

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND AGING WELL

Andrea M. Matthews
Teacher of the Alexander Technique
Member, Alexander Technique International

“Most of us, including members of the medical and educational professions, tend to look on pain and illness as natural concomitants of the stresses of living and old age. But such stresses are caused by uncoordinated movements which accelerate the process of ageing.”¹

This simple but seemingly radical idea is at the heart of what the Alexander Technique offers. In our culture, we are constantly told that age and gravity work against us, grinding us inevitably down into decrepitude and immobility. This scenario is based on a misreading of how we are constructed to process gravity. Rather than compressing ourselves by our own weight into the earth like a column, we are actually ingeniously built to process gravity by means of reflexes that in fact suspend us lightly off the planet. Rather than gravity pulling us down, gravity serves to project us up into life and activity.

Despite these widespread and hampering ideas about age and gravity, older persons are seeking the means to improve their quality of life, to cope with concerns that seem to limit their activities more each day, and to retain their independence and mobility. By means of a few simple principles, thoughtful and non-strenuous movement, and the development in students of their ability to self-observe and gradually take responsibility for how they choose to move, the Alexander Technique provides a powerful answer.

A great strength of the Technique is its ability to address the whole student as an organic system, avoiding the trap of an unending series of specific “fixes.” By starting with the reflexive system of the head and neck that F.M. Alexander (who developed the Technique a century ago) termed the “Primary Control,” the Technique addresses indirectly a host of related issues in well-being and movement. His empirical discovery that this primary control (a certain dynamic relationship—rather than a fixed position—of the head and neck) controls the balance and coordination of the entire organism was later confirmed by scientific studies of vertebrate movement.

Alexander discovered that from a very young age and continuing through life, most of us learn unwittingly to interfere with our mechanisms of balance, starting by contracting the muscles in the area where our heads rest on our necks.² Because natural balance and coordination are immediately impaired by this interference, a series of “compensa-

tions” arises, further distorting coordination. Instead of being a poised and available system “tuned” by a balanced distribution of tonus and compression throughout, we learn to feel “normal” as a discontinuous collection of some slack and other excessively tensed parts that we must heave around like so many bricks. It never seems to strike us as peculiar that we even find it harder and harder to get out of a chair!

As time goes by, the imbalance becomes ever more pronounced, and is fed by the very fear of falling that it engenders. Moving our joints against the forces tending to immobilize them generates tremendous wear and tear, leading to pain and injury. We realize, without knowing how or why, that we have somehow become stiff, top-heavy, unstable and less able to respond flexibly. Fear of being injured in a fall ironically makes us tense up more, increasing those qualities that make us unstable. Balance and falling become major concerns—and often, major limitations.

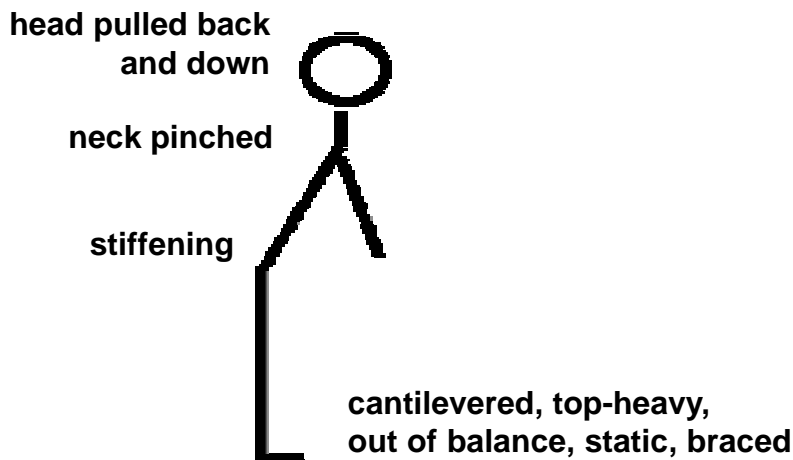


Fig. 1 This person’s head is pulled back and down, interfering with reflexes of balance and coordination, forcing rest of body to compensate with bracing and stiffness, in order to prevent falling forward. This is only one example of the forms that distorted balance can take, but they all begin with a disruption of the balance of the head on the neck. Such a posture as this can only work in that position and offers no responsiveness to change of any kind, let alone an unexpected one. Such vulnerability leads to fear and even more interfering tension.

Restoring Balance

Fortunately, Alexander also discovered that it is possible to interrupt and reverse this unhappy process.³ The delicate balance of the head and neck can be consciously restored, imparting balance and flexibility to our movements. With a slight change in how we think about what we’re doing, we stop contracting our necks and pulling our heads back, the interference with the reflexes of balance ceases, the dynamic relationship of our head and neck restores itself, and our balance and confidence return.

In theory, this simple principle, that we should cease our interfering contractions, hardly seems revolutionary. It doesn't seem like it should be very hard to put into practice, either. Nor would it be in practice, were it not for this paradoxical obstacle: Habit. The very thing we are trying to prevent is what feels "right," and has become an ingrained habit. It is often only when we attempt to change such a habit that we realize how shockingly resistant it can be to alteration, because we are constantly seduced by its feeling of rightness. It seems so natural to strive to be "right." And so unnatural not to!

