've ever used the leg press machine one leg at a time, the Bulgarian split squat is a near-perfect substitute. It's a safer, more athletic movement that builds unilateral strength, balance, and stability while also supporting lower back rehabilitation.



A story always comes to mind when I talk about the leg press machine. From time to time, I visit my clients' gyms to review their exercise routines and make sure they're set up for success. One day, I was working with a Major League Baseball pitcher who was rehabbing his lower back. During our initial evaluation, he mentioned that he regularly used the leg press in his strength program.

We removed it immediately, but I wanted to show him firsthand why it wasn't a good option for his spine. At his gym, I loaded a relatively light weight onto the machine, got into position, and demonstrated how most people perform the exercise. Midway through the explanation, I felt a familiar twinge in my lower back, the same area I had injured years earlier.

I managed to get off the machine without much discomfort, but I knew something wasn't right. Later that day, symptoms began radiating down my leg. In such a short span of time I had irritated the same disc I've spent years keeping healthy through my own back protocol. It took longer than I'd like to admit to fully recover from that one careless moment. Thankfully, I avoided drugs, injections, and surgery by following the same strategies I teach my patients to return to pain-free function.

THAT EXPERIENCE WAS A POWERFUL REMINDER FOR ME.

I NO LONGER DEMONSTRATE WHAT NOT TO DO.

I ONLY DEMONSTRATE WHAT TO DO.

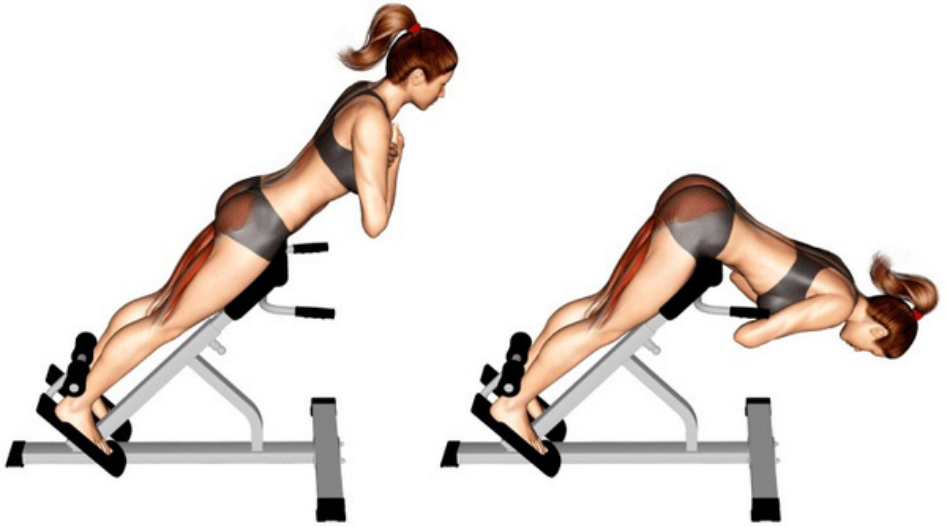
In the next chapter, we'll look at another piece of gym equipment that can be your best friend or your worst enemy, depending on how you use it: the Glute-Ham Developer (GHD), also known as the back extension machine.

DON'T HYPEREXTEND ON THE GHD

I could have written an entire book on this machine alone.

You know the one. You lock your ankles into the restraints, position the bottom of your feet on the plate, and fold yourself over the pads that secure your hips in place. From there, you allow your body to drop forward, rounding your lower back for a deep stretch, and then aggressively arch your spine upward into forceful extension.

Depending on the gym, there may also be a version of this machine set at a 45-degree angle. This variation was introduced after so many people were injured on the horizontal version and was marketed as being "safer" for the lower back.



Here's the truth. When used correctly, this piece of equipment can actually be one of your best lower back rehabilitation tools. When used incorrectly, it can do far more harm than good.

