

The Alexander Technique

In the 21st century, we are more interested than ever in taking responsibility for our own health. We no longer look to the GP to sort out all our problems and there are so many alternative techniques and treatments on offer, we are spoiled for choice. Osteopathy and chiropractic can alleviate back problems; acupuncture and homeopathy can boost our immune systems; pilates and yoga are good for posture and flexibility, and aerobic exercise is important for healthy hearts and lungs. So where does the Alexander Technique (AT) fit in?

What is it, why learn it, and what are the benefits?

The AT is not a therapy but a practical method developed by F.M. Alexander (1869 – 1955) for improving the way we 'use' ourselves in the activities of everyday life. Through learning it, we begin to address the root causes that may have led us to explore the possibly better known methods above.

The AT gives us a chance to free ourselves from unhelpful habits. It helps us to control our reactions, develops our ability to apply simple thinking in our activities and teaches us to take responsibility for our own health and well-being.

Why learn the AT?

Self Awareness

One of the things the Alexander Technique makes clear is that we don't see how we are causing our own health problems. We are not really aware of what we are doing with our bodies or how we are (subconsciously) orientating or 'directing' ourselves.

If we do notice that something is going wrong, we don't know how to go about changing it. If we find ourselves slouching, for example, we might attempt to sit up straight but, in doing this, just produce more tension. If we strain our voice when talking, we might drink more water, take a throat tablet or rest our voice. But because we don't know what we've been doing to cause the strain, we don't know how to prevent it from happening again. Alexander said that if we learn to stop doing the wrong thing, the right thing will do itself. This is what the AT is all about: finding out what we are doing to 'get in our own way' and learning to prevent it.

The Need for Improved Co-ordination

In an everyday activity like getting out of a chair, most of us will produce all kinds of unnatural tension and interfere with our breathing even as we prepare to get up. When standing for long periods, we may create problems throughout the system by constantly pushing the hips forward and pulling the head back and down into the body, when nature intended the reverse.

Many of us, in ordinary acts of living, are guilty of what one teacher described as 'squeezing the life out of ourselves'. But, until we are shown a different way, we won't change because what we do, out of habit, feels right.

Regaining Natural Poise

Natural poise is the tendency for the head to release from the top of the spine and lead us into movement; for the spine to lengthen as we move so that the back is springy and full of life, the breathing unrestricted and the arms and legs light and free. Alexander talked about 'primary control' to refer to a certain relationship between the head, neck and back which influences the quality of all movements.

Think of small children as they explore their environment, enjoying activity without fear of outcomes. (Watch their freedom of movement as they go into a squat to pick something up. Look at their ribs moving as they breathe.) In nature, living things are poised, alert and bursting with vital energy but without unnecessary tension. Most adults in the Western world have lost this natural condition but can, by using our ability to think, begin to get it back.

F.M. Alexander and his discovery

F.M. Alexander brought his Technique to the UK over 100 years ago. He began a teacher training course in the 1930s and several of the most renowned teachers he trained based their practices in Wales. Alexander was born in Tasmania. As a young actor in Sydney he developed throat problems which were exacerbated by being on stage. He would lose his voice after performances and this began to threaten his career. Doctors agreed with him that he must be doing something to cause his problem. But, apart from providing relief from his symptoms, no one knew how to help him.

He began a process of self discovery which led him to see a harmful pattern of habitual reaction which he realised was the cause of his problems. The pattern - to stiffen the neck, pull the head into the body, shorten and narrow the back and restrict breathing - is in fact universal. We each have our own, individual version of this misuse of ourselves but most of us are not conscious of it. The more intense the situation, the more we misuse ourselves. But even a simple stimulus, like the telephone ringing, is likely to set off our habitual pattern if we are not aware of it.



What are the Benefits?

- **Improvement** with numerous conditions such as back, neck or shoulder pain, repetitive strain injury, and vocal or breathing complaints. Also with difficulties such as depression, anxiety or lack of self-control. The AT can improve management of stress and pain and provide coping skills for chronic illness and disabilities.
- A greater sense of **confidence** through poise, freedom of choice, a freer neck and a stronger back.
- Changes in **appearance**. Applying the Technique results in changes in physical appearance as well as in the way we move. Friends and family often report that AT students look younger, happier and full of life. It can literally be a process of growth.
- A sense of responsibility and **control** of our own health and well-being.



Learning to let go

What happens in AT lessons?

In a series of AT lessons, we gradually, and in our own time, begin to glimpse our potential to be free from our habits. By taking the time to think our way through simple activities, we realise how strong the tendency is to carry them out habitually. So we get to know our habits. When we allow ourselves to do things in a more natural way, detached from the end result, we may experience lightness, flow of vital energy and opening up of the breathing. Alexander work should uplift us, physically and emotionally.

The teacher, through guiding touch, encourages us to release tension, to allow expansion throughout the body and to move in a new way. Most lessons will involve sitting and standing. Alexander believed that working with this everyday activity never stops being useful as there is so much to learn from it about ourselves. We are learning to control our reaction to a stimulus (to sit) and to re-coordinate ourselves by thinking. In a good lesson, no two experiences will be quite the same.

There will also usually be some lying-down work. The student will lie down with the head supported by books and the feet resting on the floor or table with the knees up. The teacher will bring about release by putting hands on the student and teaching Alexander 'thinking'. This is something the student can quickly learn to do at home.

Loose fitting clothes, preferably trousers, should be worn. One to one lessons usually last between 30 to 45 minutes and in Wales you can expect to pay between £20 and £30 per session. A course of six lessons should give you a basic understanding of the principles and enable you to decide if the AT is for you. The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) suggests that a course of twenty to thirty regular lessons provides a good foundation for ongoing self discovery for most people. Teachers who are members of STAT have undergone a three-year full time practical training course.

Applications of the AT

Because the AT helps us to use ourselves better in all acts of life, it has any number of applications. But there are certain fields where it is commonly used. Sports people and performing artists use it to prevent injuries and to help them achieve consistent levels of performance. Business people use it to manage stress, to make more effective presentations and to prevent back pain caused by long periods at the desk. Swimming without Stress, based in Cardigan, uses the AT to help people let go of their fears, enjoy the support of the water and swim more smoothly and efficiently. ✂

Feature by Ian Cross, MSTAT, BA (Hons)
Images by Allen and Cheryl Cross



Serena, a housewife from West Wales, came for lessons in the AT because of recurrent hip and feet problems. After 25 weekly lessons she says:

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The Alexander Technique has improved my life no end. I wish I had learned it years ago. I had put up for years

with debilitating pain in one form or another due to injury, wear and tear and, unbeknown to me, misuse of posture and muscle tension. Now I am aware of wrong posture and muscle tensions, I can correct these at will, helping myself to a better life, for the rest of my lifetime.

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Annemarie and Mark came to Cardigan from Leeds to learn to swim with the AT. They had a fear of putting their face in the water and could only swim for short periods, with a lot of strain. After 6 intensive lessons Annemarie says:

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We never thought we could have such a great experience with water. We had such a great time and couldn't

stop talking about it in the car on the way home, and don't forget we are talking a 220 mile drive here... It has been the most amazing experience, not only in relation to swimming and water; but what a confidence booster to shatter a phobia we've had for years in a matter of days. It feels absolutely fantastic to have achieved so much in such a little space of time and I am looking forward to coming back at a later date and bringing the kids too.

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To find your nearest teacher or for further information contact STAT:
www.stat.org.uk tel. 0845 230 7828
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