

What is the Alexander Technique?

by Richard Brennan

Source: <http://www.alexandertechnique.com>

The Alexander Technique is not so much something you learn as something you unlearn. It is a method of releasing unwanted muscular tension throughout your body which has accumulated over many years of stressful living. This excess tension often starts in childhood and, if left unchecked, can give rise in later life to common ailments such as arthritis, neck and back pain, migraines, hypertension, sciatica, insomnia and even depression.

Vast amounts of money are being spent on the treatment of these illnesses (to say nothing of the pain and discomfort that is endured by the sufferer), yet the number of patients continues to increase. With the right education, however, many people could be helped to understand the causes of their problems and be taught to help themselves, so that their aches and pains may either be relieved or avoided altogether.

The Alexander Technique can help us to become aware of balance, posture and co-ordination while performing everyday actions. This brings into consciousness tensions throughout our body that have previously gone unnoticed, and it is these tensions which are very often the root cause of many common ailments. This is exactly what Frederick Matthias Alexander, the originator of the Technique, discovered when trying to get to the bottom of his own voice-related problem.

When applying the Alexander Technique you will learn how to release unnecessary muscle tension. As most of this tension has built up very gradually over a number of years you are unlikely to be aware that it is even there at all. You will also learn new ways of moving while carrying out everyday actions which cause far less strain on the body, and discover ways of sitting, standing and walking that put less strain on the bones, joints and muscles, thus making your body work more efficiently.

In fact, many people who practice the Technique experience a general feeling of lightness throughout their bodies and even describe the sensation as being like 'walking on air'. Since our physical state directly affects both our mental and emotional well-being, people often say that they feel much calmer and happier even after just a few Alexander lessons. This often results in less domestic tension and a greater ability to cope with life in general.

The Alexander Technique also involves examining posture, breathing, balance and co-ordination. As children our posture and ease of movement are a joy to watch, but as we start to tense our muscles in reaction to many of life's worries and concerns, our posture deteriorates into what can border on deformity.

Yet this is not the case with people outside Western civilization - many of the indigenous races who still live on the land, such as Native Americans, the Berber people from North Africa and the Aborigines in Australia, retain their natural posture throughout their lives. Their upright posture is considered to be a reflection of their human dignity and integrity.

We have a series of reflexes throughout the body that support us and naturally co-ordinate our movements, yet we interfere with these natural reflexes to such an extent that many of us often hold four or five times more tension in our bodies than is really necessary. In fact, we often make life much harder for ourselves than it really needs to be, although of course we are completely unaware that this is the case. Our shoulders become permanently hunched, our necks become stiffer and stiffer, and we sit either slumped or holding ourselves in a very rigid fashion, as our minds become more and more concerned with the future and the past and our awareness of the 'present moment' diminishes.

Over the years we become accustomed to the ways in which we sit and stand without realizing that it is often these very positions that are putting strains upon our body - no matter how uncoordinated these positions are, they will always feel right to us. When we perform everyday activities it is amazing how frequently we subject our bodies to undue tension simply by not being aware of what we are doing; this tension spreads throughout the muscular system, even if it is triggered in one particular area of the body.

It may be many years before we start to suffer from aches and pains or restriction of movement. Many of our modern methods of combating such problems involve powerful painkilling drugs that block out the body's warning system, whose function it is to tell us that something is wrong. Often, doctors can offer little advice as their training revolves around the treating of symptoms rather than uncovering, and also rectifying, the causes of such problems. The Alexander Technique, however, does just this; it shows you the underlying cause, enabling you to eliminate the tension responsible for so many of the ailments that we mistakenly put down to the aging process.

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Richard Brennan teaches the Alexander Technique in England and Ireland. "What is the Alexander Technique" is taken from his book *The Alexander Technique Manual - A step-by-step guide to improve breathing, posture and well-being*

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