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Unnecessary tension in your body can lead to all kinds of ailments and pains but by relying on the natural design of your body you can feel much healthier. We ascertained how the Alexander Technique can help you improve your health.

DISCOVER THE DELICATE BALANCE

Neck, shoulder and back pain are so common nowadays that we hardly question their existence. We do something about them only when they become really bad. That is what happened to Korien Sander. Her chronic neck and shoulder pain developed into muscle spasms which would not go away.

“I knew that the problem was due to general bad posture and spending long periods of time at the computer,” she says. “When I also started suffering from back pain I did some thorough investigation and found Marion Charleston, an Alexander Technique teacher.”

Her neck and shoulder pain improved quickly but the lessons also produced other surprising results. “The first improvement was something which I had not expected at all. One morning the dark circles under my eyes had disappeared. Then I became aware of the fact that I had grown taller. Eventually all the pain, including that in my lower back, had disappeared and if it returns as it does now and then, I know how to deal with it.”

Your back pain is relieved, the dark rings under your eyes disappear and you also become taller? How does the Alexander Technique (AT) work that it has such a variety of results? Put quite simply, the AT teaches you to use your body without any tension in your muscles and limbs.

Marion explains that it is not about what you do, but how you do it. We all possess an innate knowledge of how to use ourselves in an easy, tension-free manner. In small children you can observe the natural principles in action, but as we get older we add layers of bad habits to our usage. We stand crooked or sit slumped and compress our internal organs; we lift our shoulders when we pick up something and we pull our heads back when we sit at the computer.

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE?

The technique is named after an Australian reciter and actor, **Frederick Matthias Alexander** who developed **breathing and voice problems** when on stage, preventing him from performing in public. For over a decade he **examined his use and responses** in mirrors and developed and refined a **system of unlearning his bad habits** and preventing unnecessary tension in his body.

FROM YOUNG TO OLD

Both young and old and all between can benefit from the Alexander Technique. Some teachers have pupils up to age 80 and beyond. "It can be very beneficial to start lessons at a young age and learn correct usage (or unlearn bad usage)," says Lean de Wet, an AT teacher who works mainly with children. She says that AT is good for children who spend long periods at the computer, who are self-conscious and ungainly, who are anxious and easily frustrated, who struggle to relax and sleep and of course those who do sport or play a musical instrument. Good coordination and the absence of muscular tension help a child to enjoy life and learning.

So you think it is all about correct posture and you remember your teachers' injunctions from long ago to "Stand up straight, stomach in, shoulders back". Unfortunately that is not the simple solution for gaining good posture and good use, says Marion. If you consciously follow such instructions you will be tightening muscles elsewhere in your body with more negative results.

She says that the relationship between the head, neck and back is the primary control area for correct use of the body. With the assistance of an Alexander Technique teacher you can learn how to eliminate tension in those areas, and as a result in the rest of your body. Under the guidance of the teacher's hands you learn to restore the good relationship between head, neck and back and how to use each part of your body in a flowing, harmonious and coordinated manner.

The Alexander Technique is not a cure or a therapy for the elimination of symptoms. It rather goes to the root of the problem – the psychological and physical stress which you put on yourself through bad habits and patterns of use.

The well-known actress Jana Cilliers who is also an AT teacher explains that general medical treatment is geared towards an end result – you may hurt yourself, you may have an X-ray and receive subsequent treatment aimed at healing or, at the very least, relief.

"AT works differently. We work indirectly. It is very simple – you function as a whole. If you function well in a holistic manner you will also enjoy holistic wellbeing. For example, if someone comes to me with a sore knee he is usually surprised that I give no attention to the knee. We always give attention to the whole being. Everything is integrated – your thoughts, your sensations and how these affect your body."

YOUR OWN RESPONSIBILITY

Firstly it is important to realise that you are responsible for the state you are in. It is easy to blame situations like tension at work, hours at the computer or long distance driving for your aches and pains but those situations are external and each is merely a stimulus. The problem is your response to these stimuli. How do you use yourself at the computer? What is the pattern of your use when you are driving, using your cell phone, walking or writing?

