



DISCOVERING THE
DRAMATIC BENEFITS
OF THE ALEXANDER
TECHNIQUE

GETTING Into the Act

BY SHANNON ANDERSON

Most of us are completely oblivious to the routines and habituated physical limitations within our manner of movement and thinking that are the source of unnecessary stress on our daily lives. We hunch over our desks, slouch through the office and charge down the sidewalk head-first, necks bent towards ever-present cell phones. Even as you sit here, reading this article, you may be unconscious of the rigidity in your neck or the angle of your head relative to your spine. Factors such as these interfere with our ability to react effectively to every day stimuli, prohibiting us from responding as well as we should, and even creating additional emotional troubles such as depression and anxiety. These basic

problems are addressed and dealt with in the Alexander Technique, a method of touch therapy and verbal guidance that has been recognized for over one hundred years as an exceptional and astonishingly valuable technique of mind-body re-education.

People of all professions and backgrounds have studied the Alexander Technique. Performing artists, business executives, parents, teachers and even the wheelchair bound have all discovered the diverse benefits of this interesting modality, and more importantly have found that they can better handle daily stress and develop a long term solution to chronic pain, muscular tension, depression and even anxiety.

Listed below are a few common problems the Alexander Technique has been known to reduce or even eliminate:

- Daily Stress and Anxiety
- Chronic Back Pain
- Arthritis
- Postural Problems
- Asthma and Other Breathing Disorders
- Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

The Technique, named after F. Matthias Alexander, has been used to complete recovery and provide pain management for those recovering from injuries, suffering from chronic pain or undergoing excess tension, which can interfere with performance. Though it is most often associated with those in the performing arts industry, the Alexander Technique can prove beneficial for anyone who has the self-discipline and desire to reach a higher level of self-awareness that will help him or her enhance their performance whether at the office, a weekly yoga class or a major recital. The technique is based on three assumptions; that function is affected by use, that an organism functions as whole, and that the relationship of the head, neck and spine is vital to the organism's ability to function at peak performance.

F. Matthias Alexander, a Shakespearean actor who began devising the technique's principles in the late 1800s, had been suffering from hoarseness of voice due to an inflammation of the larynx. Alexander went to doctor after doctor, hoping to determine the cause of his condition, yet each one affirmed that, physically, there was absolutely nothing wrong with him. Alexander became increasingly restless, realizing that his condition was placing his entire career in jeopardy. Knowing this, Alexander approached yet another doctor who persuaded the actor that his vocal cords had simply been strained beyond their capability and prescribed complete rest of his voice for two weeks, promising that this would give Alexander a solution to his problem. Determined to try anything, Alexander rested his voice for the two-week period preceding his next performance. When the time came to speak at last, the actor was delighted to find that his voice was perfectly clear. His delight soon turned to dismay, however, when halfway through his performance, the hoarseness in Alexander's voice returned and the condition continued to worsen, until by the end of the evening he could hardly speak. Alexander then reasoned that since his voice had been clear when he started the performance and by the end of the play he could hardly speak, it must have been something he was doing *while performing* that was causing the problem. After more than nine years of self-observation, Alexander discovered that he was unconsciously stiffening his entire body in preparation to speak, which ultimately caused him to lose his voice. Alexander went on to develop an entire system of therapy based on his newfound knowledge, which he then passed on to a very select group of students.

The Alexander Technique is meant to teach us how to recognize and overcome our habituated limitations within our manners of movement and thinking, the most common of

which is unnecessary muscular tension. If you ever have the feeling that you are moving through life, processing your daily functions as if you were a robot and responding to stimulus with automatic reactions that limit your responses physically and mentally, the Alexander Technique can act as the key to unlock your untapped potential. The Alexander Technique essentially teaches you to re-learn what you already know how to do with less effort and tension, which is a common inhibitor of performance. Oftentimes with performers, tension is interpreted as emotional expression, when in actuality it is preventing them from performing their best. The Technique teaches us to let go of that tension, and has improved the performances of thousands of people, including Paul Newman, Sting, Hillary Swank and Robin Williams.

