

*Improve Muscles-Improve Life:  
How Optimizing Muscle Function  
Could Be the Missing Link to  
Solving Your Musculoskeletal  
Problems*

**By Chris Vercelli MATm, CMES**

## Down the Rabbit Hole...

In 1999, a movie called *The Matrix* was released and it was an enormous box office success. The plot centers around a man named Neo, who early in the movie, discovers some things about the world that are very alarming. Because of this, it is impossible for him to go back to his old ways of thinking. Shortly after these initial discoveries, Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) is approached by a man named Morpheus (played by Lawrence Fishburne) and he is told that he's only seen the tip of the iceberg. Next, they sit down inside a darkened room by a fireplace, and Morpheus places in front of him two pills, a red pill and a blue pill. He tells Neo that if he wants to go all the way "down the rabbit hole" and have his eyes completely opened to the truth, he must take the red pill. Conversely, he says that if he would rather go home, forget everything he's learned, and go back to his old way of thinking, he must take the blue pill. If you've seen the movie, you know that he took the red pill. And I'm sure the stars of the two sequels are very glad he did!

I bring this up because over the years, when I've shared the information in this book in lectures, TV and radio interviews, and in countless one on one conversations, I've felt a little bit like Morpheus. In those moments, people have their eyes opened to a part of reality that they never knew existed. And, if they choose to take the red pill and go down the rabbit hole, they may never look at things the same. With that said, I want to personally thank you for choosing to read *Improve Muscles-Improve Life*. As the title suggests, within these pages is information (much of which you've probably NEVER heard before) that has the power to change your life for the better. Why do I say that? Because if you're reading this book than chances are good that you are one of the many people alive today who has some type of physical problem that is negatively affecting your life. If you're like most of my

clients, part of that problem could be pain, weakness, inflexibility, lagging physical performance, postural issues, balance problems or some other type of physical restriction. *What is it for you?*

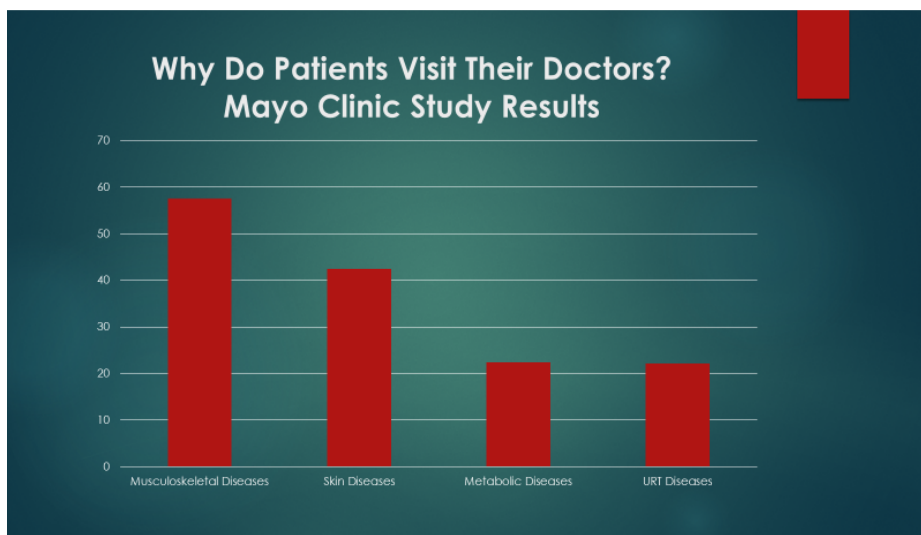
Maybe you're frustrated because this problem is something you've had for far too long. Maybe you're angry because it's negatively affecting your personal life, your work life or your social life. Maybe you're annoyed because you've sought help for the problem/s only to be disappointed that the time, energy and money you spent didn't get you where you wanted to go. Maybe you're afraid of what's going to happen if things get worse. Maybe now you've been wondering, "*What am I missing?*" If this describes you, you're not alone. Nearly every person I've worked with has had the same experience prior to working with me.

