

The Alexander Technique

A HEALTHIER BODY AT ANY AGE



AT teacher Erika Senft-Miller works with a student.



For four years, Heather Fitzgerald had trouble falling asleep. Night after night, the debilitating pain of tendinitis kept her awake, desperate to find a position that wouldn't hurt her arms. A writer and a trained viola player, Fitzgerald, of Burlington, didn't touch a computer keyboard or pick up her instrument during that time. She couldn't even open jars of food or floss her teeth because of the discomfort, and driving a car was almost impossible. Anxious to find a cure, Fitzgerald sought treatment from a range of practitioners—an orthopedic doctor to an acupuncturist, and everything in between. Although the pain would lessen for brief periods, it inevitably returned.

In desperation, Fitzgerald turned to the Alexander Technique

(AT), a method she had first heard about years earlier. "It's a movement re-education technique in which students become aware of physical habits, and then can pause, or inhibit those patterns, and redirect themselves," explains AT teacher Erika Senft-Miller, EdD, of Colchester. "It does take a willingness to change habitual patterns," she says, adding that "although the technique is not physically strenuous, it does require one's full attention and commitment to changing deep-rooted habits."

For a Variety of Conditions

Originated for use by stage performers and musicians in the 1890s, the Alexander Technique has proven beneficial to many others, in-

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cluding people suffering from chronic back, hip, and neck pain, and even deskbound computer users. The technique has also been used to treat asthma, arthritis, sleep disorders, and panic attacks. It has been proven effective in clinical studies at Columbia University, Oxford University, and most recently in the *British Medical Journal*, and is regularly recommended by physicians and other healthcare professionals.

“The Alexander Technique helps bring back the natural balance and harmony of the musculoskeletal system of the neck and chest,” says John Roos, MD. Dr. Roos, who practices in Burlington, recently recommended the technique to one patient, a businessman, who was “speaking too loudly” to compensate for a chronic sinus problem, resulting in strained vocal chords. That, in turn, aggravated his sinus problem. Practicing the technique allowed the man to relax his neck and chest musculature, which led to a softer voice, healthy vocal chords, and, in time, relief from the sinus problem.

Correcting Alignment

The Alexander Technique’s ultimate goal is the proper alignment of the head, neck, and spine. Ideally, the head should balance lightly at the top of the spine. If there is tension in the shoulders or neck, for example, the weight of the head will compress the spine. As a result, the body’s overall movement and coordination will be out of balance. Any AT teacher will explain that injuries tend to come from how an activity is performed, rather than from the activity itself. With the spine properly lengthened, the body will be able to move more freely, without strain and the resulting likelihood of injury. As toddlers, most of us enjoyed that ideal freedom of movement, but stressors, injuries, and time have all conspired to erode it.

New AT students should not expect to sit passively as corrections are made. “The teacher’s hands need to communicate freedom in movement,” Senft-Miller says, but adds that the Alexander Technique is “the opposite of a massage or adjustment, where something is done to you.”

During the lessons, students learn about human anatomy in general, as well as how to recognize specific stressors and tension that affect well-being. They work on new

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movements for familiar activities, learning to move and care for themselves in a healthy, natural, efficient way. Lessons typically last about 45 minutes, once or twice a week. A standard course involves 20 to 40 lessons. Although a student will continue to learn and refine throughout, the lessons can be spaced farther apart as he or she progresses. Once the student is familiar with the technique, he or she can practice virtually anywhere, including while standing in line at the grocery store, sitting at a desk, or watching television.

Different for Everyone

Though the underlying principles are the same for all, no two students will have the exact same experience because each one brings different movement habits and limitations to the lessons. For example, a student seeking relief from the discomfort associated with sitting at a desk all day will have different needs than a student whose neck and shoulder tension hinder her forehead.

“As a teacher, I have to meet them where they are and engage them,” says

Senft-Miller. That said, the essential elements are the same for all students: to do the work with the back at its most expansive, the neck relaxed, the head up and off the shoulders. The effort at home is as important as time spent with the teacher. Senft-Miller likens the process to learning a language or an instrument in that the student gets the basic information in the class, but masters it through repetition on his or her own. It's no quick fix, but improvements should be noticeable after six to ten lessons. Says Senft-Miller, "It's the process, not the end gain. It's not always about being in total balance, but about making healthier choices." Fitzgerald has learned that.

"I wasn't sure what to make of [the technique], but I kept going because I didn't know what else I could try if this didn't work," she says. "For a long time I worked on breathing, even though it didn't seem to

Find a Practitioner

The Alexander Technique is taught worldwide. To find a practitioner near you, visit the website of either the Alexander Technique International, www.ati-net.com, or the American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT), www.alexandertechnique.org. Both sites also list workshops, books, DVDs, and other resources. Erika Senft-Miller can be reached at senftmiller@mac.com.

What to Expect

What will happen in the first lesson? Your teacher may ask you to lie on a bodywork table while he or she gently moves your head and neck to encourage expansion in those areas. The teacher will then observe as you perform several basic movements such as sitting, standing, walking, and reaching. The lesson will be individually tailored to meet your needs and can be adapted to include specific goals, such as swinging a tennis racket more fluidly, playing the piano or typing more easily, or simply walking and sitting without discomfort.

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be connected to my arms, and eventually, very slowly, I started to feel this sixth sense in other parts of my body.” After several months’ practice, she is now able to do all the things that had caused her such discomfort, including playing her viola.

Helpful at Any Age

Fitzgerald is in good company. Among the many well-known practitioners are Julie Andrews, Sting, and members of the New York Philharmonic. Indeed, the technique has been proven helpful at any age. Philosopher John Dewey took it up at 60 and hoped it might be incorporated into the American educational system, and playwright George Bernard Shaw reportedly began practicing in his late 80s.

The Alexander Technique’s originator himself was living proof of the success of his work, reputedly teaching until a few days before his death in 1955 at age 86. F. M. Alexander was an Australian Shakespearean actor who became virtually mute every time he went on stage to give a performance. Yet he was fine during rehearsals, and no doctor could find a cause for his laryngitis. He soon realized, through the use of mirrors and self-observation of his movements and postural habits, that muscular tension in his neck brought on by performance anxiety was the cause of the problem. Alexander subsequently developed his eponymous technique.

Like thousands of AT students worldwide, Heather Fitzgerald remains committed to the Alexander Technique, and says that she is spreading the word whenever she can. “It’s easy to keep going because it’s so effective. It’s never drudgery,” she says.



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