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THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE  
for  
STRESS

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USING THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE  
TO RELIEVE AND PREVENT STRESS

Introduction

I have written this booklet to complement public sessions and private lessons given in the Alexander Technique. I have intended that it should be used after some initial practical work with a teacher of the Alexander Technique. If you find, when making use of this booklet, you have some questions please contact me so we can discuss them.

The contents include a brief summary on the Technique, some practical suggestions for relieving stress, some guidance on preventing stress arising and a note on other approaches to stress. The appendices are a particularly important feature. There you can find instructions for learning how to think better in order to improve the way you manage your body.

If you wish to extend your reading about the Technique, there are other publications which cover themes not included here like, for example, the theory of the Technique, its development by its originator, and how it is applied in different spheres of endeavour. One of the best books is Michael Gelb's "Body-Learning" published by Arum.

My aim in writing this booklet is to give those, who have done a little Alexander work, a manual to which they can refer when they are on their own without a teacher. I hope you find it useful.

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## The Alexander Technique

A certain degree of appropriate muscle tension is needed for movement and the functioning of the body. When too much muscle tension is used over a prolonged period of time the body becomes stressed. Maladies of many different kinds arise, e.g. back-pain, arthritis, hernias, depression, alcoholism, asthma, speech defects.

The Technique, developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander from his detailed studies of the body in movement, teaches you how to regulate the use of your own muscle tension so that you can control, with full consciousness, the amount of effort you put into your activities. In this way you can use your physical energy appropriately for any task you want to do:- like making a 'phone call, cutting bread, brushing your teeth, talking, writing, typing, sitting-down, walking, running... the list, of course, is endless because you are always doing something (even when you are just sitting still).

Most people, untrained in this Technique, control their body unconsciously. So they do not know, at a conscious level, how they actually make their own bodily movements. By learning the Technique they raise their awareness of how they move and thus learn to exercise conscious control over the effort they use to do things. This training in consciousness is, then, a training of the mind and so the Technique is described as a mind-body method.

The Technique teaches you how to use conscious mental control in everything you do. There isn't anything you do to which it does not apply. It is a generic method for learning better use of yourself. Alexander referred to his Technique as "The Universal Constant in Living for the Use of the Self."

To help you place the Technique within the spectrum of approaches available today for handling stress, I give the following indications by showing what it does not do:-

- The Technique does not focus on emotional trauma and distress directly. Nor does it treat mental illness directly. Nevertheless, people who have emotional and mental problems are often helped indirectly by the Technique. And nowadays many Alexander teachers are also qualified in psychotherapeutic disciplines and can give psychological help.

- Nor does the Technique directly correct faulty joint alignments through manipulation. Improvements in the alignment of the body that arise through work with the Technique are the result of the changes in the individual's mental approach to his/her body. Many Alexander teachers work in collaboration with osteopaths and physiotherapists who practice manipulation. And there are osteopaths and doctors who are also teachers of the Technique.

The Technique is often likened to Yoga, and is sometimes called the western man's yoga. This is a useful analogy in that the Technique is like Yoga as it is a mind-body discipline, but unlike Yoga as it was developed in the west with western scientific information, western thinking and western terminology. In contrast to the eastern approach of Yoga, the Technique does not place emphasis upon special exercises focussed on "Being" but rather examines what you already do in your normal daily life and teaches you how to do that better. This in turn quite naturally enhances the quality of your "Being", i.e. reduces your unnecessary stress.

In this booklet I shall outline two approaches to stress

1. how to reduce your bodily tensions when you are already stressed
2. how to prevent unnatural body stress arising in the first place

Of course everyone has to work out their own routines and methods for handling stress. I hope this booklet helps you to incorporate some things from the Alexander Technique. The appendices contain a number of practical instructions which you might find useful to put onto cassette in order to replay and remind yourself of basic good thinking for good use of your body.

## A note on other approaches to stress

You will obviously need to consider other approaches to stress relief and prevention which the Technique does not deal with. Diet is important, as is health hygiene and the management of your time. Regular physical exercise is necessary (carried out, please, from an Alexander point of view, with good use of your body. Physiotherapists claim that 70% of the cases they are treating nowadays are due to misuse of the body while taking aerobic classes or similar kinds of strenuous exercise.)

And while it is essential that you sort yourself out physically it is, of course, but a part of the whole story. We all need to ask ourselves to what extent the ways we think and feel towards other people add to our stress. Our inner states are the most powerful contributors not only to our own stress but also the distress we cause other people.

Information about all these things is readily available from books and magazines. Contact with appropriate teachers and therapists can be made through their national associations. Your health food shop will probably have names and addresses of local specialists.