In fact, it probably won't surprise you to hear that millions of people can relate to the type of pain and suffering that you're experiencing. It may not be in the same area or be the same in severity, but statistics show that a large percentage of people battle mild to severe musculoskeletal problems somewhere in their body. Musculoskeletal problems are problems that affect the muscles, joints, bones, cartilage, bursa, fascia, tendons, and nerves. They include things like arthritis, tendonitis, bursitis, fasciitis, bulging or herniated disks, sciatica, torn muscles, torn ligaments and other things like these. They typically manifest as pain and they create various kinds of physical restrictions.

Believe it or not, studies show that these problems (technically classified as "diseases") are the most common health problems in America today. For instance, in 2013 the Mayo clinic published the results of a study entitled: "***Why do patients visit their doctors? Assessing the most prevalent conditions in a defined US population.***" In the study, they analyzed the files of 142,377 patients of all ages and

rates. 53% were women and 47% were men. They found that **57.5% of all patients had a diagnosed disease (such as those I've mentioned) in their musculoskeletal system.** This made it the most common health problem, by far.

You can see the other top finishers on the chart below.



**Skin diseases came in second at 42.7%, nearly 15% lower than musculoskeletal diseases. Metabolic diseases came in third at 22.4% and upper respiratory diseases came in fourth at 22.1%.**

If that isn't alarming enough, take a look at these other statistics. It's hard to even imagine all the suffering that these numbers represent all over our great nation.

**In the United States alone:**

- It is estimated that between 50-100 million people (and possibly up to 126 million) have chronic pain. (*Centers for Disease Control, Institute of Medicine, National Institute of Health*)
- Each year chronic pain costs us nearly \$600 BILLION dollars in medical treatments and lost productivity. (*Institute of Health*)
- 54 million people have arthritis and 24 million of them are physically limited by it. (*Center for Disease Control*)
- 60% of the people with arthritis are between 18-64. (*Center for Disease Control*)
- 80% of the population will have lower back pain at some point in their lifetime. (*Mayo Clinic*)
- At any given time, 25% of the population will report that they've had back pain in the previous 3 months. (*Mayo Clinic*)
- 7.2 million people have a knee or hip replacement and over 1 million new ones are done each year. (*Mayo Clinic*)
- Over 2 million people are diagnosed with a rotator cuff tear each year. (*American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons*)
- Approximately 60,000 people per year have nerve damage from knee replacement surgery, approximately 24,000 develop blood clots, and approximately 10,800 develop an infection. (*Journal of Anesthesiology, Medicare and private pay claims data*)

- **Approximately 70% of people over 65 use an anti-inflammatory drug at least once a week. (*American Journal of Managed Care*)**
- **Each year over 100,000 people are hospitalized due to health complications caused by anti-inflammatory drugs. Over 16,500 of them die from those complications. (*American Journal of Managed Care*)**

I think you'd agree that these statistics are both shocking and sad. They also represent the need for a different and better solution to musculoskeletal problems than the ones we typically seek. One that is lower risk, less invasive, and has the power to correct, as well as the power to prevent. Thankfully, you will discover a solution exactly like that as you read this book, so swallow that red pill and let's go!

## **Why This Book Matters**

When I published the first edition of *Improve Muscles-Improve Life* in 2013, I was 8 years into my career. Now, as I write the third edition, I'm well into my second decade and I've already had the amazing privilege of investing tens of thousands of clinical hours into helping close to 700 people improve a musculoskeletal problem. In addition to working extensively in my own practice, I've also worked in athletic clubs, physical therapy clinics, assisted living homes, a doctor's office and a pro baseball teams' spring training facility. I've seen everything from an 80+ year old woman on a walker who can barely move without

pain, to a 4-time MLB All-Star catcher with leg problems that threatened to force him into early retirement.

Over the years, I've also been exposed to many techniques, therapies, devices, technologies, medications and medical procedures, and to be 100% honest, I still have not seen a superior solution to the one I write about in this book. Over the years I've even had MD's, Chiropractors, Massage Therapists, and Physical Therapists as clients, and they've raved about how unique and amazing these techniques are. In fact, although musculoskeletal problems are typically some of the most challenging problems for practitioners to handle, during our most recent clinic audit we found that our clients had roughly a 78% "success" rate. Success being defined as hearing the person say that they are either happy or very happy with the results they've achieved while adhering to the program. Not surprisingly, the biggest variable in this is how long they've had the problem/s. Problems less than 10 years old typically yield an even higher success rate.

