

Ergonomics for jewellery artists

Part 1: The back friendly work environment

In this first of two parts Helen Kaut explains what to look out for when creating an ergonomic workspace

Jewellery artists often spend hours hunched over their intricate work, causing muscular pain and stiffness, which can lead to restricted movement and repetitive strain injury (RSI) as well as headaches. Often you sit in the wrong position on a chair that is not suitable for the job, with insufficient light and a workbench or table that is the wrong height, using tools that are too small or too heavy for long periods of time, which can also add to the pain.

The right chair

If you want to set up or improve your workspace it is first worth looking for an appropriate chair. The kind of chair you choose depends on whether you have a workbench or create your jewellery on a kitchen table or desk. Your chair should be comfortable and enable you to do your job. It should have an adjustable seat back that supports your lumbar curve. You should also be able to tilt the seat and adjust its height, if you want armrests make sure you can adjust their height and also detach them. If your chair hasn't got back support that is close to your spine you can use a cushion or rolled up towel for support. When buying a chair choose one that allows you to sit comfortably in a neutral position. This means that you should sit upright with an upright head and your chin jutting outward, while your body maintains its natural S shaped curve. Your legs should be apart to hip width, feet on the ground and shoulders relaxed with arms by your side. There are plenty of different chairs on the market that are sold as ergonomic chairs and there are specialist companies that supply them. However they can be expensive and a high price tag does not necessarily mean that it is a suitable chair for you. For a taller desk or high workbench, consider a draughtsman style chair which has an adjustable foot ring you can rest your feet on.

The workbench or table

Most workbenches have a height between 80cm to 100cm. For precision tasks, the bench should be just above elbow height and an angled, padded

support should hold the wrists correctly where possible. If your workbench needs to allow for a variety of tasks a height adjustable desk or bench might be a better option. When I do beading work at the living room table I tend to elevate the workspace on my lap mat to achieve a better height, which means I don't have to bend as much over it as I would at normal height.

Lighting and magnifying glasses

Good lighting is important; working in low light leads to mistakes and can also tire your eyes. There are many different types of specialist craft lamps on the market, which are made specifically to do the job. Some are foldable and easy to store, good for working at a table, while a clamp on style lamp would be ideal for a workbench. If you work with lots of intricate designs it's worth investing in a magnifying glass. Again there are different options available; if you wear glasses a clamp-on magnifying glass might be a solution. You could also consider using an Optivisor, which is available in different magnifications or an Illuminated Headband magnifier, both available at Cookson Gold. If looking at purchasing a magnifier, it's worth remembering that the stronger the lens magnification the closer to your work you need to be, which means that your bench height is critical to avoid straining your neck. Another option is to buy a lamp that has a magnifying glass attached to it. This is ideal for those artists who work with very small pieces.

Hand tools

Invest in some good tools that are comfortable to use. I once made the mistake of buying very small tools and found them to fiddly to work with. A good tool should have a handle long enough to not dig into your palm. When working, arrange your tools according to frequency of use and keep them close to you where you can easily pick them up. Make sure you keep your tools in good working condition, keep them clean, sharp and oiled, replace worn out blades. To minimise the effort required, when using tools, make sure



ERGONOMIC:

"Designed for maximum comfort, efficiency, safety, and ease of use, especially in the workplace"

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that your wrist is as close to a neutral position as possible and that your arms are by your side, having your elbows high up can cause muscle strain and tension.

Enjoy your jewellery making, but don't forget, if you start to feel pain; stop and rest, carrying on could cause more damage. In next month's issue I will give you ideas on how to minimise the risk of muscular pain and injury.

Resources

Suppliers for chairs:

Osmond Group: www.ergonomics.co.uk

Online Ergonomics:

www.online-ergonomics.co.uk

Posturite: www.posturite.co.uk

Advanced Seating Designs: www.asd.co.uk

Barry Bennett: www.barrybennett.co.uk

Craft lights and magnifying glasses:

The Craft Lights Store: www.craftlights.co.uk

Craft Lamps: www.craftlamps.co.uk

Workbenches, tools and lights:

Walsh: www.hswalsh.com

Cookson Gold, www.cooksongold.com

More information available at:

The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Occupational Health and Ergonomics:

www.acpohe.org.uk

CONTACT DETAILS

www.helenkwhitedesign.co.uk