The machine is officially called the Glute-Ham Developer, or GHD. The name is important. It was designed to strengthen the glutes and hamstrings. Nowhere in the name does it say "back extension machine." Yet the overwhelming majority of people use it to repeatedly flex and hyperextend their spine, often while holding a weight plate in front of their chest.

That exact movement pattern is one of the most common contributors to lower back pain and injury.

If you've been performing this exercise this way, it's not your fault. The machine looks complex, and common sense suggests it's meant to strengthen the back. If you've never used it before, even better. You're starting from a clean slate, and that's a good thing.

Let's start with why this movement becomes a problem.

When you lock your legs into the ankle restraints and fold over the hip pads, most people round their lower back and relax the muscles that stabilize the spine. When they extend upward, they contract the lower back muscles aggressively and often rise above parallel, forcing the spine into hyperextension.

This creates excessive compression on the facet joints and can increase pressure on discs, especially if those structures are already irritated, degenerated, or injured.

It may feel like a good exercise at first. You feel a stretch at the bottom and a strong contraction at the top. That sensation is misleading. If you're holding a weight plate while performing this movement, you are compounding the stress and accelerating the breakdown of spinal tissues. Stop doing that immediately.

Now let's talk about how this exercise should actually be performed.

The GHD is designed to strengthen your glutes and hamstrings through movement while your lower back works isometrically, meaning it stabilizes without moving.

When your lower legs are secured and your hips are positioned correctly on the pads, the movement begins with a hip hinge, not a rounding of the spine. Think of the same hinge pattern you would use during an air squat or deadlift.

Lower your torso under control while maintaining a long, stable spine. At the bottom of the movement, pause for two seconds. Then contract your glutes and hamstrings to drive your hips into the pad and return your torso to the starting position.

CONTROL IS EVERYTHING HERE.

Your torso should never rise above parallel to the ground. Ideally, stay about 15 degrees below parallel to reduce stress on the spinal joints.

When performed correctly, you strengthen the muscles on the back side of your body while training your lower back to stabilize and support your spine safely throughout the movement.

The three main things to focus on during this exercise are:

- Initiate the movement with a hip hinge, not spinal rounding
- Use your glutes and hamstrings to lift your torso, and do not rise above parallel
- Imagine a cable gently pulling the crown of your head forward to help lengthen your spine throughout the movement

IF YOU NEED VIRTUAL COACHING SUPPORT, SEE THE RESOURCES SECTION FOR OUR VIRTUAL COACHES AND THE TEAMBUILDR APP.

This exercise strengthens the muscles that support the joints that allow flexion and extension in the lower back. That's why technique matters so much.

I once worked with a man in his mid-60s who was an avid golfer and consistently developed right-sided low back pain after playing a round. During his evaluation, he brought an MRI showing severe degeneration of the facet (spinal) joints in his lower back, along with stenosis, or narrowing of the space where the nerves exit.

When I asked about his gym routine, he mentioned one exercise he used: the "back extension machine." He described folding over the pads and aggressively arching backward into extension. He also mentioned that when he extended upward, he would often feel sharp pain in his lower back that sometimes radiated into his glute.

Despite the warning sign, he continued the movement because it felt like one of the few exercises that directly worked his back.

Once I explained the anatomy and showed him how that movement was compressing the exact area we needed to decompress, the light bulb went on. We didn't eliminate the exercise. We modified it.

Using the same machine, we turned a compressive movement into a decompressive one.

He looked at me and said:

"WHY HASN'T ANYONE TOLD ME THIS BEFORE?"

Now that you understand how poor movement patterns in the gym can damage your spine, let's move outside the gym to something even more common.

Running.

DON'T RUN WITHOUT LEARNING PROPER FORM

Running often feels simple, rhythmic, and liberating. It is one of the most accessible forms of exercise, and for many people, it represents discipline, clarity, and control. But for those dealing with lower back pain, running can quietly become the one thing preventing recovery.

