

BODY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT: ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Joanna Hall

What's it all about?

The Alexander technique is a gentle approach that aims to re-educate the mind and the body through a series of movements so the body uses muscles more efficiently. The relationship between head and spine is key. When the neck muscles work well, the head should balance lightly at the top of the spine.

What the expert says...

Brita Forsstrom has been an Alexander technique teacher since 1984. She now runs teacher training courses as well as classes in London.

'The Alexander technique is really about telling a client what not to do – that is, helping them to unlearn poor postural habits,' says Forsstrom.

'People don't often appreciate that, if you change the way your head, neck and back move, then all other movements in your body can improve. Thus it can help every area of sport technique, from running style to golf swing or tennis serve.

'Try to be constantly aware of the way you're sitting, standing and moving; the tension that is causing the postural problems lies within your own body. It is about developing an awareness of where that tension is and then addressing it.

'There is no one correct position for your body – it's about adjusting your position to suit different situations. For example, when working at your desk, rest against the back of the chair. When you're having a phone conversation, sit up near the front of the seat rather than leaning back, so you're not engaged in forward lean, which can put strain on the spine.

'Every day, take time to lie down on a firm but comfortable surface. Recline for about 20 minutes with your knees bent, pointing up to the ceiling with a few paperback books to support your head. This classic Alexander position offers important rest both for your mind and body, allowing tension to be released and the back to lengthen in a coordinated way with the rest of body.

'While standing, keep the balance

Lowers blood pressure

With the release of tension in the muscles, blood vessels become less constricted, so blood circulates more easily. Studies by Dr Wilford Barlow, Alexander technique author and physician, revealed decreases in blood pressure of up to 30 points in clients.

Clears throat

FM Alexander himself developed the technique to overcome voice difficulties. It can also reduce dry throats and chest congestion.

Improves coordination

Changing how we move in a number of everyday activities will improve coordination. People with neuromuscular disorders such as stroke, MS and cerebral palsy have also been found to benefit in simple tasks such as doing up laces.

Helps you stand taller

The technique focuses on how the head, neck and back work together; when neck tension is reduced, the head no longer compresses the spine, and the spine is free to lengthen.

Creates better balance

An eight-week pilot study reported in the *Journal of Gerontology* found balance improvements in a group of 65-year-old women completing just two sessions a week.

PRACTITIONER CLAIRE RENNIE PHOTOGRAPHED BY CAIRNIE CONWAY. CLAIRE RENNIE: 020-8674-4112. CLAIRE RENNIE.CO.UK



even between the front and back of the feet and avoid slumping down on one hip. An open-eyed attitude to your surroundings helps to keep you poised and balanced in any situation.

'The Alexander technique is suitable for everyone,' she says. 'It can help actors and professional athletes, but is just as good for pregnant women, new mothers, individuals with long-suffering back problems and patients with chronic diseases.'

Getting started

To find your nearest Alexander technique teacher, call 0845 230 7828, or visit stat.org.uk. It's the largest of the AT organisations and lists STAT-qualified teachers in the UK and abroad. Other organisations include the Professional Association of Alexander Teachers (paat.org.uk). A class lasts from 30 to 45 minutes and prices vary from £25 to £75, depending on the teacher's experience and location. Classes are generally one on one, with the teacher using their hands in a gentle, guiding manner to help you rediscover your balance and natural upright poise – they will help you find what it is about your movement style that is causing problems: bad back, sore neck etc.

An Alexander teacher will show you, through simple daily activities such as sitting, lying down, standing, walking and lifting, how to move in a freer, more integrated way. The aim is to release unnecessary tension and reach your full height and stature without effort – no fancy equipment is needed.

How quickly you start to see improvements will be in part dependent on your body awareness and ability to identify areas of tension. In order to overcome long-standing postural habits, it is important that the Alexander technique sessions are close together. The founder, FM Alexander, felt that an intensive approach was by far the best way to benefit. Initial courses of 15 to 25 sessions are encouraged, with two to three sessions for the first few weeks, which can then be reduced to once a week. After each class, you should feel relaxed and calm, yet energised.

The gear

Lessons are given in normal but not tight-fitting clothes. You can do it barefoot or, if you need to look at how you walk in a particular pair of shoes, the teacher may ask you to wear them. Don't expect to break into a sweat, as there's no strenuous exercise, though you may get warm, as circulation improves as a result of changes in posture.

Read all about it

Many books are available, including four by FM Alexander. Teachers are keen to emphasise that Alexander can't be self-taught, so all books and resources must be used in conjunction with a course. Recommended texts include *Body Learning* by Michael Gelb and *The Voice Book* by Michael McCallion. Gym-goers keen to improve their workouts may be interested in *Master The Art Of Working Out* by Malcolm Balk and Andrew Shields. There's no magazine available, but the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) publishes a journal and newsletter, and anyone taking lessons can access these publications (stat.org.uk).

The downside

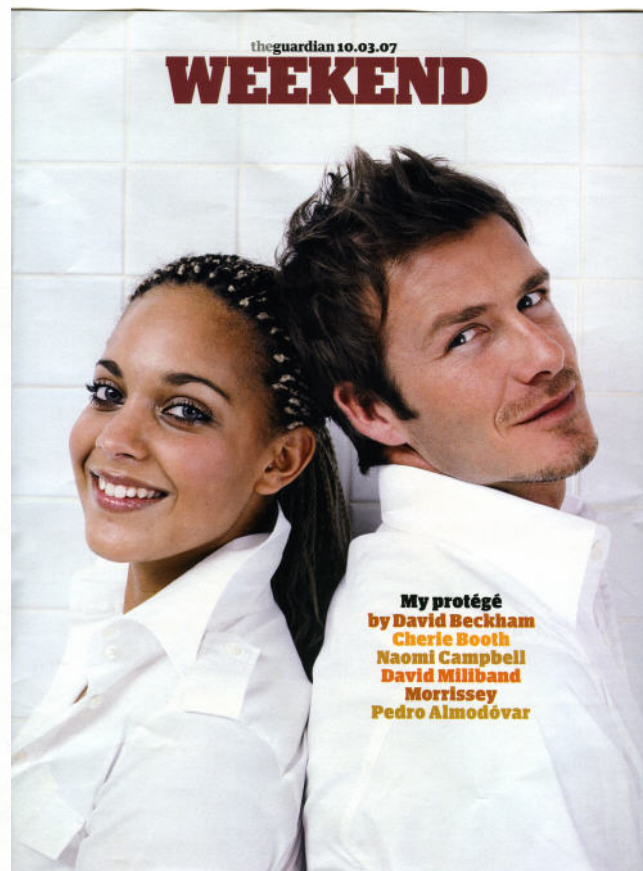
No quick fix You need to be mentally and personally engaged in the class for a number of sessions before you begin to feel the benefits. But whatever you learn stays with you.

No specific strength or cardiovascular benefits Your heart, lungs and muscles will not get fitter, but by using your muscles more efficiently you can start to be more active without incurring risk of injury.

Get the right teacher If you're hoping to focus on one particular aspect to improve, say, your running technique, then you'll need to look quite hard to find a teacher who will suit your specialism.

Total commitment Making Alexander work for you is about applying it to your everyday activities, from sitting down to make a phone call to getting into bed at night. If you only commit yourself to it in a class, you won't experience all the potential benefits.

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My protégé
by David Beckham
Cherie Booth
Naomi Campbell
David Miliband
Morrissey
Pedro Almodóvar