

# The Alexander Technique... an explanation

USUALLY, people take lessons in the Alexander Technique as a way to help their back pain or as a method for improving artistic performance.

This wasn't my reason as I didn't know that I needed it, I was just curious. However, I walked away from my first lesson feeling as if I'd been introduced to my body for the first time and it was thrilling. I felt lightness, ease, internal energy and a sense that I was working correctly. I floated away from my teacher's house and knew I wanted to train to teach it.

The technique was developed by an Australian actor, FM Alexander (1869-1955). He had experienced vocal problems (in the days before microphones) which left him unable to work and had been treated by various doctors but showed no signs of improvement.

After much self-observation, he identified a pattern of movement that constricted his throat and interfered with the natural workings of his body. When he was able to prevent the movement in response to the stimulus of projecting his voice, he was able to find a permanent solution to his problem.

He recognised that change needs to be brought about by the individual to be effective and that we (our mind and body) work together as an integrated whole. When

**By Andrea Hughes, a member of the Society of Teachers of Alexander Technique (STAT)**



you disrupt one part of it (in particular, the relationship between the head, neck and back), then you alter the natural balance and harmony throughout.

Therapeutic benefits such as reduced back pain, neck and shoulder pain, headaches, joint problems and stress disorders are experienced by addressing how a person interferes with the natural workings of their body. Balance can also be improved and this is also applied to the distribution of weight on the joints.

## Muscle spindles

There is proof from an Oxford study that if we harbour tension in the muscles beyond a certain point, the muscle spindles (the transmitters) that send the message up to your brain cease to work. When the muscle spindles are doing their job, and we have the ability to listen to our body, then we have more feedback and can make better choices.

This heightened awareness allows us

to notice unnecessary fixing, pushing or contracting at the idea of performing a task or as a reaction to a thought. If we are worried, our body can contract with a fear response, pulling our head back and down, the shoulders in or fixing our ribs which then alters our breathing. Sometimes, this response may be necessary, but often it can occur habitually due to work pressures or social pressures and only serves to do harm by distorting our form, altering our breathing and creating internal stress.

By learning the technique, we can still have the thoughts but not disturb our internal workings in response. I have found that by noticing when I tense myself (for instance, clenching my jaw) in response to a negative thought and then releasing it, I am able to let go of the thought also and respond appropriately in the moment. Since I have reduced my physical tension, my mind has also calmed, bringing me a sense of peace.

I used to work in a pressured job in television production. I was aware I had back pain, but didn't know then that my response to stress is to pull my tailbone back and up and hold it there.

The solution when applying the Alexander Technique is to recognise habits that interfere with the ease and mobility within our body and notice the tightness, rather than actively try to pull the body into a different position.

Initially, thoughts of maintaining length, depth and width in your body and mobility in the top joint of your neck (this is higher than you think and is in line with the upper part of your ear lobes) need to be applied consciously, but eventually they become integrated into how you move and think.

My lower spine is now able to move freely, which, in turn, allows other parts of my body to move freely too (I discovered that I held my breath, in addition to my lower back).

I recently taught someone with similar back problems as myself. She had exhausted every avenue of treatment, but still had persistent back pain and reduced mobility which affected her enjoyment of life. With no medical explanation for her problem, she is now looking to herself and, with the help of the technique, becoming aware of her habits of tension and habitual contraction – just as Alexander did.

The change and understanding required to learn and apply the technique isn't an instant solution to a long-standing problem but, like learning any skill, takes practice. When applied, the student becomes aware of many things that happen within the mind and body and have more choice over their current state.

Long-term effectiveness for musculoskeletal pain conditions has been demonstrated in two large randomised controlled trials<sup>1</sup> and, in addition, learning the technique is often associated with good posture. Improved posture and body mechanics are associated with better balance, co-ordination and greater ease in all activity.

## Physical response

However, a common misconception of good posture is to be up and straight but, as the body is meant to move in multiple directions, how can there be a correct position? Learning the technique brings about an expansion and a quality of how you use your body, while freeing your mind of the notion that you need to fix parts of your body (such as pushing your chest out as a sign of strength or forced confidence). It is this expansion or desire not to reduce your internal space that can lead to improved aesthetics of uprightness, wide shoulders, free limbs and true confidence.