When a client comes to me with back pain and tells me they are running long distances, we often have to have a difficult conversation. Running itself is not the problem. The problem is that most people never learn how to run in a way that supports the natural design of the human body. Poor form and faulty mechanics can place significant and repeated stress on the spine.

If running has always been your outlet, hearing that it might be contributing to your pain can feel discouraging. This does not mean you have to stop running forever. It means you need to learn how to run efficiently. When you do, running can become part of your healing process rather than something that holds you back from recovery.

Early in my career, I had the privilege of working at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, California, just south of San Diego. I was hired to work with the U.S. distance running team, and that experience completely changed my perspective on running.

I quickly learned how technical the movement truly is. Every stride had intention. The posture, cadence, mechanics, and efficiency these athletes displayed were remarkable. What stood out most was how rarely I encountered lower back pain among them.

Why? Because they had access to the world's best coaches, therapists, and movement specialists. Every stride was coached. Every inefficiency was corrected. Their form protected them.



Now let's look at the other side.

Recreational runners training for marathons, half marathons, or weekend trail runs often experience back pain. The difference between them and elite runners usually comes down to three things: form, mechanics, and coaching.

You cannot simply wake up one morning, buy a pair of running shoes, and decide to train for a marathon without consequences. Something will eventually give, and more often than not, it is the knees or the lower back.

Most of my clients are motivated and goal-oriented. They equate toughness with progress and often try to push through pain. But pain is not a badge of honor. It is a signal from the body that something needs to change. Ignoring it only leads to more damage.

Running is a skill. It is not something we are automatically good at just because we learned how to walk. A qualified running coach helps refine stride mechanics, improve efficiency, and protect the joints and spine over time.

If you have lower back pain and still want to run for exercise or mental clarity, it can be done safely with the right approach. Here are a few strategies that help many of my clients return to running without regret:

1 **Master intentional walking.**

Start with walking mechanics, as discussed earlier. Healthy running is built on efficient walking.

2 **Practice backward walking and running on a treadmill.**

This improves balance, coordination, and control through the hips and spine while reducing forward-impact stress.

3 **Work with a qualified running coach.**

Learn to treat running as a skill. Coaching builds awareness, efficiency, and longevity.



There are many more techniques beyond the scope of this book, but these strategies provide a strong starting point. Be honest about what your body can tolerate, especially if pain is already present.

Let me tell you about a client named Brian. He is one of the most driven individuals I have ever worked with, deeply committed to his family, fitness, and personal growth. Brian thrives on challenge. He has completed multiple endurance events and once woke up on a random morning and decided to run a marathon simply because he felt like it.

THAT MINDSET EVENTUALLY CAUGHT UP WITH HIM.

After one marathon, his preparation had been inconsistent, and his recovery was minimal. Within days, inflammation built up around a lumbar disc that had been absorbing repeated stress. The pain became sharp and began radiating into his glute and down his leg. Despite being strong and highly motivated, Brian had never received formal running coaching. He relied on grit rather than mechanics and on intensity rather than efficiency.

Even the strongest body will eventually break down under the wrong type of stress. Brian struggled for a period of time, but through proper treatment, movement correction, and small lifestyle changes, we helped him recover. He learned how to train smarter, not harder.

Today, he is back to being the positive, energetic father and coach he has always been, but now with a deeper respect for how his body works.

Like many of my clients, Brian eventually said what so many people say once they understand their movement patterns: “Why hasn’t anyone told me this before?”

Running can either build your body or break it down. It can be healing or destructive. The difference comes down to awareness, form, and respect for your body's signals. You do not have to stop running, but you do need to learn how to run smarter, listen to your body, and move with intention.

Running strengthens the body through forward motion. This develops endurance and rhythm, but it leaves one key component of spinal health undertrained: rotation. The spine was designed to twist, turn, and transfer force from one side of the body to the other.

When we only move straight ahead, we neglect the muscles and joints that protect the spine during rotational movement. In the next chapter, we will shift our focus from linear motion to rotational training, a critical element in developing a strong, resilient, and fully functional spine.

