
Alexander technique

Summary

- We can improve the quality of our lives by being more mindful of even the most mundane things.
 - The Alexander technique is a method of rediscovering natural balance and poise through thinking in activity. It is not an exercise regime.
 - All our movements should be gentle, using only the appropriate amount of muscular energy.
 - Every thought we have registers somewhere in our muscles, so the way we think about ourselves is a vital element.
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Almost every one of us has effortless poise and balance in childhood. By the time we reach adulthood, we've picked up many bad habits of posture and movement. Usually, we don't even realise that we have lost our suppleness, because tension has become an unconscious response to stress over a lifetime.

The Alexander technique addresses these bad habits by helping us to develop an even distribution of muscle tone, neither sloppily relaxed nor over tense. The philosophy of 'good use' means using and moving the body lightly, with a minimum of interference in the interrelationship of neck, head and back. The Alexander technique is a process of re-education, not a 'quick fix' solution. Over time, you will find that you function better in almost every way.

A sedentary lifestyle affects posture

The way we move affects our posture, breathing patterns, how we perform our everyday activities and, ultimately, the way we live our lives. A comfortable, easy posture needs a strong and coordinated body. However, a sedentary lifestyle promotes muscle tension. For instance, slumping in a chair for long periods of time compresses the spine. Learning the Alexander technique can help you to become aware of the inappropriate ways in which you hold, move and use your body, particularly your back. Bad posture and continual muscle misuse can lead to serious musculoskeletal problems including:

- Head, neck and back pain
- Muscle aches and spasms
- Bursitis (inflammation of joints)
- Repetitive strain injuries.

Poise is economical

Most of us put too much force into our movements, which can jar nerves, muscles, and joints. The Alexander technique stresses that movement should be economical and needs only the minimum amount of energy and effort. With awareness, it is possible to change postural habits and redistribute muscle effort more evenly and gently throughout the body. The Alexander technique can benefit you in many areas, including:

- Posture and balance
- Sporting performance
- Back pain management
- Stress management
- Increased confidence and self-esteem.

The positioning of your head

'Primary control' - in Alexander's terminology - refers to good neuromuscular organisation, which occurs when the whole body is able to expand freely. For this to happen:

- The spine must be able to lengthen, which means that the neck must be free
- The head should move in a direction relative to the top of the spine
- The muscles of the back should unclench
- The arms and legs should function as extensions of the back.

Becoming aware of how you sit, stand and walk

The Alexander technique focuses on making you aware of how you move and think. Some simple suggestions include:

- **Sitting** - most of us have a habitual way of sitting, such as always crossing one leg. What does it feel like to sit the 'other' way? The most comfortable sitting position is to put both feet flat on the floor and position the torso over the pelvis.
- **Standing** - most of us have a habitual way of standing, such as always putting the weight of our body through one leg. What does it feel like to stand the 'other' way?
- **Walking** - does your chin, stomach or pelvis lead the way when you walk? The easiest way to learn to walk is to take some Alexander lessons. You will learn directions for freeing your neck, which will allow your head to go forward and up, and your back to lengthen and widen. Movement then becomes a pleasurable thing.

Hands-on instruction is vital

You need to attend lessons with a qualified teacher. In a typical session, the teacher might point out muscle overuse as you stand, walk and sit, and suggest different and easier ways of moving. The teacher will also demonstrate a new way of thinking about movement, before you actually do it. In many ways, we could say that Alexander is a 'pre-technique'. The aim of the teacher is to encourage a light, free range of movement by raising your awareness. 'Self-carriage' is the best kind of self-care. Rediscovering your natural balance and poise requires your constant attention, but the benefits are enormous.

Where to get help

- Your doctor or any other health professional
- Alexander technique teacher
- AUSTAT - Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique Tel. 1300 788 540

Things to remember

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