

Alexander Technique TEACHER

WHAT IS THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE?

The Alexander Technique is a means of re-educating the nervous system and developing the normal use and function of the body.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Alexander said, "Stop the wrong and the right thing will do itself". The Alexander Technique works to reduce any undue tension or collapse, improving the relationship between our nervous system and our postural reflex mechanisms thus restoring the good "use of the self".

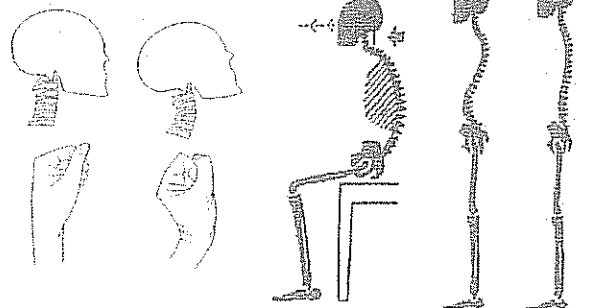
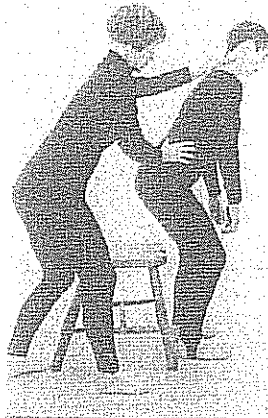
WHO NEEDS IT?

The Alexander Technique can be applied anywhere and at any time: at home, in the office, at school, performing on stage and during sports and leisure activities. Natural poise and balance soon become a way of life.

Your Alexander Technique Teacher
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DO IT BETTER WITH THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

HOW we use our bodies has more effect on everything we do than we imagine. Years of body misuse result in habits that stop us fulfilling our potential. Cheryl Isaacson writes about the Alexander Technique – designed to inhibit our bad habits and free us to do better.

Are you standing up with your throat? Holding your shopping bag with your shoulders? Talking with your feet? An overwhelming 80-90 percent of the population is habitually indulging in such unlikely-sounding methods of body use.

Years of misuse, emotional tensions and incorrect learning have caused temporary adaptations to become habits which seem normal and right because we're so used to them, but according to the Alexander principle they are doing untold harm.

For instance, getting out of a chair may cause constriction of the throat muscles. Carrying a bag can be a matter not just for the hands and arms, but involve tensing the shoulders, neck and even half the back. The use of the voice can, quite unconsciously, make for rigid feet and quite unnecessary stiffness in the legs. The Alexander Technique is more than just another method of relieving these tensions. It's a whole philosophy of movement and co-ordination, a new approach to doing and thinking about doing. Surrounding it is a kind of mystique – not because Alexander practitioners aren't willing to talk about it, but because any explanation tends to get bogged down in its own words. It isn't really hard to understand, but it is unique. The Alexander Technique is a subtle experience, always taught individually and different for everyone.

Stafford Cripps, Aldous Huxley and George Bernard Shaw were enthusiastic about it, but it really gained respect when Nobel Prize winner Nicholas Tinbergen devoted his Nobel oration to it in 1973. It's not supposed to be a therapy. It's a way of being, an undoing of bad habits to uncover the relaxed ease inbuilt in the "action blueprint" we were all born with.

Perhaps the best way to understand the Alexander Technique is through its creator. Frederick Matthias Alexander was born in Tasmania, Australia, in 1869, and died in London in 1955. He was a sickly child, suffering with respiratory and nasal problems, but nevertheless grew up to fulfil his

ambition to be a Shakespearean reciter. That was when trouble began. Constant sore throats led to hoarseness and complete loss of voice. The doctor advised resting; this brought only temporary relief. Then Alexander made his first discovery: something he was doing was causing the trouble. His description of the evolution of his technique, discovered after years of work in front of a mirror examining every part of his physical use in minute detail, is recorded in his book, *The Use of Self*. In his perceptive, critical, painstaking way, he went through every facet of his movement, relating it to his faulty speech delivery. Patient experimentation proved an exaggerated head movement was the crux of the matter. He pulled his head back when speaking, which led to sucking in his breath and pressing the larynx, thus increasing pressure on the vocal cords and resulting in hoarseness.