DON'T NEGLECT ROTATIONAL TRAINING

Rotation is one of the most powerful and overlooked movements your body can perform. Most people focus almost exclusively on moving forward and backward, but your spine also needs to twist and turn to remain healthy. The long-term health of your joints and discs depends on your ability to rotate with strength, control, and awareness.

When you avoid rotation, you remove one of the key movements that keep your spine adaptable. It's important to understand that your lower back is not designed to rotate very much. Most rotational motion should come from your hips and your mid-back rather than the lower back. When those areas are weak, stiff, or poorly trained, the lower back is forced to compensate. That is when torsional stress builds, joints become irritated, and discs become vulnerable. This is where the spine begins to become less adaptive over time.

Because we spend most of our lives facing forward, we naturally gravitate toward linear movement patterns. Over time, this makes rotational strength and control even more important. Rotation is what allows you to move efficiently in sports, lift safely, and respond quickly to unexpected demands in daily life. It is how your spine learns to handle real-world forces.

One of the most common ways people injure their lower back is by bending forward and twisting while lifting. This combination of spinal flexion and rotation is responsible for countless disc injuries. The good news is that this risk can be dramatically reduced by training your body to rotate correctly.

The first step is awareness. Begin analyzing your rotational pattern such as noticing how you twist, reach, and turn throughout the day. The second step is to intentionally strengthen your rotational pattern. When rotation is trained slowly, under control, and with proper mechanics, you protect your spine and reinforce how your body is designed to move.

When I coach clients through rotational exercises like the cable twist, they almost always rush the movement. They rely on momentum instead of control. Once they slow down, focus on their breathing, and stay present with the resistance, everything changes. They begin to feel the muscles of the abdomen, hips, and spine working together as a system.

I remind them to pause briefly at the end range, maintain control, and then initiate the return by driving from the hip. That is the moment when they realize this movement is not just about strength. It is about connection. It is about transferring force smoothly from one region of the body to another. It is about moving intentionally and training your body to rotate correctly rather than simply going through the motions.

When clients experience true rotational control for the first time, there is often an immediate shift in how their body feels and moves. I always wish I could have been there earlier in their journey, because this single movement pattern can change everything. It restores proper load sharing between the hips and spine, improves mobility, and reactivates muscles that may have been dormant for years. For many people, rotational training is the missing link in their rehabilitation.

Two Foundational Rotational Movements

1 **Spinal Twist (Cable or Resistance Band)**
When you perform a spinal twist with your feet facing forward, your pelvis remains stable while your torso rotates. This encourages rotation through the mid-back and hips rather than the lower back. At the end of the movement, engaging the hips and driving force from the ground up creates a safe, full-body rotation pattern. This is one of the most effective ways to train rotation while protecting the spine.

2 **Kneeling Rotation (Bodyweight)**
If you do not have access to equipment, this variation works in any location. Start in a half-kneeling position with both knees bent at ninety degrees. Engage your abdomen and keep your hips stacked beneath you. Initiate the movement by activating the back hip and allowing that force to travel upward through the spine into the torso. This promotes controlled rotation, improves stability, and can create a decompressive effect along the spine.

Rotational movement keeps your spine strong, mobile, and prepared to adapt to real life, but awareness does not stop there. True resilience comes from learning how to manage force, not avoid it. When you move with intention, your body becomes more coordinated, more efficient, and more protective of itself. Strength is not about how much you can move, but how well you control it. Once you understand how your hips and spine work together to rotate safely, the next step is learning how to position your body so that the load works for you instead of against you.

That brings us to one of the most important principles in protecting your back: closer is stronger.

DON'T HOLD WEIGHT FAR FROM YOUR BODY

Every day, we lift, reach, and move in ways that challenge our spine, not because we want to, but because life demands it. Whether it's at work, at home, or in the gym, your back is constantly being asked to manage load. The key is learning how to move in a way that keeps your spine strong and protected. One of the most powerful lessons you can learn is this: the closer the weight is to your body, the stronger and safer you are.

