

Driving

By Sydney Laurel Harris

As so many others in Southern California, I drive considerable distance several days a week. Commuting between home in Ventura, CA, and the Alexander Training Institute in Santa Monica, CA, to work as a faculty member, the driving is fraught with stimulus and habitual reactions. As with riding a bicycle, we so self-consciously learned to drive, and then, with little fanfare, important facets of the activity became essentially tacit, almost beyond notice. We stopped conscious concern about where our hands needed to go, where our feet went, what our feet do and when, where our eyes need to go, etc. In short, much of the driving activity became sub-consciously rapid and automatic. Therefore, each time we drive we bring to it essentially the same physical coordination patterns, for better or worse. And there are, obviously, positives about such “learning”.

However, then add to it the mercurial and sometimes intense stimulus of traffic conditions, plus conversations in the car or on the phone or similar distractions, plus the “normal” stresses of time constraints, discomfort at long sitting in one position, etc. It’s then hardly surprising if we pull our heads back and down onto our necks just with the thought of driving, much less that we tend to do so in reality, in reaction to these common but endlessly potent stressors. It is also likely that this reaction will become exaggerated due to an increase in stressful stimuli.

The Alexander Technique convincingly teaches that most of us habitually pull down on ourselves, even in the calmest of situations, because it’s a common habit we develop over time. It also teaches us that this “pulling down” is not beneficial. It leads to a collapse/contraction of the whole torso which makes us heavier, tightens our joints and crowds our inner organs making it difficult to breathe and move easily.

We all know we need to be particularly alert to the conditions that surround us when driving. To better deal with the stressful stimulus of actual driving, consider taking a few moments prior to getting into your car to take note of your head/neck/back relationship. Ask yourself to pause before you step into your car and then focus on the top of your head leading the way into the car. Once you are in the car with your seat belt on, pause again. Notice your head/neck/back relationship and ask yourself to let go of the excess tension in your neck. Gently bring your hands up to the steering wheel. Bring your hands back to your lap. How much effort did you put into that movement? Bring your hands to the steering wheel again, but this time more gently. Repeat this several times being progressively gentler each time before you turn on the engine. You have just practiced Awareness, Inhibition and Direction which is helping you to undo your habitual pattern of pulling down before you drive.

Once you are driving, your primary attention needs to be on the road. However, there may be times when you also notice that you are gripping the steering wheel much more firmly than is necessary. Now ask yourself to loosen your grip slightly, enough to keep hold of the wheel without over holding. Or you might notice that you have collapsed down toward the wheel with your whole torso. Can you tell if you are tightening your neck and pulling your head down onto it? Instead of jerking yourself upright in reaction to the observation, don’t react. Simply ask yourself to stop tightening your neck and pulling your head down. Perhaps you will observe yourself moving up a bit or maybe you will only notice that your neck isn’t as tight. Either way, you are making a positive change and releasing unnecessary tension.

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