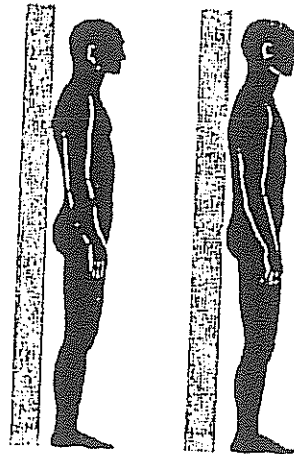
Instead of being the end of his search, this was just the beginning. What Alexander then saw was a further relationship between different parts of the body. The head and neck position, associated with depressing the larynx, also made him tend to lift the chest and shorten his body. This suggested that the malfunctioning speech organs were influenced by misusing his whole self. He concluded at this stage "it would clearly be useless to expect such improvement as I needed from merely preventing the wrong use of head and neck".

The next step was to work out the most beneficial method of use. "Head forward and up", in conjunction with lengthening and widening the back, became the basis of Alexander's "primary control" – the simple body posture. Having discovered what he should be doing with his body to obtain optimum functioning, he met perhaps the biggest stumbling block in the whole process. He found that when he thought he was doing the right thing he was not in fact doing so. What felt right was wrong, simply because it had become instinctive. He concluded that man's sensory appreciation had become unreliable through the process of civilisation, and feeling must somehow be made more trustworthy.

Since it was the *impulse* to move which, he found, created unnecessary tension in parts not directly concerned with the movement, he had to find away of inhibiting this reaction at the point between stimulus and action. He used inhibition in the sense not of repression but conscious control. Doing something as an automatic response to stimulus cancelled the space in which the new instructions could be injected. So he had to lose sight of the end, and attend to the "means whereby". Thus he was replacing immediate reaction with control rather than relying on instinctive movement, and replacing a "feeling right", based on habit, with the *knowledge* that what he was doing was right. It worked at last. He was free of his habitual wrong use, and not only the voice problem but his nasal and respiratory difficulties vanished too. The end of his experiments was the beginning of a lifetime's work, refining and teaching "conscious constructive control", as he termed it, of the whole body mechanism.

The "good use" Alexander teachers aim for is a very rare natural ability found in exceptions like Fred Astaire, James Cagney, Muhammad Ali (in his prime!), Arthur Rubinstein – and the small child before it has

learned to put tension into its movements. It is in these named few that "good use" extends throughout life.



MODERN MAN (left), too often with "prehistoric" hump and protruding neck, compared with "Alexander Man" with head and neck in perfect balance.

The Alexander Technique may be as simple as stopping doing the wrong things that interfere with our bodily freedom, but it's difficult to catch our reflexes at root where tension habits begin. It's learning not to use the parts that aren't essential for the movement in mind, peeling off the extraneous accompaniments that we've plastered on. It is about allowing yourself to be, relaxing the mental attitude towards movement, but not collapsing and losing muscle tone. The Alexander state should leave you alert enough to move in any direction at will, but give relief from habitual "holding on to yourself". One teacher describes it as "returning to neutral" by becoming aware and gradually getting tension habits under control, rather than "mucking around" with our intrinsic ease of movement. Another talks of "a sense of the space around you", and indeed this is often the feeling after an Alexander lesson, when you have been shown the unnecessary and misplaced movements made in the rush to "gain the end". It is about giving yourself time, attending to the way in which we do things rather than the things we want to do. Perhaps more than anything it is grace, giving a proficient Alexander exponent poise and a sense of comfort and ease within his own body.