"You have fixed habitual responses," says Jana. "They are in your nervous system, in your thinking, in the whole you, and they are subconscious responses which have been there for years."

AT doesn't correct this bad use by teaching you additional layers of action like holding your head up straight or pulling your shoulders back. "We don't add anything. We restore by peeling off layers as from an onion until we reach the original design. It is an unlearning," says Jana.

Marion Charleston can confirm the responsibility which one must take for oneself. When she was young she fell while wearing platform heels and injured her back. For years she suffered almost unbearable back pain and visited numerous chiropractors and other therapists. "Eventually I had the insight to realise that if therapists could balance me and free me from pain for a number of days before it returned, it must have been something that I was doing to myself that was causing the problem."

With the help of an Alexander Technique teacher she was able to take responsibility for her own body and determine where the fault lay.

Her back pain is something of the past. When it occasionally recurs she knows how to correct her use to deal with it. Besides that, she is taller than before, her slumped shoulders are straightened and she now has a neck which in the past was dropped down into her shoulders. She sits upright effortlessly on a chair with no backrest. She can walk around with books on her head while relaxedly chatting and gesticulating.

There is no tension in her head, neck and back, all thanks to the Alexander Technique.

The technique cannot be learnt from books and then applied. One has to have the experience of lessons from a teacher. An Alexander teacher's training lasts three years and includes 1,600 hours of practical work. It is through the hands of a teacher that you become aware of your unconscious responses.

In an AT teacher's room there will be a table, a chair and a mirror, all external stimuli that will assist you to become aware of your responses. You may lie on the table with your legs pulled up and your head resting on a low pile of books. With gentle touch of the teacher's hands he or she allows you to experience complete release in your neck and back. Gradually you learn how to achieve that effortlessness on your own.

The result is that you begin to lengthen and widen. You create space so that your organs are no longer compressed.

Marion says that is the reason for the disappearance of the dark rings under Korien Sander's eyes – there is space for her organs to improve their functioning and so she breathes more easily.

The achievement of improved wellbeing is not restricted only to your body, but is evidenced also in your psyche and your thinking. You learn to be aware of how you do things. You learn to inhibit your habitual behaviour through thinking and to give yourself directions for the correct use of your muscles and limbs. You discover what you are inclined to do wrong and that you have the choice to stop doing so.

WHAT RESULTS CAN YOU EXPECT

Although an AT teacher does not claim to heal any specific condition the general wellbeing resulting from the technique has an effect on a variety of problems.

The most common problems which drive people to an AT teacher are neck, shoulder and back pain. In a recent study conducted by the British Medical Association it was discovered that compared with medical intervention and various therapies, the Alexander Technique offered by far the most lasting relief from back pain.

Marion tells us about an aged woman who came to her because she could no longer lie down flat. For years she had slept in a chair. After just a few months under Marion's guidance she could for the first time in years lie down flat on a bed.

Scoliosis or curvature of the spine are often seen as a life sentence, but both can be alleviated by the AT.

Tremors and tingling in hands and feet can be relieved by the correct use of the back muscles. Even Parkinson and arthritis sufferers can find benefit from the AT.

Emotional trauma such as the death of a loved one can lead to suppressed emotions which cause muscle tension. By returning to a natural, neutral state you can gain emotional and physical relief. The absence of tension in your body which leads to lengthening and an improved posture can be accompanied by a lifting of depression. Neurological research has substantiated this by proving that correct posture has an influence on the secretion of chemicals in the brain.

AT is not only beneficial for people with physical problems. Performing artists and sports people can improve their performance through the effortless use of their bodies. In the British colleges of Drama, Music and Ballet the Alexander Technique is part of the curriculum.

The Alexander Technique impacts on your whole system.

You change on a physical, psychological and emotional level. Marion relates what a wonderful experience it is to attend an Alexander Technique Congress. The calm which is present in the bodies of the delegates is evidenced also in their psyches and their thinking.