One of these very happy people was Carol, a woman who had such horrible back pain that she actually entertained the idea of assisted suicide in Oregon. I'll never forget the day when Carol came in ecstatically grinning from ear to ear because she was able to do one of her favorite activities without pain for the first time since the injury. You will see more of her story elsewhere in this book. I also remember Brian, a man who had not one, not two, not three, but five torn muscles in his shoulder. His doctor was convinced that he would need surgery if he wanted to have pain free movement again, especially if he ever wanted to play tennis. By the grace of God and by using the techniques described in this book, Brian recovered all his movement, his pain went away, and he went back to playing tennis. Four years later, he still has not had surgery. You can read more of his story later in this book also.

There are dozens and dozens of stories like this that I could share with you. You will find a few of them imbedded in various pages throughout this book, like the one below from Lori. I promise you that all the people are real, the results are real, and they all approved of the use of their comments. I include these to encourage you.

*“When we joined the Meadows for the summer, we met Chris and attended his MAT presentation. I've had everything under the sun done to my back after my surgery and this technique really made sense to me. WOW! I went in with my left hip bothering me to the point I thought I needed a joint replacement and now the pain is completely gone. Nothing has ever worked so well as MAT. My husband was so impressed that he is now going to Chris too. Run don't walk! Make that appointment for a review with Chris. I'm doing things I couldn't do before and I've got my lifestyle back with a smile on my face.*

**—Lori Walker, Retired Pharmaceutical Rep, Lakewood Ranch, FL**

In addition to these stories, throughout this book I will also explain to you the mechanics behind the formation of musculoskeletal problems, the vital role the muscle system plays in their prevention and correction, and how undetected and untreated muscle inhibition can be a major contributing cause of them. I will also explain some of the science behind why we feel pain and how activating inhibited muscles can lead to pain relief. By the end, you will understand how improving muscle function in the way I describe, will not only help you feel better and heal better, but how it will also make you more “invincible.” If you’re laughing, keep reading because I will explain this in chapter 5. Also, in chapters 6 and 7, I will show you a few assessments you can do on yourself at home, as well as a few ways you can begin to improve your muscle and joint health immediately. All that to say, I think you will benefit tremendously from reading it all the way through.



Before we get in to the nitty gritty though, I want to take a slight detour and answer the question that I'm asked by nearly all my clients at some point- "*how did you get into this kind of work?*" It's an unusual story that I've been told is very inspirational. I think you'll be glad that I included it.

## **How I Got to This Point**

The year was 1997. Bill Clinton was President, Titanic was the big movie at the box office, and I was a sophomore in high school living a normal teenage life. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, my dad picked me up from school and took me to what I thought was going to be a routine doctor visit. We were going to get a second opinion about the swollen lymph nodes on my neck and shoulders, which my internist had diagnosed as "mono" just a few days earlier. After a few tests, I was told what was really causing my swelling. "*We found leukemia in your test,*" the doctor said. "*We have to begin chemotherapy right away.*" My dad and I looked at each other in total disbelief, as if what the doctor had told us couldn't possibly be true. Unfortunately, it was. On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, I began the first round of treatments in my 26-month long chemotherapy protocol, and by the second day I already felt like a truck had hit me. This was when I realized how serious all this was.

Over the next 10 months, the intense chemo drugs and my extremely sedentary lifestyle were causing my body to completely fall apart. In fact, I was in such bad physical condition that the one time I tried to walk a few blocks, I literally almost passed out from exhaustion. At 16 years old, I felt like a decrepit 90-year-old man, and it seemed that my health and my life were slipping out of control. To make matters worse, the doctors put me on corticosteroids, which in addition to chewing up my

bone and muscle tissue, also made me want to eat like crazy. Within those 10 months I put on over 40 extra pounds despite having lost a significant amount of muscle.