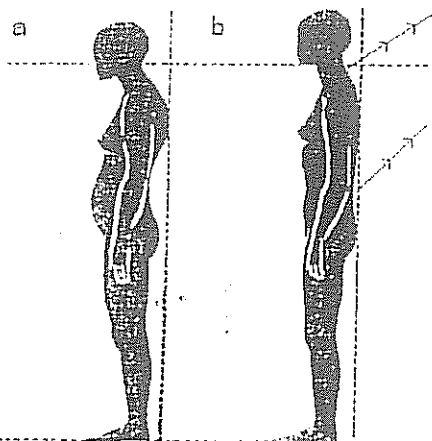
Teachers undergo a three-year training at a recognised school. Thirty lessons are suggested for a course, but some people show remarkable understanding and improvement in half an hour; others come back for "reminders" for the rest of their lives.

Adapting the body to the shape of an instrument – particularly the violin – more often than not imposes tremendous strain. The Alexander Technique shows how to use the body in conjunction with the instrument, "inhibiting" hunching of shoulders, twisting of arms, collapsing the rib cage and other habits that have become ingrained enough to feel part and parcel of the whole process. Playing without these "props" feels uncomfortable and "wrong" at first, but once they have been "let go", not only physical wellbeing but a new ease of performance begins. Singers, too, have found voices,

previously stilled by rigidities in unexpected parts of the body released by the Alexander Technique.

Dr Willred Barlow, who has taught the method for many years and written books about it, considers that only five percent of the population has no defects. By the age of 18, 15 percent will have slight defects, 65 percent will have quite severe defects, and 15 percent will have very severe defects. He believes there is virtually no-one whom the Alexander Technique couldn't help. Dentists or hairdressers, or others whose occupation almost demands faulty body alignment (dancers, skaters, or runners, who seem to be functioning perfectly but can show gross body misuse) could all benefit. Practically anyone doing anything, from typing to tennis, can do it better with the Alexander Technique, he maintains.

Whenever we put strain where it need not be, he continues, we are putting ourselves at risk. Strain may bring on ageing, where the body becomes sunken, and the spine curves into the position of old age. Strain may come out as mental ill health. And it more often than not leads to physical illness. Dr Barlow believes correct use is tremendously valuable to those suffering from the ragbag of ills labelled rheumatic disorders. An example is osteo-arthritis of the hip joint. He suggests that misuse is one of the most important factors in its development. The earliest sign is a narrowing of the width of the joint, which leads to a shortening of the distance between the hip and the ground, which leads to faulty distribution of bodyweight. The result of this wrong distribution is that the arthritis condition progresses and further shortening takes place on the affected side. This leads to putting yet more weight on the hip joint, and so on. He maintains that attention must be given to general body use when the condition is in its early stages, to see that the balance is not thrown more and more on to the affected side.



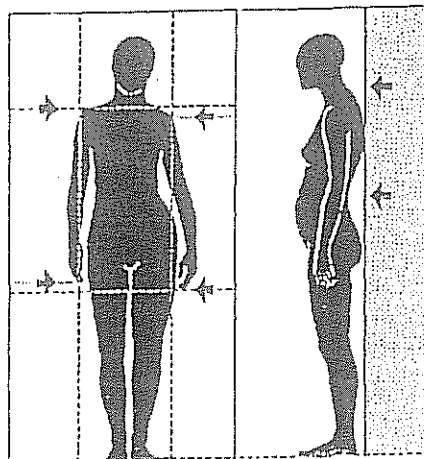
COMMON BAD USE: Neck dropped down and forward, back arched, pelvis tipped so abdominal contents fall forward. Improved use (right) with lines showing "lengthing" up and back of neck and lower spine.

Dr Barlow applies this principle to other conditions - tennis elbow, frozen shoulder, aches and pains in neck, chest, back and legs. Far more often than generally realised, he says, these are associated with general misuse. Relating the Alexander Technique to mental illness, Dr Barlow says anxiety and muscle tension are inter-woven. The

relation between neuroticism and unbalanced postural balance is obvious, i.e. the dejected and collapsed posture of the depressively ill. The worse the imbalance, the greater the likelihood of pain, both on physical and mental levels. Dr Barlow would go so far as to say that it is impossible to sort out your mental attitudes as long as you persist with a faulty manner of use.

Many people have spoken of the improved mental state that has resulted from assuming their new, upright, free posture.

