

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

by

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On holiday a few years back, I met a physiotherapy lecturer. I asked her if the course on which she taught included information about the Alexander Technique.

"Waste of time," she said. "Any physiotherapist worth their salt will teach their patients relaxation and good posture."

This lady was fierce and I was newly qualified so I decided to bide my time, curious how there could be such a gulf between us. I had just spent three years training as a teacher of something that had changed my life and here was a practitioner of a highly respected, related discipline saying it was a waste of time! Over the years I have come to realise that, among people who have heard of the Alexander Technique, most think it is either a form of posture training or a method of relaxation. It is neither of these although, paradoxically, it is certainly the case that people who use the Technique will have better posture and will be more relaxed than if they didn't. So, what is it?

It is a process of self re-education whereby each pupil gains:

1. awareness of how they do anything and everything (i.e. habitual use)
2. insight into how their habitual use interferes with physical and mental well-being
3. the ability to minimise habitual use and maximise conscious awareness in activity.

The contrast between other forms of self re-education and this process was highlighted by Alexander:

*"Everyone is always teaching one what to do, leaving us still doing the things we shouldn't do."*

The role of Alexander teachers in this process is to guide, with a combination of words and hands-on work, a pupil through a series of lessons which are normally taught individually. We are not (usually) medically qualified and we do not offer diagnoses nor treatments. We have, however, all experienced the process of applying the Alexander Technique in our own lives and continue to experience it.

So, who, willingly, embarks on such a process? The largest group in my teaching experience has been people with recurrent chronic pain or discomfort e.g. migraine, lower back pain, ME/CFS, shoulder/neck pain or breathing problems. Such people, while appreciating the relief that interventionist treatments afford them, also recognise that, by changing how they do everything they do, they may break out of a cycle of recurring pain. A second group is people dealing with stress or emotional difficulties, e.g. agoraphobia or bereavement. A third group is people wanting to maximise their physical co-ordination, e.g. after a stroke or the onset of conditions like MS or Parkinson's Disease. A fourth group is people wanting to improve performance, e.g. horse riders, musicians, golfers, actors or writers.

The Alexander Technique requires:

1. no physical effort but considerable mental adjustment.  
*"We can throw away the habit of a lifetime in a few minutes if we use our brains."*
2. an open mind, open to the possibility that, as the quality of movement and

experience of activity changes, what feels wrong may indeed be right:

*"When people are wrong, the thing that is right is bound to be wrong to them"*

3. an intention to change although:

*"Change involves carrying out an activity against the habit of a lifetime."*

Just think of all those people who want to get fit without exercising!

It is always a challenge to describe the Alexander Technique in words! It is all too easy to give the impression that it is a blueprint for postural alignment, a static, maybe even rigid, idea. We are all moving, thinking, feeling beings. The excitement of working with the Technique comes as we begin to let go of our habitual use and discover that we can move, think and feel with greater freedom and ease than we ever imagined.

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All quotations in this article are notes of instruction addressed by F.M. Alexander to various pupils and collected in Edward Maisel's book "The Alexander Technique".)

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