When you reach out and hold your weight away from your center, you instantly increase pressure on your lower back. Your spine and discs are designed to handle load efficiently, but they rely on leverage working in your favor. Every inch of distance creates more strain, increases the margin for injury, and creates a unproportionate load on the spine. Bringing the weight closer to your body allows your hips, legs, and abdomen to share the load more effectively. That is how you protect your spine while still getting stronger.



Think about how often you find yourself reaching or leaning forward in daily life:

- **PLACING OR REMOVING SOMETHING FROM THE TRUNK OF YOUR CAR**
- **LOADING OR UNLOADING A BABY SEAT**
- **BRUSHING YOUR TEETH OR SHAVING WHILE LEANING OVER THE SINK**
- **PERFORMING A BENT-OVER ROW WITH THE WEIGHT TOO FAR FROM YOUR BODY**
- **DOING A STRAIGHT-LEG DEADLIFT WITH THE BAR DRIFTING FORWARD**
- **HANDING YOUR CHILD TO SOMEONE ACROSS FROM YOU**



These moments may seem harmless, but they all challenge your spinal stability. When repeated day after day, they can lead to irritation, breakdown, and pain. The good news is that once you understand how leverage works, you gain control. You can move safely and confidently in every situation.

Minor adjustments create significant results.
Here are a few simple ways to protect your back in real life:

- Keep weight as close to your body as possible at all times
- Never reach forward to place a heavy load away from you
- Avoid lifting or placing objects deep into the trunk of a car
- During a straight-leg deadlift, let the bar glide along your legs
- In a bent-over row, keep the bar close and controlled
- Stand tall when brushing your teeth or shaving
- If standing for long periods, rest one foot on a small stool to reduce pressure on your lower back

A little awareness goes a long way. These small decisions, repeated daily, can prevent years of discomfort and keep your spine strong and functional for life.
One of my clients, Jose, was an auto mechanic who spent most of his day bent over the hoods of cars and trucks. By his late thirties, his back pain had progressed to the point where he struggled to make it through a full workday. No matter what he tried, the grueling pain kept returning.

When I explained how posture, leverage, and load distance affect the spine, something clicked. He realized that every time he reached across an engine, he was forcing his lower back to absorb the majority of the load. That dull, familiar ache was his body asking for a change. He made one simple adjustment by changing his stance and keeping his body closer to his work. Within weeks, his pain began to fade.

As Jose's back healed, something even more important happened. His confidence returned. Each pain-free day gave him more energy and motivation. That momentum carried into other areas of his life. He began eating better, moving more, and eventually returned to the gym. In just three months, he lost twenty pounds and gained something far more valuable: belief in his body again. That simple shift in awareness did more than reduce his pain. It reconnected him to the person he used to be.

Pain often holds you back quietly, shaping your habits and limiting your potential without you even realizing it. But awareness changes everything. Once you understand how your body moves, you can begin to take control of your health and your future.

Awareness is the first step, but awareness alone is not enough. What matters is what you do with it. Every small action you take from this point forward is either moving you closer to healing or pulling you away from it. The next step is about commitment. Turning knowledge into daily action is what creates lasting change.

DON'T GIVE UP ON YOUR COMMITMENT TO HEALING

At the end of the day, if you keep one foot in and one foot out, your back pain will likely come and go, but never fully resolve. One of the biggest struggles I see with people dealing with low back pain is that the pain itself often wears them down. Discomfort, frustration, fear, and emotional fatigue slowly erodes more than just their spine but their commitment to getting better as well.

Healing your back takes more than exercises or treatments. It requires consistency, patience, and the willingness to keep showing up even when progress feels slow. The people who experience the most meaningful transformations are not the ones who do everything perfectly. They are the ones who refuse to quit on themselves.

