Repetitive strain injury - a very real problem for IT professionals

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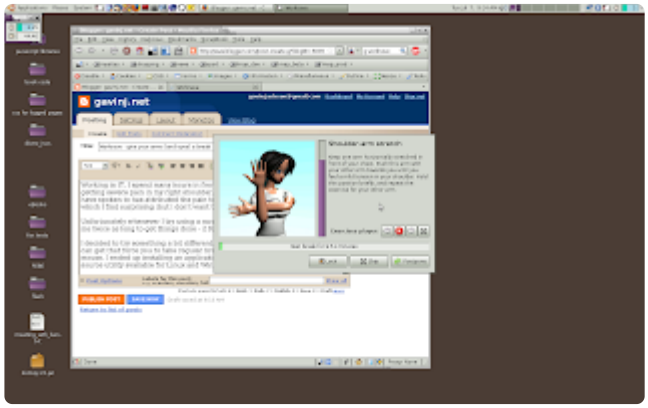
health kinesis rsi workrave



Working in IT, I spend many hours in front of a computer. Lately I have been getting severe pain in my right shoulder, neck and shoulders. Most experts I have spoken to has attributed the pain to using the mouse with my right hand, which I find surprising.

It is apparent that repetitive strain injury (RSI) is a very real occupational health and safety issue in our profession. Unfortunately whenever I try using a mouse with my left hand it seems to take me twice as long to get things done - it feels totally awkward.

I decided to try something a bit different, I had heard about special timers you can get that force you to take regular breaks from using the keyboard and mouse.

I ended up installing an application called workrave (which is an open source utility available for Linux and Windows).

I have configured it to force me to take a micro-break every 10 minutes (of continual typing), and take a ten minute break every 1 hour. You can also set it up to enforce a daily limit (which I disabled).

When a break is scheduled to start, it pops up a window letting you know that a break is about to start (at which point you can choose to postpone the break, or skip it entirely - which can be optionally disabled).

When a 10 minute break starts it pops up a series of exercises that you can do to stretch your wrists, arms, neck and shoulders (it also provides exercises for your eyes).

You can tell that a real geek wrote it - it provides statistics detailing the number (and types) of breaks you take during the day, how many times you skip (or postpone) your breaks.

In addition to this it also has a network enabled mode that keeps track of keyboard time on multiple computers. I found the timers to be quite bright too, it actively monitors the keyboard and mouse usage and backs out the timers during natural breaks (so it doesn't keep bugging you to take breaks when you don't need to.

Finally a friend of mine has insisted that I try using a Kinesis Ergo keyboard, my tying rate is probably down to about half speed at the moment but I'll give it a week and see if I see any improvement.

Let me know what you are using/doing to combat RSI.

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