

A matter of technique:

Addressing chronic musculoskeletal pain at its source

Misuse, not overuse, is the contributing factor to our problems. The Alexander Technique is a learned skill featuring hands-on guidance for improving postural behavior to eliminate pain and underperformance caused by patterns of learned habits.

By Brian McCullough

Back pain is a leading cause of visits to the doctor and missed days of work. How often do we hear someone say, "My back is killing me"? A more accurate pronouncement, acknowledging personal responsibility and the mind-body connection, would be to say, "*The way I am using my back is killing me.*" The tendency to cite stress as a source of pain is another example of failing to make that key connection. We should consider that it is our *reaction* to stress—strain—that is the real problem.

It is often difficult to diagnose back, neck, arm, or any pain from a so-called repetitive stress injury. Trips to five different health professionals can result in five different diagnoses. But can a diagnosis really be complete without determining the root cause of a problem? We gravitate to quicker, easier approaches such as drugs, massage, exercise, or rest. All these things may be tried first in the hope that the pain will just go away. Addressing the root cause is a more elusive endeavor, but usually yields a more effective, longer-lasting solution.

Bad habits learned too well

The pain and functioning difficulties people experience are often caused by learned habits that interfere with natural poise, capacity to learn, and the ability to heal ourselves. Often it is something we are doing that causes our problems.

At my daughter's Aikido class, the instructor does not notice she is shortening her stature while performing the side-to-side looking movements asked of her. She is corkscrewing her neck into her torso while carrying out the movements, and eventually there may be neck and back pain. Similarly, a computer user inclines toward his work with a slight, almost invisible rounding

of the back and collapsing down toward his work. Eventually, there may be back pain. In both examples, the subjects are unconsciously misusing the self—the mind/body/emotion connection.

Not what we do, but how we do it

Many of our discomforts and underperformance during daily living, sport, or artistic performance are use-related. We tend to blame an activity rather than the way we perform it. We blame the non-ergonomic office chair, the too-soft bed, the hours of practicing the violin. However, the blame needs to lie with our technique, defined as “way of working.” It’s the “how,” not the “what,” that needs to be addressed. Misuse, not overuse, is the contributing factor to our problems, because the majority of individuals doing the same repetitive activities do so without ever encountering a problem.

All of our senses can become unreliable at times. This is due to what F.M. Alexander, creator of the Alexander Technique, called “unreliable sensory awareness.” For example, initially you notice the smell of the toast you burned this morning; then it “goes away.” In fact, the burnt smell has not left your house, but you simply got used to it. The noise of the refrigerator in your kitchen goes unnoticed until something new happens—it turns off. The same thing occurs with proprioception, a part of the human sensory system. The term refers to our sense of balance, relationship of parts to other parts, and appropriate effort. It may be the one sense we simply can’t live without, and it can be unreliable at times in nearly everyone.

How do we go wrong?

What causes us to misuse ourselves? The cause is much more fundamental than we may realize. It is end-gaining—grasping for an end result without consideration of the best way to achieve it. End-gaining is common in our society. We see it in politics, education, workplaces, and health care. To best recognize it, we should begin by understanding our own end-gaining behavior. We perform hundreds of tasks every day. We often bend, reach, sit, stand, and walk in unnatural ways that harm us. We might call the effect of these unnatural ways of using ourselves “cumulative trauma.” Despite our best intentions, we are unable to change our misuse patterns because they are unconscious habits.

What to do? First, stop doing!

To change unwanted habits, an important strategy is to stop *doing*. That sounds too simple and we can’t appreciate it because we are conditioned from early age to try hard and strive for accomplishment (i.e., end-gaining). Unfortunately, in doing so we often bypass process, and problems arise.

Alexander used “conscious inhibition” to describe the way to change habits. Space can be put between stimulus and response in order to stop, think, and thoughtfully reorganize. The power of inhibition is not much appreciated by most people. However, as noted by the influential neurophysiologist, Charles Sherrington, “To refrain from an act is no less an act than to commit one, because inhibition is co-equally with excitation an activity of the nervous system.”

Doing is what we know best. In our culture, doing exercise is the foundation of many forms of self-improvement and rehabilitation. We are given strengthening exercises for a “weak” back, vocal exercises to train a singing voice, and weight training to improve our golf game. All this may not help our functioning because it does not address underlying habit patterns that are faulty. There is a saying, “A crooked man will walk a crooked mile.” Repetitive exercise plastered on top of existing faulty habits can further ingrain those habits.

Often when we are given an exercise to do, we are instructed on *what* to do, and not enough instruction on *how* to do it. The same exercise given to five different individuals can have five different results. This is due to the accompanying, underlying manner of use employed by each individual. A good approach would be to stop the wrong thing, so the right thing will do itself, but this is difficult and foreign to us. How can we escape this trap?

The Alexander Technique

Poised coordination is the foundation for solving many problems that are musculoskeletal or related to any skill development. Active participation, not passive therapy, is essential. Education is needed to address mental habits that are inseparable from body movements. F.M. Alexander, who lived from 1869 to 1955, spent decades developing such a teaching method. The Alexander Technique uses no exercises, but rather employs everyday activities coupled with an improved underlying manner of use. A study in the August 2008 issue of the British Medical Journal reported that one-to-one lessons in the Alexander Technique from a certified teacher were more effective than conventional therapy for chronic back pain, and the effects were longer-lasting.

Anyone can learn the Alexander Technique in a series of weekly lessons that first teach how to recognize problem patterns. The learning process includes inhibiting the response to a stimulus that causes a problem, redirecting muscular energies, and continuing that process throughout an activity. The lesson provides an experience that is almost impossible to give oneself because what is familiar feels right, and new ways of thinking and moving initially feel wrong. The Alexander teacher, with hands-on guidance, gives immediate feedback when the client starts using inefficient habit patterns. An outward, poised framework or carriage of the body is accomplished.

People consider the Alexander Technique for many different reasons. Among them are:

- Prevention and reversal of conditions that lead to musculoskeletal discomforts
- Performance enhancement of any skill, craft, sport, music, dance, etc.
- Sense of ease, lightness, and well-being, and clarity of thinking

The Alexander Technique has been well preserved for a century. It is taught in a consistent way by thousands of teachers worldwide who adhere to standards set by the American Society of the Alexander Technique (AmSAT). An informational Web site is at www.AmSAT.ws.

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