For this reason, the benefits of the Alexander Technique are much more easily attained through the help of a teacher who can objectively observe how the student actually moves and uses himself. Gradually the student also learns to catch how he "gets set" to move and learns to inhibit (to interrupt, not repress) that impulse, allowing the movement to be carried out with natural, unimpeded grace. The philosopher John Dewey, himself an enthusiastic student and supporter of Alexander, called this skill of using conscious awareness to cooperate rather than interfere with reflex coordination, "Thinking in Activity."

A Rising Tide

Because Alexander Technique resists the temptation of chasing down and fixing particular "symptoms" such as stiffness, pain, and fear of falling, in favor of addressing the fundamental interference that generates those symptoms, it sets off a wave of indirect benefits of value to all students, and in particular to older students. Young people tend to have a greater latitude for error and misuse than older persons, and thus can "afford" more excess tension and interference. Those who are older or suffer from illness have a decreased margin for error and thus need to regain every degree of flexibility possible. The rising tide of balance and flexibility set off by use of the Technique lifts many "boats." The relief of pressure and redistribution of tonus at the head and neck is transmitted throughout the body,

- restoring poise and balance, helping to prevent falls
- increasing flexibility at joints and reducing excessive pull on bones, lessening damage when falls do occur
- helping to regain and maintain mobility
- increasing economy of movement by re-enlisting normal antigravity reflexes of the body, improving stamina and lightness

- promoting ease in activities from the simple and routine, such as rising out of a chair, to the more complex, such as lifting, reaching, golfing, gardening, etc.

As movement becomes less effortful and pressure is taken off joints and organs, the student's general well-being is enhanced. She will often experience:

- improved breathing
- improved organ function
- improved digestion and absorption
- lowered blood pressure. It is important to note that in addition to heart problems, high blood pressure is now found to be associated, along with lack of activity, with bone loss. By reducing blood pressure and making physical activity more pleasurable and manageable, Alexander Technique may also contribute to retention of bone mass.
- improved ability to cope with chronic illness and/or pain. For example, arthritis sufferers benefit from the Technique also because it reduces pressure on joints and promotes activity. Studies are also being conducted on patients with Parkinson's disease that indicate improvement in movement and outlook.⁴
- improved physical function and balance, which lessen anxiety; improve mood and sense of well-being; restore independence and a sense of self-determination; restore natural coordination, control,⁵ and choice; and reconnect the individual with a feeling of support both from within and from the environment

As the human organism is indivisible in its physical and psychological aspects—a “psychophysical unity,” in Alexander's words—such apparently bodily improvements immediately manifest as emotional benefits to the person as well.

A Means for All Seasons

Walter Carrington, a teacher of the Technique who trained with F.M. Alexander, stressed the value of the work for older students in a talk recorded in the book, *Thinking Aloud*.⁶

I remember what was probably Alexander's last lesson...an old lady who had been a pupil of his for some years. She must have had quite a number of lessons,

off and on, and she was quite old. Of course, so was he by then—he being nearly 87. The relevance of age is that people find that life becomes more difficult in all sorts of small, unexpected respects when they get older. They never thought or hesitated about climbing stairs and carrying things, or even lifting their hands up to a high shelf. The physical demands that you have taken for granted do become more difficult as you get older, and that is where you really need all the help you can get. Alexander help is particularly appreciated here. In fact, old age really is the testing time from the point of view of the Technique.

So here was this old lady and when F.M. finished the lesson, he patted her on the shoulder and said, “Now, my dear, see that you don’t stiffen your neck, and see that you’ve always got something to look forward to.” And that was the summary of the whole thing.

The Alexander Technique is not just for young professional athletes or performing artists, though they are often thought of as its primary beneficiaries and historically have been the first to recognize its enormous value. Ease of movement, confidence in balance, and enthusiasm for life’s activities are our birthright as human beings at any age and it’s never too late to start to reclaim them.

Endnotes

¹ Richard Brennan, *The Alexander Technique: Natural Poise for Health*, Element Books, 1991, p. 49

² The reasons for this are too numerous to go into in the space of this article, but have been discussed widely in other writings on the Alexander Technique. For more information, I recommend particularly Michael Gelb’s book, *Body Learning* (Owl Books, Henry Holt & Co., 2nd ed., 1994). You can also find numerous informative articles and books listed at the website of Alexander Technique International at www.ati-net.com or call ATI at 1-888-668-8996.

³ One preliminary study that confirms these results in older students is: Dennis RJ; Functional reach improvement in normal older women after Alexander Technique instruction. (J Gerontol A Biol Sci Med Sci, 1999 Jan, Abstract available) The outcome of the study was significantly improved balance and a reduction in falls.

⁴ Stallibrass C; An evaluation of the Alexander Technique for the management of disability in Parkinson’s disease—a preliminary study. (Clin Rehabil, 1997 Feb, Abstract available))

⁵ And in particular with the knowledge—through experience—that real control stems not from clamping down and grasping at results, but rather from balance, clarity of intention, expansion of the organism, and trust of the ability of one’s own reflex mechanism to respond appropriately to the demands of life.

⁶ Walter Carrington (Jerry Sontag, ed.), *Thinking Aloud*, Mornum Time Press, 1994, p. 136

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