



## FIVE QUESTIONS / For Sandy Blaine

### ***Sandy Blaine helps Pixar workers keep limber***

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Pixar Animation Studios is responsible for sparking the brilliant careers of many a young talent, most of them fueled by long, feverish hours crouched in front of a computer pursuing technical and artistic excellence. Sandy Blaine is not one of those people. But her work at Pixar has given her career a boost as well. Blaine was a serious practitioner of yoga who happened to be working as a production assistant on "Toy Story" when one of the producers suggested that she teach a yoga class at lunchtime.

That was 14 years ago. Blaine has since become a full-fledged yoga instructor, including a stint with a local professional sports team (which she can't name but which is a far, far cry from yoga), as well as co-founder and co-director of the Alameda Yoga Station. She's also continued to work at Pixar, where she still teaches lunchtime yoga classes two or three times a week.

Blaine's long relationship with the makers of movie magic has turned her attention to something she finds distressing. "Because my other teaching is in yoga studios, it was just a different population. (At Pixar) I really saw how people were suffering from longtime effects of computer use. You see young people walking around with these elderly spines and shoulders. It's worrying."

It's no secret that computer use has become a major part of most of our lives. "It's your work, recreation, communication, it's really everything," she said. "We go from working on a computer to going home and playing computer games, texting, catching up on e-mail. It never stops. One bleeds into another."

"There has always been some repetitive strain injury, but it's so epidemic now, it's really quite amazing. I worked in law offices in summers during college, and there were clerks who were at their word processors all day," she said. "But there's never been anything like this."

Blaine thinks the potent combination of high stress and computer ubiquity has created a body-crunching monster we're all increasingly prey to. Her desire to provide succor before the really bad stuff happens has resulted in her latest book, "Yoga for Computer Users: Healthy Necks, Shoulders, Wrists and Hands in the Postmodern Age (Rodmell Press, 2008), which features two of Blaine's students at Pixar Studios as models.



## Preventive Health Specialist

### **FIVE QUESTIONS** / For Sandy Blaine, *continued*

Q: When you watch a movie like "WALL-E," are you thinking of all those poor, tensed-up shoulders and aching wrists?

A: When I'm watching the movies, I am just thrilled to see the results of the hard work of the people I've been working with to stay healthy and energized. The movies are so brilliant. But when I walk through the halls of Pixar, I certainly think of them hunched over their desks, and when I hear about the long hours they work, I think of that.

Q: So what's the worst thing that can happen and how can yoga help?

A: While RSI is not going to kill you, I have seen quite a few people who have had to change careers. I've seen it turn into ... arthritis. I've seen it progress so that people cannot hold a spoon. It can compromise your life and your ability to make a living. Once nerve damage has set in, there is no consistently reliable cure. Prevention is the best. Yoga is fantastic for prevention.

Q: What do I need to look out for when working at the computer?

A: Chair proportions. Your hips need to be higher than your knees. It's easier on the back. Healthy posture comes from movement of the hip sockets and flexibility of the hips. That's a huge part of good posture that's not really understood. A phrase used by physical therapists is "it's not the criminal that screams, it's the victim." If movement of the pelvis is impaired by inflexibility, little joints in your back suffer and get damaged.

It's the same with the neck. The big joints are hips and shoulder joints. If your shoulder joints are tight, then your upper back is tight and there's more strain on your hands. Those muscles can get so tight it affects nerve pathways down to the hands. Your hands feel the strain, but if your shoulders and upper back are looser, it'll be less of a problem.

Q: What are the most important stretches I could be doing while at the computer?

A: Shoulder, neck and arm stretches. Even just putting your hands behind your head and bending your upper back over the top of your chair. Rest your head there and take five breaths. Another good one is sitting up straight and folding your arms behind your back and trying to reach (opposite) elbows. Hold for 30 seconds to a minute. This is energizing because it opens your lungs and allows more oxygen in.

Something I teach in my yoga classes: Interlace your fingers and roll your wrists around a bunch of times. Very soothing and it's a good countermovement. One more thing is to do a little spinal twist. Sit at the edge of your chair, cross the right knee over the left, rest your right forearm on your left thigh, and twist your ribcage toward your left shoulder, your head should follow. (Do the same in the other direction.) You can sit at the edge of your chair, plant your feet wider than your hips, hips slightly higher than knees, bend forward from your hip sockets, put elbows on knees to support your spine and try to elongate your spine. If you're more flexible and it's not too intense for your back, you can bend forward and hang like a rag doll. It's better if your chair is braced against a wall.

Q: In your book, you recommend that people do a little yoga to unwind when they get home from work rather than immediately having a glass of wine or busting into that bag of chips, but what if I have to feed my cats and do all this other stuff?

A: I'm not saying don't have that glass of wine or bag of potato chips, just pause so you have more choice. It's great if you're choosing it if you want it rather than from habit or addiction. Here's what I think you could do: Put it on a list, put yoga on top, then feed your cats and do it. It's a whole different ballgame if you have kids; then you do it when they go to bed. Maybe it's just one minute. Sit down and breathe and relax. After that, you decide, do I really need to get going or could I take a 10-minute break? I recommend legs up the wall or seated position on the wall, badakonasana, bound angle pose, against the wall. Something really restful and quiet.