The person untroubled by his defects can benefit just as much. Probably the most common methods of "bad use" noted by Dr Barlow are: pulling the head back, pushing it forward, stiffening the shoulders, contracting the back, collapsing the rib cage down towards the pelvis, and tilting the pelvis forward. We remain unconscious of them until they are pointed out, and we may not take much notice even if they are - so long as they are causing no major strain or restriction. But listen to an Alexander teacher, and you'll be made aware of the gradual, insidious decline in function, which will catch up with you sooner or later.



COMMON POSTURAL MAL-ALIGNMENT. The line dropping from the outer edge of the lower shoulder towards the floor falls through the thigh; on the other side it misses the thigh entirely. On the right the neck vertebrae are dropping too far forward, so the spine at the back of the chest is bent forward, producing an excessive hump, and pressure is put on the windpipe.

It's interesting to consider where "bad habits" come from. It seems we are all victims of our strained, civilised life. Alexander teachers are agreed that barring accidents, which impose their own strain, a great deal of strain is due to fear - stiffening the muscles, hunching shoulders. It comes, too, from imitation - ingrained habits of use are passed on quickly from parents and school - teachers to children. And many problems are imposed by the normal stress of living - hurrying, tiredness, worrying.

Alexander teachers consider PE at school more of a danger to the body. Pupils praised for good posture often show severe defects such as lordosis (marked concavity in the lower back), exaggerated rounding of the upper back, and a poked out head. Dance and drama training can also impose enormous unnatural strain on the body. The heartening thing is that all these seemingly ingrained

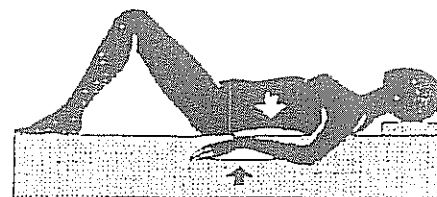
patterns, accepted as "part of the way you are", can be counteracted. None of us is hopeless, so long as we're willing to learn to check how we're doing things.

Alexander lessons might, by now, sound a daunting prospect, where years of bad habits will be revealed, but it's essentially a gentle process and a positive experience. The teacher works with touch and making suggestions that have more to do with attitude: "sensing direction", "walking lightly", "coming out of yourself", "flowing upwards". The head/neck relationship is touched on, the lengthening in the back, the sideways extension into the shoulders and hands. But attention is on exploration, adjustment, so there is no force towards correction of wrong.

Although the beginner naturally is eager to know exactly what he is doing incorrectly and how to counteract this, the good Alexander teacher will never enlighten him in this way. Doing so would constitute a value judgement, set up a resistance, a tension and the will to "get it right". The process is to show through the guidance of the light touch on the body where release of tension might occur, and it is only when the awareness of what it is like without the "block" of pressure that the new way can begin to supplant the old. You learn through the experience of letting go of the old habit, and each time it happens you recognise the "better state" more deeply.

There are many ways of working within a session, and they vary as much as the needs of the individual pupil. There is no competition, no moulding into "doing it the Alexander way". You may be taken out of a chair, and back into it again - no jerking up of the head, no thrusting out of the bottom, just perfect alignment of head, neck and shoulders and an almost imperceptible flex of the knees - until you are suddenly made aware of all the difference in the world between straightening the body by using muscle tension, and the falling into place by allowing lengthening to happen. There's a glad stillness, an increased perception, a restorative balance about a good Alexander session, and, afterwards, a feeling of lightness, poise, and even "floating in space".

Eventually, through the Alexander Technique, a completely new way of life can develop. As habits of physical use change, other habit patterns - emotional, philosophical, are explored, and you develop the ability to do something about them too. The start may come from the outside, but, as with Alexander himself, each beginning only leads to another.



LYING ON A HARD SURFACE (as shown) with a support under the head will highlight wrongly arched back and protruding abdomen. Unless the arch of the back is corrected, full breathing is difficult - but care must be taken not to accentuate the hump at the base of the neck. Also note the bend of the elbows. The funny bone should be turned outwards from the body and the inside of the elbow turned towards the body.