



## What is the Alexander Technique?

"Every man, woman and child holds the possibility of physical perfection; it rests with each one of us to attain it by personal understanding and effort."

*F.M. Alexander*

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The Alexander Technique is a subtle method of integrating mind and body in such a way that each functions with maximum efficiency and ease and minimum stress and tension. The Technique is an educational process which provides an individual with the means to identify and change habits and attitudes interfering with "the proper use of oneself."

The Technique was developed in the late 19th century by F.M. Alexander, a Shakespearean orator. Having lost his voice, Alexander undertook an intensive program of self-observation that lasted for nearly a decade in order to discover the source of his problem. In the process, he not only regained his voice, but also laid the foundation for the Alexander Technique.

Alexander practiced the Technique in England and the U.S. until his death in 1955. Among his students were John Dewey, Aldous Huxley, George Bernard Shaw, and Nikolaas Tinbergen (who gave part of his 1973 Nobel prize speech on the Technique).

## How Does It Work?

A typical Alexander lesson is divided principally into two activities-- "chair work" and "table work."

### Chair Work

The Technique uses the action of repeatedly sitting in a chair and then standing as a way to gain awareness of and eventually correct movement and postural habits. Since sitting and standing are among our most frequent activities, they serve as the foundation of the Technique.

During this portion of the lesson, the teacher generally guides the student in and out of the chair, providing the student with the experience of movement which is effortless and tension-free. Together, the teacher and student learn to stop or, as Alexander called it, "inhibit," habitual responses to the stimulus of either sitting or standing. By stopping for a moment before the action takes place, the teacher and student have time to use reasoning powers to assess which is the most efficient and appropriate way to perform the action of either sitting or standing.

Chair work allows students to learn what it is they do when moving. Special attention is paid to the relationship between the head, neck and the rest of the back, the relationship which Alexander noticed as primary in the performance of all movements.

Alexander spoke of chair work as follows:

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.

Chair work is thus the basis for the students learning how s/he moves in any activity. Once awareness is gained in this single activity, the student acquires the power to control all reflexes in order to direct the body—the self—in a coordinated and balanced way.

## Table Work

The other part of a lesson involves "table work." Students lie on their backs with feet flat and knees bent in what is known as the semi-supine position, or the rest position. The teacher is encouraged to inhibit tension and remain alert. It is during this part of the lesson that the student becomes quiet to the external

world so that s/he may give full attention to the self.

Table work is an effective complement to chair work since gravity has less influence on body movement and habits. It is a time when students may reflect upon their habitual patterns of movement but without the active demands of movement.

## Why Are Sessions Called Lessons?

The Alexander Technique, unlike other "body work", emphasizes learning. It does not attempt to "fix" a particular problem but rather to re-educate. Its focus is not on the particular but rather on the whole movement. The Technique encourages an experiential way of learning—including intuitive, sensory, and other non-cerebral ways of acquiring knowledge—so as to master new skills in the art of movement.

## What Are The Benefits?

The Technique gives the individual an improved sense of well-being. Students enjoy:

- **Increased relaxation and coordination**
- **Ease of movement**
- **Heightened muscle strength**
- **Increased flexibility**
- **Enhanced equilibrium**
- **Decreased physical tension**
- **Reduced stress**
- **Improved sensory awareness**

The rewards can be deep and far-reaching. Students often achieve greater control over themselves and the events in their daily lives. They cultivate an increase in powers of observation and develop a much sharper sense of awareness.

## How Long Does It Take

As with the learning of any skill, such as the learning of a musical instrument, the process demands commitment on the parts of both teacher and student. Alexander prescribed a minimum course of 30 lessons, a period he thought necessary to acquire the basic principles of the Technique. The length of time necessary, though, depends greatly on how much misuse the body has already received and how severe the problems are before the lessons begin.

Lessons last approximately 30 - 45 minutes and are conducted on a one-to-one basis.

## Who Can Benefit From The Alexander Technique?

Those who can benefit from the Alexander Technique include individuals seeking lasting relief from any of the following physical problems:

- **Lower Back Pain**
- **Neck Pain**
- **Shoulder Pain**
- **Tension Headaches**
- **Chronic Muscle Tension**
- **Knee Pain**
- **Hip Pain Fatigue**
- **Whiplash**
- **Shortness of Breath**
- **Certain Arthritic Conditions**
- **Dowager's Hump**
- **Scoliosis**
- **Sway-Back**
- **Carpal Tunnel Syndrome**

## Who Else Can Benefit?

Others who can greatly benefit from the Alexander Technique include:  
People whose occupations can cause poor postural habits such as:

- **dentists**
- **carpenters**
- **computer operators**

People who must use their bodies with maximum efficiency such as:

- **musicians**
- **dancers**
- **singers**
- **actors**
- **golfers**
- **tennis players**
- **weightlifters**

People who are experiencing new aches and pains due to:

- **pregnancy**
- **aging**
- **accidents**

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(last update: [1.21.2000](#)) Comments and questions to [nancy@at-toledo.com](mailto:nancy@at-toledo.com)