

reaching implications. Even at a very basic level people trying to put this idea into practise report a greater sense of having control over their lives.

It is the role of the Alexander teacher to guide the pupil into a discovery of these psycho-physical facts, and it is done through a combination of explanation and direct "hands-on" work. A competent teacher is able to bring about in the pupil a change in their co-ordination in a matter of minutes, though this cannot, of course, be sustained. Gradually the pupil comes to understand how a certain mental acquiescence is necessary to allow these changes to happen. This "acquiescence" or "absence of interference" is the very state needed by the body to function at its most efficient. In time the pupil learns how to bring about this internal reorganisation on his or her own and how to apply it to all the normal - and even some of the unusual - activities of life.

It should by now be apparent in what way this relates to managing stress. Experience is very subjective, and situations which are stressful and difficult for one person can be challenging and enlivening for another. It all depends on how we take them, which depends on our individual "make-up". Learning the Alexander Technique cannot change someone's essential nature, but can help one to achieve greater integration, inner "connectedness". That which is better connected, better integrated can better withstand stress, just as our camping tent - if properly pitched with the right amount of tension - can better withstand the storms.

For many people who learn the Alexander Technique the sense of improved physical well-being is as much as they want to take out of it. For others, the possibilities of developing some of the psychological aspects can become a very personal tool for self-development over a great number of years. Space does not permit me to explore such questions further and the serious enquirer is referred to Alexander's own writings\* or to a trained teacher. I have found, however, that these ideas do translate well into the needs of busy people in the work-place. Both in private lessons and in group classes (where such tools as "role-play" can be used) the process of making discoveries about oneself, of understanding some of the hidden relationships between cause and effect, can empower people in a very real way.

\* Particularly recommended is "[The Use of the Self](#)".

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# Self-Management and the Alexander Technique

*Who was F. Matthias Alexander? What is the Alexander Technique?  
How does it relate to Stress Management?"*

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Generally considered today (owing to some unfortunate literature) to be a postural approach to dealing with back pain, the work of F. Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) was, for he himself and his early pupils, primarily a means of learning to control human reactivity. Faced with vocal and respiratory problems in his youth, when he was an itinerant actor, he sought unsuccessfully for a cure from the medical profession and through the study of various contemporary systems of voice production and respiratory control. By means of meticulous self-observation over a considerable period of time, he was eventually able to discover certain patterns of unnecessary muscular tension which were causing harmful pressure on his larynx and interference with his natural breathing.

This in turn led him to the realisation that the human body maintains its equilibrium and poise according to certain principles. By understanding what these principles are one can learn to carry out the normal range of human activities in such a way that they are in conformity with these principles rather than in contradiction to them. In other words, one can learn to be better co-ordinated.

However, as Alexander discovered, these principles of physical co-ordination do not work in isolation from the rest of our functioning. Specifically, the quality of muscle tone and the way we are supported at rest and in movement is only one aspect of a whole which includes our thought processes and our emotional states. In trying to unravel and understand the interrelationship between these different aspects of his organism Alexander realised that they were inextricably linked with habit patterns which were deep-rooted and connected with his "intention to act" or his "will to do". If this sounds as though it is getting complicated, I will try to explain what I mean.

Firstly on the physical level, Alexander discovered that we do not hold ourselves upright by balancing one part of the body on top of the part below it - like someone on stilts balancing something on their head - but rather that we are held upright by dynamic tension: a useful image is that of a suspension bridge or a camping tent which are held firm by forces pulling in opposing directions. Poise, therefore, is attained by finding the right balance of tensions pulling in the right directions.

Contracted muscles in parts of the back, neck or shoulders, for instance, are seen from the point of view of the Alexander Technique as symptoms of an uneven distribution of tension throughout the whole body. The "Alexander" approach to dealing with this is to try to rectify the overall balance of tensions - just as a "kink" in the canvas of a tent is corrected by adjusting the relative tensions on the guy ropes. The key, on a physical level, to this balance of tensions in a human being is the relationship of the head to the neck, and the head and neck to the back.

Certain parts of the body are for support and others for mobility. The spine, pelvis and rib-cage are our central support structure and movements come from the joints. The weight of the head (some 10-12lbs.) has to be borne by the cervical spine. It does not rest on the atlas in such a way that it could balance; there is more weight forward of the atlas than behind. The head would, if left to itself, tend to fall forward and it is prevented from doing so by muscular activity which pulls the head back. If this muscular activity becomes excessive then the head pulls back too much and the weight of it starts to bear down on the cervical spine. This then has a "knock-on" effect on the rest of the spine, which either collapses or, usually with a great deal of tension in the chest shoulders and neck, becomes rigid in order to provide support. The effect of either collapse or rigidity on the respiratory system is that free movement of the ribs is prevented; the relationship between respiration and emotion is a field of study in itself.

No amount of locally applied massage or remedial treatment - nor, for that matter, a psychologically based approach to tension - is going to bring about more than temporary relief until the individual discovers what it is he or she is doing (at a level

currently below the sense register) that is causing this "chain reaction" and stops doing it. In other words, the individual needs to learn how to allow the spine to regain its natural length and spring. This is achieved, put in the most simple terms, by removing the excessive downward pressure of the head on the cervical spine, which is achieved by releasing excessive tension in the muscles of the neck.

This is just the physical aspect, however, and it does not function in isolation. In learning to carry out motor-activity certain connections are made between the mental decision to act and the physical actualisation of that decision. These processes are connected below the level of conscious awareness in accordance with certain patterns of neural stimulation stored in some kind of "motor" or "neural" memory. However, if this "memory" contains badly organised information, or unnecessary information then the "will to do" a certain activity will inevitably stimulate all the neural and motor activity associated with it. Like a computer programme, or worse a computer virus, once it is activated it obediently, ruthlessly and blindly follows each stage of its preordained obligatory path. This is how habits of posture and movement work. A very simple example of this is someone who when using a computer mouse lifts their shoulder every time they click it. Lifting the shoulder is unnecessary, but it has become associated unconsciously with the act of clicking the mouse. The tension which accumulates in the shoulder can start to pull on the neck and cause pain. Massaging the neck and shoulder will relieve the symptoms but until the person realises what is causing the problem it will recur. (This was the case with one pupil of mine who thought his shoulder pain was caused by a sports injury from too much squash and tennis. It turned out to be the result of lifting his shoulder when using a mouse. Once he had realised this he could very quickly stop doing it and all symptoms soon disappeared.)

Alexander devised for himself a method of re-educating the links between volition and the resultant motor-activity. His approach is not "behaviourist" in that it deals with the detailed processes, extremely subtle though they are, of the interface between thought and movement. The changes which are brought about are not so much ones of "behaviour" as of "state". When the quality of the connection between mental and physical processes changes, so does our "state". Alexander studied in himself the action of both volition and its counterpart, "inhibition" (not in the Freudian sense of some kind of repression, but in the sense of the opposite of volition: i.e. "Volition" is that which you agree to do and "Inhibition" is that which you do not agree to do). He found that with sufficient mental alertness it was possible to receive a stimulus to act (the stimulus coming either from within the organism or from without) and to choose not to react. This is a function of a higher part of the mind and calls for a high degree of attention and "awareness in the moment", which in themselves affect one's state. The possibility of using consciously our potential to "give or withhold consent" has, if one takes the time to reflect on it, far-