This may sound esoteric, but the concept is actually very simple (and the technique is completely practical). If we can stop doing the wrong thing (like creating unnecessary tension or contracting our body inwards) then our head will balance on top of our spine, our whole spine will work with the whole body and we will function optimally. Length, width and depth in a person is encouraged and when a person has more

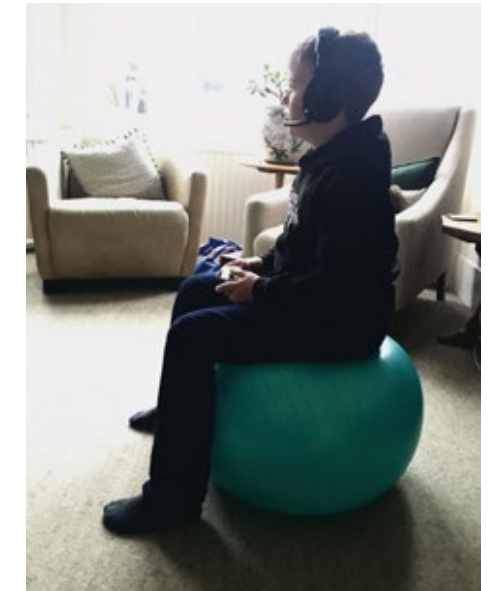


We need to pay attention to how we position ourselves when focused on screens. When the monitor is lower than eye level we naturally drop our head forwards and down towards it which can add up to 30lb of pressure on the spine, causing back and neck pain

awareness of this, they notice when they take it away. They can relate the physical response to the situation or movement that caused it, thus learning not to do the same thing with the same stimulus.

During a lesson, the teacher uses verbal guidance and a light touch to raise awareness of the amount of tension, ease or effort that the student is bringing to a simple task such as sitting down. This process, the abandonment of your own set of unhelpful habitual tendencies, can then be applied to all activities and responses to thoughts. With practice, you begin to notice how you respond and by applying the technique you develop and retain natural poise and co-ordination despite the demands made of you from the external world.

I've found that realigning my body with various treatments does little to quell the contractions and internal pressures that I inflict upon myself as my response to life. It is only by addressing the environment in which the pain arose that we can change the outcome. The skeletal alignment, the gait patterns, the thought processes and beliefs about the use of our body are a



Children can easily spend hours hunched in front of a computer screen sitting on a sofa, which is harmful. By sitting them on a ball, they will effortlessly bring small movements into their spine, distribute their weight through their feet and find natural poise up from their sitting bones. Take care to check their environment for sharp edges as children become engrossed in games and loss of concentration could lead to a fall

system as a whole and are influenced by the way we live our life.

Having an awareness of our internal body while we are operating in the world around us is why the technique can bring about long-term benefits. It helps us to understand how to operate our body either by moving from the correct joints, or by using appropriate tension and balance throughout. It can solve much more than ergonomic problems and poor posture. It is a tool for life that can help you to remain calm and centred and not lose yourself to panic and fear.

Having a method to apply in response to your reactions helps you to look after yourself in that moment and I've found this to be an invaluable asset.

<sup>1</sup> Little P, Lewith G, Webley F, Evans M, Beattie A, Middleton K et al. Randomised controlled trial of Alexander technique lessons, exercise, and massage (ATEAM) for chronic and recurrent back pain. *BMJ*. 2008;337:a884. Available from: doi:10.1136/bmj.a884

● Andrea Hughes is a qualified member of the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique and registered with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council. Visit her website <https://www.alexandertechniquealtrincham.co.uk/>



Alexander Technique active rest is a practice that can easily be done at home using a talk-through guide (there are many free ones on the internet and on my website). A short daily practice can show you how to release excess tension from your body. Position yourself on a firm surface with a few books to support your head, have your feet hip width apart and use a blanket to stay warm