

Back Pain: Using the Alexander Technique by Sydney Laurel Harris

It's supportive to know good science validates something that so many of my clients have experienced over the last thirty five years: the Alexander Technique helps to eliminate and prevent back pain. For example, three years ago the "BMJ" (formerly the "British Medical Journal") published the following study that demonstrated the effectiveness of the Alexander Technique ("AT") for back pain: http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/337/aug19_2/a884

While it may seem mysterious to some, it's really common sense that the AT alleviates back pain. We may appear to be relaxed when slumped over the computer keyboard or when slouching in front of a classroom or at the kitchen counter. But, in fact, these behaviors are chronically straining muscles and putting enormous pressure on our backs. The same thing is true if we "try" to do the opposite, e.g., by holding ourselves upright in a stiff posture. Most of the time the resulting "posture" isn't "up right" at all, but rather sending us backwards instead of curving forward. Chronically holding ourselves in any position creates excess tension, ie. uses muscles in a way that wears us "down". The resulting downward pressure then narrows joints making them less flexible. It also crowds organs and nerve channels.

Picture this: someone sitting at their computer, their chin is jutting forward; their head is pressing down on their body, forcing their shoulders near their ears. Their back then forms a curve and their belly protrudes forward. The human head weighs between 8 and 11 pounds, similar to a bowling ball (6 to 16 pounds). It's not difficult to imagine how immobilizing and even stressful such poorly balanced weight must be? And, what their lungs, heart, stomach, intestines, etc. must experience in the resulting cramped, hindered space thereby allotted to them. It is easy to picture how years of such behavior could result in less than optimal organ functioning as well as detrimental structural and alignment impact. Consciously awakening to such obvious though seemingly trivial facets of our lives, and addressing them effectively, can make a huge difference to the quality of our lives as we age.

The AT teaches us how to carry ourselves in such a way that the downward pressure is eliminated and natural flexibility is regained. We learn to move through all of our activities with a minimum of effort and our musculature works in harmony without constraint. The AT is unique in that it recognizes our bodies' innate ability to move and therefore doesn't try to implement individual body mechanics, postures or exercises. Rather the AT focuses on becoming aware of the interfering patterns that pull us into a contracted state and thereby gently stops them long enough for our natural, more flexible patterns to take over.

Now, a different picture. Imagine that you are a carefree child frolicking at the beach. You can sit for hours digging in the sand, yet you are not sitting in a held position...you are bending forward, reaching, coming back up, gently moving, fully absorbed in your task. Or, at a moment's notice, you may dash into the water. Your movement is easy. You have flexibility. You are not entrenched in habits that degrade rather than enhance your growth.

The study found that the AT is most effective for back pain with a series of 24 AT lessons. “Twenty four lessons in the Alexander Technique had a significant effect on other outcomes; similar but smaller changes followed six lessons.”

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