I finally hit rock bottom in October of 1998. One night, I became so fed up with what was happening to my life that I decided to take back control of my body. The next day I woke up and began a process of lifestyle changes that included exercising regularly and eating right. I continued this diligently all the way through my chemotherapy, and within 22 months, I had lost over 80 pounds of body fat, I had put on over 50 pounds of muscle, I was healed of the cancer, and I had gotten into such good condition that I could physically do whatever I wanted without restriction. I was ecstatic.

After experiencing how much my health transformation improved my life, I decided that I wanted a career that allowed me to help other people improve their health too. After a short stint at the YMCA, I was honored to be hired as a Resistance Training Specialist by the highly respected Exercise and Biomechanics guru Jay Weitzner. Jay had a master's degree in Exercise Science, an extensive amount of advanced specialty training, and experience with all kinds of different clients. To this day he is still one of the most brilliant men I've ever known. The first time I ever spoke to Jay he told me that if I wanted to have any chance of working for him then I had to pass a course developed by one of the leading Biomechanics Specialists in the world. Over the years this course had not only been taken by exercise professionals, but also by Physical Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Medical Doctors and Chiropractors. It was the most advanced course of its kind, and it had an enormous failure rate. Despite that, I felt confident that if I put my mind to it, I could succeed.

There were 15 others that took the course with me, and somehow, I was one of only two people that passed. The other was a man who Jay had been personally consulting with for over 7 months and to my amazement, he only scored 5 points higher than I did. After this, Jay hired me on the spot. The course gave me a detailed understanding of joint and muscle function, injury prevention and how to create exercise programs that worked around people's ailments. Because of this, most of the people who hired me were the ones who had musculoskeletal problems. Although it was rewarding to help these people become more fit, as I saw their suffering my heart was burdened to also find a solution to the chronic pain problems they were experiencing. Sadly, most of them hadn't found anything that worked very well, and they didn't know what else to do.

Right around this time a cutting-edge process called Muscle Activation Techniques (MAT) was starting to gain national recognition. Through the amazing word of mouth success stories from clients and practitioners, as well as from the developers' prominent position with various professional sports teams, there was a real buzz about it within the industry. At the time there were only 7 people in the entire state of Florida who were certified. But, because Jay had a connection with a very prominent Biomechanics Specialist in Connecticut- who was also one of the first MAT Specialists in New England- he got a profound recommendation to take his staff through the program. Because of this connection, in May of 2005, my prayer for a solution to my clients' problems finally started to be answered.

That day, Jay, myself and a few of our colleagues took off work to attend a 6-hour lecture given by Greg Roskopf, the developer of MAT. He was in Tampa that day as part of a lecture tour. In front of a packed room, Greg explained how stress, trauma, injuries, surgeries, diseases in

other organs, overuse, underuse, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, allergic reactions, lack of sleep, dehydration, and other lifestyle factors, can cause muscles to lose their ability to communicate adequately with the neurological system. He explained that this loss of communication (called “muscle inhibition”) causes the muscle to not perform its key functions properly. He also explained how muscles not functioning properly can create a wide array of painful musculoskeletal problems, as well as weakness, tightness, limitations in flexibility, and acute injuries. What he said made perfect sense and there was significant science to back it up (I’ll share some of that research in chapter 3). Greg even showed us how to manually test for muscle inhibition, and how to correct it with a simple, manual process that he and others developed. As we worked on each other at our tables, we saw results in just minutes. We had all taken the red pill and we instantly became hooked.

After his lecture, several of us including Jay, decided to go through his program to learn the MAT process. In early 2006, we began a series of entry level “Jumpstart” classes taught in Boston and Miami. These gave us basic MAT assessment and correction procedures that were applicable for our “less complicated” clients. Jay and I did our classes together and we finished in 5 months. When we started using the process with our clients, we were amazed by what was happening. One early example was my client Debbie. Debbie had been diagnosed with a bulging disc in her back about 10 years earlier. She’d been to MD’s, Chiropractor’s and a slew of other practitioners, but was still in chronic pain. I started taking her through the MAT process and to her (and my) amazement; she had virtually no more pain after just a few sessions. This experience, along with others, confirmed beyond a doubt that I was truly on the right path. Shortly after we had completed our trainings, Jay was offered a job with his mentor in Connecticut and I decided to go into

practice for myself. I put nearly all my focus in the direction of MAT, and within the first year my practice really began to take off. It was amazing.

