

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE – effective for back pain

by Lauren Hill

Are you mystified by your recurrent back pain or excess tension? Do you see your lack of coordination and posture as unchangeable? Do you wish you could perform better at a favorite activity but something seems to be in the way? You may be looking in the wrong place for answers. What many of us fail to recognize, and what the Alexander Technique addresses, is just how much our daily movement and postural habits contribute to our problems. The Alexander Technique provides a tool for learning to recognize and overcome these impeding habits by becoming more aware of how you engage in your activities.

Back pain is a major reason that people seek out an Alexander Technique teacher. And no wonder: it is the second most common complaint in the physician's office. The British Medical Journal recently published results of a clinical trial showing significant long-term benefits of lessons in the Alexander Technique for patients with chronic low back pain. What Alexander Technique teachers and their students have known for years now has many more people sitting up and taking notice.

Back pain is however not the only reason people study the Alexander Technique. Students come with chronic neck and shoulder tension, stress-related conditions, migraines, repetitive strain injuries, problems with coordination and balance, breathing, and vocal difficulties. Others study the Alexander Technique to help them perform better at a favorite activity, such as dance, music, or athletics. Still others study because they want to take a more active role in their health and well-being as they age.

The Alexander Technique developed out of one man's quest to solve a chronic vocal problem. F.M. Alexander (1869-1955) was an Australian actor who would frequently lose his voice while on stage. At the time Alexander was not able to find lasting relief from treatments offered him by his doctors. Realizing that his career was in jeopardy, he turned to himself for answers. After many years of self observation in a series of mirrors, Alexander discovered that what he originally thought to be a problem with incorrect use of his voice was in fact a much larger pattern of muscle tension and mal coordination throughout his entire body, caused by interference with the natural balance between his head and neck. Ultimately, the solution to his vocal problems lay in his ability to recognize and stop his habitual interference with his head and neck when he went to speak. Years of patience and persistence allowed Alexander to develop a process of stopping his habits that caused his vocal trouble. It is this process for learning to recognize and stop counter-productive habits that is the Alexander Technique.

The basic premise of the Alexander Technique is that when the neck muscles do not overwork the head remains poised on top of the spine. This relationship between the head and the spine is of utmost importance. How we manage this relationship—compressed or free—helps to determine the quality of the body's overall coordination and sets the stage for movement to be effortful or easy.

Though it has therapeutic side effects, the Alexander Technique is primarily an educational method. The practitioner is called a teacher, the private session—a lesson, and the client—a student. In essence the

Alexander Technique is simple but it is often very difficult to see your own habits at first. Therefore it is most often taught in a series of lessons with a certified teacher who can facilitate the learning process. In a typical lesson the teacher will use verbal instruction and gentle hands on guidance to teach you to consciously reduce habitual interference with the head/spine relationship and to approach everyday movements in a non-habitual and healthier way. You may also work on releasing tension while lying down on a bodywork table. Over a course of lessons you will improve your skills of self observation, gain the ability to recognize and stop the habits that interfere with your body's natural coordination, and ultimately apply the Alexander Technique on your own. You are usually asked to remove your shoes during a lesson but otherwise remain clothed.

Although far reaching in its effects, the Alexander Technique is quite simple in principle and can be easily understood by anyone. It invites us to stop looking to others for all the answers and to take some responsibility for the role we play in our problems—and teaches us the skills to do just that.

Students who are most likely to benefit from study of the Alexander Technique have a willingness to learn about and take responsibility for themselves and do not currently experience a level of pain or dysfunction that would preclude learning.

For more information on the Alexander Technique, the British Medical Journal study, and Introductory Workshops in the Twin Cities Metro Area go to **www.AlexanderTeachingStudio.com**. To find a complete list of AmSAT (American Society for the Alexander Technique) Certified Teachers in Minnesota go to **www.AmSATonline.org**.

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