In this final chapter, it's important to be direct because real change only happens when you commit to it. Commitment and goals are not the same thing. Goals are outcomes you hope to achieve, but they are not fully within your control. Winning a competition is a goal, and both sides can want it just as badly. A commitment, on the other hand, is a promise you make to yourself. When you break it, you weaken trust in yourself, and that has consequences far beyond your back pain.

When you commit, you commit to both the process and the outcome.

You remove excuses and stop negotiating with yourself. Committing to healing your back and taking ownership of your health may be one of the most important decisions you ever make, not just for yourself, but for the people who depend on you.

Once you begin to notice progress, even small improvements, something shifts internally. You begin to trust your body again. You feel stronger, more capable, and more in control. Momentum builds. You start eating better, moving with more intention, and shaping new healthy patterns. Healing your back becomes about more than reducing pain. It becomes the beginning of becoming the person you were meant to be.

The good news is that you do not have to do this alone. Structure and support matter. There are systems designed to help you stay consistent and accelerate your progress. We have created programs specifically for people who need a clear, realistic path forward. These systems provide guidance, accountability, and momentum, not guesswork.

As mentioned earlier in this book, my more in-depth work, FIXED, walks you through the Three Pillars I use with every client to resolve back pain and rebuild long-term health. It is paired with a 30-day online course that guides you step by step through Structural, Internal, and Mental Performance.

ShawnRobek.com/course

The course includes a hands-on workbook to help you track progress, reinforce habits, and stay accountable. When additional support is needed, our virtual coaches are available to help you refine your approach and continue moving forward.

My ask of you is simple. You have made it to the end of this book, which tells me you are serious about change. Now is the time to make a commitment to yourself that you will not break. It does not need to be dramatic. It needs to be sustainable. Choose one small action you can take daily that will create a positive ripple effect in your life.

Take a moment to decide what that action will be. Once it's clear, commit to it. Write it down, say it out loud, or share it with someone who will help keep you accountable. Consistent, small, intentional steps can completely transform your health, confidence, and future.

In this book, we covered ten things to avoid if you have low back pain. Can you commit to applying just one of these principles daily until it becomes automatic? If you need guidance or support, we are here to help. Please reach out to us or click the link below to share your story so we can better understand how to serve you.

ShawnRobek.com/Consultation

This chapter is more than a conclusion. It is a decision point. Without commitment and a system to follow, motivation fades, and old habits return. But when you commit, everything changes. You build clarity, strength, and momentum that extend far beyond your back pain.

You started this journey searching for relief. Along the way, you discovered something more powerful: your ability to take control of your own healing. Keep applying what you've learned. Stay consistent. And never underestimate what your body is capable of when you give it the opportunity to heal and thrive.

YOUR COMEBACK STARTS NOW

My purpose is to help proactive people overcome pain and get back to doing what they love. It is also my mission to help people avoid unnecessary back surgery by teaching them how to take an active role in their recovery through better daily habits and a deeper commitment to healing.

I am not here to doctor you. I am here to coach and guide you, helping you pursue your goals and build a life that is no longer limited by pain.

Remember, it is not your fault that you have not learned how to fix your back pain. Most people are never taught how to care for their spine effectively. That is what I am here for. My team and I are ready to help you move past temporary fixes and toward a permanent system that works. Invest your effort in something that helps you heal your back and transform your health for the long term.

You have already taken the most important step by starting this journey. That matters. Now keep going. Stay consistent. Stay curious. Stay committed.

Change does not happen overnight, but it always begins with a decision. Every small action you take in the right direction builds strength, confidence, and momentum. Over time, that commitment becomes your healing.

We look forward to the opportunity to connect with you personally.

If this information resonated with you, we invite you to reach out and continue exploring your healing journey with us. You do not have to navigate this alone. We sincerely welcome the opportunity to connect with you through Shawnrobek.com/consultation for individualized support.

Please keep an eye out for upcoming resources, including FIXED— we are committed to continuing to support you in your healing journey.



Robek Sports Therapy