An Alexander Technique instructor, in one-on-one sessions using specialized hand contact and verbal directions, teaches the principles that apply to movement, psychology, creative thinking, learning theory and styles of coaching, training and effective communication.

In an Alexander Technique class or private session, your teacher will guide your movements verbally and with specialized touch therapy. You are instructed to approach movement differently as the therapist gently places his or her hands on your back or neck, helping you to recognize the engrained patterns of movement that could be causing your symptoms. Using touch therapy, your instructor will help you to release tension and draw out your body's natural capability for growth, and you will acquire the skills needed to replicate the ease and extension on your own. Eventually, you will be able to completely drop the movement habits that have been causing your condition.

If the technique is practiced repeatedly, new motor pathways are created, improving proprioception – the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself, leading to enhanced coordination and balance. What does this mean to performers? Essentially, it suggests that with the Alexander technique, we enable ourselves to *utilize our body as an instrument* to fully express our own experiences, which enhances the life and range our characters can have on stage. In effect, the Alexander Technique focuses on broadening a performer's bodily consciousness and the movement abilities that hold us back from full expression.

If the purpose of Alexander Technique is still unclear to you, try this. Breathe from higher up in your chest, and then try walking or moving your arms while you breathe. Do you walk or move differently when you change your breathing? Now make a conscious effort to modify the way you walk or the way you hold your neck. Do these efforts have an effect on your breathing or your voice? What if these were habitual efforts, efforts you made all the time but were completely unaware of? We all carry excessive tension most of the time, but we are usually unaware of it because it is tension we have been carrying our entire lives. Excessive stress in one part of the body is usually part of a larger pattern of habitual unconscious efforts, and can only be eliminated by the guidance an Alexander

Technique instructor, someone who has been trained in this comprehensive technique of psychophysical re-education.

Still doubtful? Even medical professionals have noticed the undeniable advantages of practicing the Alexander Technique. Doctors have found that the Technique dramatically reduces time spent in pain. Patients who were taught the Technique averaged as few as three days of pain a month, as compared with twenty-one days of pain with traditional care. Best of all, the Alexander Technique stresses self-care to resolve injury, prevent back pain and assist with balance and coordination disorders. As your posture and movements increase in ease, and your ability levels go up, you'll also look and feel much better than you did previously. Your energy resources increase, lessening the depression and anxiety that comes with chronic conditions. For this reason, those in the counseling and psychology professions often give their approval to the Technique as well.

Though the effects of the Alexander Technique can be incredibly advantageous, the fundamentals of movement and the full benefits of this modality will take time to emerge. Each lesson will bring new insights and effects that you can apply immediately to daily life, and you will most likely see results from your training within the first 6 to 10 lessons. As you continue your training and develop a higher understanding of your own body, you will be able to consciously apply the technique to your daily activities, and

gradually, the effects will convert to long-term – a practice you will keep with you your entire life. Even if you stop taking lessons, the fundamentals you will have learned will help you to reclaim your body's natural sense of ease and restore power of movement.

Above all, helping yourself understand how posture and tension influences your very physical and emotional core can be the most important benefit of all. As Alexander once observed, compressive movement habits interfere with the function of the body's ingenious design. Resistance can manifest itself in many ways, including nervousness, tightness or confusion. In essence, acting, working and even parenting are all different forms of art. Developing confidence through posture and body movement, whether onstage or in your work environment may be the most important goal of all. Because we innately infuse pieces of ourselves into our daily occupations, it is paramount to nurture your sense of self along with crucial movement skills, and allow the technique to blend with your own unique identifying mark of inspiration.

For further information on the Alexander Technique and the American Society for the Alexander Technique, please contact Sydney Laurel Harris, BA, AmSAT certified. Sydney has taught in private practice for nearly thirty years and she currently serves the Westlake, Thousand Oaks and Ventura Communities. Ms. Harris can be reached at (805)644-7845. yhc