

Old Habits Die Hard

An introduction to the basics of the Alexander Technique.

By Rita Milios M.S.W.

Fitness trainers might be surprised to learn they (and their clients) may be misusing and mistreating their bodies during workouts. Not only that, they may be further mistreating and damaging their bodies during mundane daily activities, such as standing or walking.

Sound impossible to believe? Not if you are familiar with the concepts and training of the Alexander Technique. This unique approach, developed in the early 1900s by Shakespearean orator F.M. Alexander, involves training in "the proper use of oneself." Alexander believed that traditional voice projection techniques (raised chest, strained neck, shortened spine) had led to the loss of his voice. Thus, he set out to discover how to undo the habits of bad posture, spinal misalignment and musculature overuse that caused his problem. The result was a technique designed to re-educate both mind and body to allow a person to move in ways that provide maximum efficiency with minimum stress and tension.

The Alexander Technique is based on two main principles: "inhibiting" old, patterned, habitual reactions and "ordering" or "directing" the body to participate in alternative responses. Such



moments of choice, Alexander found, come only when one is willing to deeply attend to or notice subtle body cues.

"Training in the Alexander Technique strives to give students an awareness of their kinesthetic selves," says Nancy Crego, a certified instructor who has been teaching the technique for eight years. According to Crego, most people misuse and mistreat their bodies on a regular basis. Not only do they strain areas that should be relaxed, but they also use more tension and force than is necessary to move muscles. We overuse certain muscles, especially those in our neck—sometimes to the point of permanent damage. All the while, we wonder why we're tired, aching and stressed.

During a typical set of about 30 lessons, Crego first teaches students to "learn to stop the misuse." To do this, she instructs students in ways of sitting, standing and getting into a prone position, repeating these simple tasks multiple times as she gives feedback and gentle guidance. Attending to and noticing one's body in motion leads to kinesthetic awareness and the discovery of alternative, less destructive habits. Typically, unlearning old habits is harder than learning new ones, so much of the time in lessons focuses on learning to inhibit old bodily responses. This is actually a mental factor, not a physical one. As Alexander stated:

Boiled down, it all comes to inhibiting a particular reaction to a given stimulus—but no one will see it that way. They will see it as getting in and out of a chair the right way. It is nothing of the kind. It is that a pupil decides what he will or will not consent to do.

The understanding of this mental component of the technique, Crego says, is often not acquired right away. As the lessons continue, however, a sort of body wisdom develops. Students develop a greater sense of wholeness and lightness. "When you are not straining or collapsing, your body movement becomes fluid and easy," says Crego. "There is a feeling that the body is actually lighter."

Although such changes may take a while to become habit, it is possible to experience the differences right away. During our interview, Crego took me through a few techniques. After making minor adjustments to my hips in the standing position and aligning my back and neck, Crego led me into a sitting position and back to standing again several times. The sensation was one of "effortless" movement and my body did feel lighter. After the session, I tried to recall and implement Alexander's three major directives or "primary orders":

- Neck released.
- Head forward and up.
- Back lengthened and widened.

To achieve this, I did not *do* these things, instead I merely thought or *intended* to do them. By attending to my body and allowing it, on its own, to move into postures of reduced muscular effort, certain chronic muscle discomforts simply dissolved—at least for a few moments.

However, maintaining this kind of balanced rest of one's musculature and proper alignment of one's skeleton over time is not easy—hence the repetition of the lessons. Crego also warns new students, "In the beginning you can expect discomfort and a sense of unease as your body adjusts to new positions and weak muscles work to become toned." But the long-term rewards of the Alexander Technique are worth it, she promises. Students using the technique

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have reported relief from lower back, neck and shoulder pain, fatigue, certain arthritic conditions, carpal tunnel syndrome and more. One student remarked, "I feel less stressed with this than I do after Roling or massage." However, she admitted, "It is not easy to implement into your life. Old habits die hard."

Crego has some common sense suggestions for fitness trainers, based on the principles of the Alexander Technique. In general, she says, "performing any exercise or movement with tension. That's not using the body properly." In fact, she believes such tension is detrimental to the neck and back. The Alexander Technique stresses that proper alignment of the head, neck and back are essential. According to Alexander's teachings, these areas are designed to work together as one and make up the "primary control center" of the body. Typical problems in this area include "overinvolving" the neck when moving and shortening or tightening the neck in reaction to tension.

Crego says trainers should pay close attention to clients' heads, necks and backs and make sure they move in a single line when exercising. Also, remind them to breathe. Holding one's breath during exertion only increases tension. During floor exercises, a towel or mat may be placed under a client's head to assure proper alignment of the head, neck and back is maintained. When doing exercises from a standing position, client's hips should always be over their ankles.

"Always teach [clients] to pay attention to what the rest of their body is doing," suggests Crego, "not just the parts that are moving." This is especially important during early training sessions, she stresses. If a person is trained in ways that involve correct use of the body, assuring proper alignment and tension-free movement, they will get better overall results and feel better. "The first rule for trainers," says Crego, "is if you see a client tensing up, stop the exercise right away." They may be making too much work out of it, which "may be a cue that they are not really ready for this level of exercise."

For fitness trainers used to urging clients to "go for just one more rep," such advice may sound a bit tame. Alexander Technique proponents strongly believe being too focused on the "end gain" for one muscle group, without taking into account the possible toll of the rest of the body, is counterproductive to overall fitness. "In the end, what you really want to do," says Crego, is to "use muscle, not tension, to move your body." **AF**

Rita Milios, M.S.W., is a psychotherapist, former medical professional and a writer specializing in health, self-help and spirituality. Recently her articles have appeared in Fitness Link, Natural Health Link and Vital Living magazine.



Table work helps loosen muscles, an essential part of the Alexander Technique.

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