Now although I could see the power of MAT every day through seeing the results my clients were getting, it didn't become clear to me how powerful it really was until June of 2007. A few months earlier I had leased my first treatment room and I bought a huge filing cabinet for all the client notes I was expecting to have. Late one night as I was bent over, moving the filing cabinet into my office, I felt a strain in my lower back. Thankfully the initial discomfort subsided, but over the next two weeks I started getting little pops and twinges as I would move into different positions. One Friday night, I bent down to pick up a pencil and I felt a horrible pain go through my lower back. I was in agony when I tried to straighten up. I was hoping a good night's sleep would be enough to get rid of it, but I was wrong. When I got up the next morning, I could barely sit or stand because my back was in such excruciating pain. This went on for the next 3 hours.

At that point, in between thoughts of *what have I done? And am I going to be ok?* The thought suddenly hit me- *I should try activating my muscles.* I began to very gently and very cautiously do a few activations on myself, and lo and behold, within about fifteen minutes I got up and all the pain was gone. And I mean, GONE. I stood up completely straight like nothing had ever happened and I shouted out, "*Thank you Jesus!*" Talk about being blown away! I had seen things like this happen to other people, but I'd never experienced it myself. The feeling of empowerment was indescribable. The realization that I had the knowledge and ability to help me to get out of pain and become normal after an injury was euphoric. It immediately took away a lot of the fears that I had about

what would happen to me in the future. Fears that I'm sure you can relate to.

After this experience I became even more zealous to both master the skills of MAT, and to tell as many people as I could about it. Since then, I've continued my educational journey by getting an Exercise Science degree, becoming a certified MAT Specialist, and later becoming the 69<sup>th</sup> person in the world to receive the MAT Master Specialist Certification. This designates that I am now capable of handling even "the most complicated muscular problems." I've also completed over 700 hours of continuing education and I've become a certified Medical Exercise Specialist as well.

The path that MAT has blazed has led to opportunities and experiences that I never dreamed I would have. I run my own practice, I've been on local and national TV, I've been on the radio, I've been featured in local newspapers, I've been a regular columnist in local magazines, I've been asked to teach at The Florida College of Natural Health and be their keynote speaker at their graduation ceremony, I've worked as a continuing education provider and consultant to health professionals in 3 different countries, I've worked with Major League Baseball players on four different teams, and I've had a practice whose level of busyness has typically been measured by the size of its waiting list. It's truly a miracle what has happened to me. There was a time when I wasn't even sure how long I'd live, let alone whether I'd ever be doing something that made me excited to be alive. That's why I say I am truly a product of God's amazing grace.

And, as I write the third edition to this book, I can honestly say I'm more passionate about this work than I've ever been. As you've read on the previous pages, and as you will read on the pages to follow, so many

people have been ecstatic with the results they have gotten with MAT. Some even say that it gave them their life back. Sadly though, there are very few people who are sharing this information, and as you've seen by the statistics, there are millions out there who need to hear it. One day I envision all doctors, therapists, alternative health practitioners and other health advisors being educated about this, but that day will not come by accident. That's a big reason why I wrote this book.

So now that you know more about the messenger, let's get into the meat of the message. We will begin in Chapter 1 by taking a closer look into how musculoskeletal problems develop, why they cause pain and why they don't heal.

*"At the beginning of the summer I was having such terrible sciatic pain that I couldn't walk far without hurting or play golf. On top of that, my shoulder hurt so much because of an injury that wasn't healing, that I had to completely give up tennis. Despite months of rest and anti-inflammatory drugs, I did not have any improvement. After working with Chris and getting MAT for a few months, my sciatic problem is gone, I'm playing golf again and my shoulder is recovered enough so I can play some tennis. Although these musculoskeletal injuries are not cured, they have significantly improved. I also plan to go back to Chris for periodic "tune ups"*

**Dr. Mark Ballow, M.D. Member: The Meadows Country Club**