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PERSONAL HEALTH

By Jane E. Brody

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It would come as no surprise to teachers of the Alexander technique, a method of adjusting body postures to relieve damaging stresses, to hear that my neck is plagued by perpetual tension, occasional pain and even crippling spasms.

There is hardly a moment that I don't unconsciously tense the muscles between my head and upper back: when I read, write, drive, work at a computer, cook, sew, garden, play tennis, swim, cycle, dance, sit, stand, walk, talk on the phone, carry my groceries and even sleep.

Alexander teachers say the demands of modern life have fostered a virtual epidemic of neck, back and other problems related to misaligned posture and improperly tensed muscles. Their technique is finding an ever-widening role among people with chronic pain and tension. Basically, it helps people shed long-established habits and relearn how to use their bodies with ease and grace, as they once did in childhood.

Judith Leibowitz, a leading trainer of Alexander teachers, notes that muscle tension habits begin early, often in first graders learning to write. Ms. Leibowitz is the director of the teaching program at the American Center for the Alexander Technique in New York and is the co-author with Bill Connington of "The Alexander Technique," to be published in August (Harper & Row, \$19.95).

What It Can Do

While not construed as a therapy, the Alexander technique has nonetheless proved therapeutic for countless people, most of whom seek help only after they are in pain or unable to perform their usual activities properly. "By teaching people better body mechanics," said Dr. Jack Stern, professor of neurosurgery at the New York Medical College, "it frequently enables patients to do away with pain -even the pain of a herniated disk -without having to undergo surgery."

The technique has long been appreciated by performing artists -dancers, musicians and actors, who use it to counter occupational tightness and injuries and to produce more fluid performances. In the last few years the technique has gained the attention of a growing number of ordinary people, many of whom have failed repeatedly to get permanent relief from conventional health professionals.

Randi Adler, for example, had been suffering from neck spasms for more than a decade. No one, from masseuse to physiatrist, had been able to relieve for more than a day the pain that she said began when she worked as a typesetter.

"I couldn't sit through a movie, couldn't go out to dinner, couldn't play cards, I was so uncomfortable all the time," she recalled.

Then a friend recommended the Alexander technique. In the first session, she said, she realized it had promise; she began to see how her misuse of her muscles was contributing to her problem. Gradually, through weekly sessions with Carole Crewdson, an Alexander teacher in Brooklyn, she gained a new awareness of her body and how she moved it.

Now, 10 months later, Mrs. Adler has shed her old neck-crippling habits and replaced them with more balanced and appropriate postures. She can now move without pain.

The Alexander technique helped Kathleen Usadi to undo the hunched posture she had assumed for 42 years until she developed back pain so disabling she could not carry a few books or groceries without pain. Within three and a half months of weekly Alexander training sessions, she said, she had a healthy back for the first time in five years.

After listening to Alexander students, a critical consumer might be tempted to dismiss the technique as a panacea promoted by fringe therapists who subject desperate patients to unproved remedies.

And not surprisingly, the technique, which was originated by an actor, has been all but ignored (although not denounced) by the medical profession. Only a relative handful of physicians, mostly orthopedic surgeons, refer patients to Alexander teachers.

How It Began

A hundred years ago F. Matthias Alexander, a young Australian actor, discovered that unconscious habits of posture and movement can interfere with the performance of normal activities.

It all started because he was losing his ability to speak on stage. Distraught by the failure of medical consultants to restore his voice, he took matters into his own hands. Using mirrors, he analyzed his body movements as he recited Shakespeare and found that his voice was poorest when he adopted certain postures that seemed right for the part but were not right for his voice muscles. Gradually he worked out a new stance, retraining the action of his muscles until he had regained control of his voice.

Encouraged by a physician familiar with his method and motivated by observations that many people abuse their muscles when they stand, sit and move, Alexander began teaching people how to use their muscles properly. He also wrote extensively about the technique and trained others to teach it in Australia, Britain the United States.

Hundreds of therapists in North America have completed long courses to become certified Alexander teachers, and the technique is now part of required course work in a number of schools for performing artists, including the Juilliard School in New York and the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

How It Is Done

Alexander teachers start by observing the student's posture, movements and muscular tensions during various activities. Through touch and words, the student is made aware of muscular habits that can interfere with natural poise and smooth performance.

For example, Eleanor Rosenthal, an Alexander teacher from San Francisco, tells of a violist whose left shoulder kept locking, causing pain, numbness in the hand and inability to move the head and arm. The problem made it nearly impossible for her to play.

The violist reported: "After my first lesson I noticed immediate improvement in the left shoulder area. The shoulder never locked again after the second lesson, and I have probably increased the number of hours I play."

The focal point of Alexander therapy is the positioning of the head, 10 to 15 percent of the body's total weight perched atop a slender rod, the spinal column. With two-thirds of the head's weight in front of the spine, it tends to fall forward (as it does when you doze off sitting up). The muscles in the back of the neck must keep it balanced. Some people adopt a military posture: chest out, shoulders back, chin in. Others tilt their heads back and lead with their chins. Still others bend their heads forward and hunch their shoulders. All such abnormal postures create undue stress on the spine and its supporting tissues.

The Alexander method teaches a more relaxed and natural posture and movement patterns that balance the head while relaxing the neck muscles. It also strives to free the neck from having to participate in every move the body makes.

Finding a Teacher

Teachers of the Alexander Technique vary widely in costs and methods. Typically, students attend weekly 30-to-50-minute sessions, at about \$25 to \$60 each, for a few weeks to several months.

Look for a teacher who has completed a recognized course and who has been certified by an Alexander training center, like the American Center for the Alexander Technique Inc., at 129 West 67th Street, New York, N.Y. 10023. The North American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, at Box 806, Ansonia Station, New York, N.Y. 10023, phone (212) 866-5640, maintains a list of certified members.

Books on the technique include "Back Trouble," by Deborah Caplan, at \$9.95 from the Triad Publishing Company, 1110 Northwest Eighth Avenue, Gainesville, Fla. 32601, and

"The Alexander Technique," by Judith Leibowitz and Bill Connington, at \$19.95 from Harper and Row, due in August.

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