A word now on the positive side of stress. Each of us has to face challenges and crises which place demands on us that call forth new learning, new discoveries and development. When we are healthy we are able to take on these challenges with a gusto, joy and exuberance that seems to enhance every fibre of our being. When we are over-stressed these challenges push us lower in both vitality and willingness to work at them.

Sometimes the loss of this vitality for living is a spiritual malaise, not attributable either to physical or emotional issues alone. Therapies for the body and mind can bring relief from stress in many ways, but they may not reach into the realms of spirit where the deepest springs of life flow.

Then it could be important to look at the significance of your life and the events that have shaped it; to search out the meanings of your relationships, your accomplishments and your failures; and to open up the future with its possibilities for you. Biographical work in this realm is conducted by members and associates of TRANSFORM, Northgate Mansions, Northgate St, Gloucester. I am an associate and can give you information about this work.

## Relieving Tensions when Overstressed

### Lying-down work

Ten to fifteen minutes on your back on the floor in a semi-supine position (knees bent and feet flat on the floor, your hands resting on your abdomen and your head supported on a small pile of books) does wonders for restoring energy and good humour and relieves back, neck and head aches. you need to be warm, private and quiet.

People often ask why the semi-supine position is recommended. With the knees up lower back tension is released. With the head supported it is properly aligned with the back instead of falling backwards. The spine is then encouraged to lengthen, pressure on the discs is relieved and they can then soak up the spinal fluid which makes them better shock absorbers.

If you are very tired you may well drop off for a quick snooze because this position is so comfortable. But the purpose for your lying-down is to stay awake and use your thinking to sort out the tensions in your body. You are tuning in with your mind to your body. Using it with the body instead of against it, which is usually the case in our busy lives. Here's how to do it.

Once you have got yourself comfortably on the floor in semi-supine you start by moving your "attention" to different parts of your body. Do this in complete stillness, without any wriggling or tensing to check whether you are really putting your attention in the right place in your body.

So begin by taking your attention to all the points where your body makes contact with the floor...your head, your shoulder-blades, your upper arms and elbows, your lower back, and your feet. Don't hurry. Take it nice and easy. Let your breathing flow naturally.

Allow yourself time to get comfortable. If the books are too high or too low, adjust the height. If they are too hard put a little padding on them. If your lower back feels at all sore, put some padding there too, a small towel often does the trick.

Now you can begin to practice using your mind to release muscle tensions. This needs to be done slowly, for although we can create muscle tension very quickly, undoing it takes time. This is what to do.

Starting with your attention at your head, gradually work down your body moving your attention through its spatial length and breadth right through to your feet. Pay particular attention to noticing the whereabouts of all your joints. In the jargon of the Technique we call this "directing your thinking". In an appendix, I have written down the verbal instructions I give my pupils while they are lying down. You can put these onto tape and play them to yourself when lying-down, to help you train your attention in this procedure.



What are you going to get out of doing this? The immediate results become apparant as you do it. It refreshes you and calms you. It relaxes muscle tensions and relieves aches and pains.

There are longer term benefits too which I would put under the category of stress prevention. Most of us unconsciously carry an over-contracted body image of ourselves which needs to be expanded. While you are lying down and giving yourself thinking directions you are expanding your body image. By actively "directing your thinking" you can open out the spatial relationship between your mind and body...you consciously "re-programme" the unconscious sense of your body-space. Regular practice will gradually alter the over-contracted image of yourself. You will be able to retain this expanded image when you get up and thus make your movements, moment by moment, with less tension.

### Sitting and Directing your Thinking

Often it will not be possible for you to lie-down. Make use of the time you have by getting yourself comfortably seated (with your eyes closed, your hands resting on your lap, your feet flat on the floor, your back well supported).

What you have to be particularly aware of when sitting is the poise of your head. Do check that it is not pulled back on the neck. (When lying on the floor your head was supported by the books but, as soon as you are up-right, you have to manage the balance of your head yourself. Head balance causes people the greatest postural difficulties and leads to most problems of muscle tension. Please pay particular attention to the information on head balance in the section on the Anatomy of Movement).

While you are sitting in this position you can "direct your thinking". Beginning with your head, as when lying down, you gradually work through your body to your feet, opening out your spatial awareness of yourself. Once again you are tuning your mind to your body, bringing them into harmony and co-ordination with each other. And this has a restorative effect on the nervous system.

In the appendix I have written out the instructions I give my pupils when they are sitting. You can refer to them to help you.

There is no need always to retreat to a quiet place in order to do this, "directing of your thinking". After some practice on your own you will find you can do it anywhere. No-one notices - except perhaps that you are calmer and more "together" in yourself. For example, when you are at a meeting and not actually speaking you can take odd moments to "think" about your bodily directions and allow yourself to relax.

And you do not necessarily have to be sitting down either. If you are standing waiting in a super-market queue, for example, you can "direct your thinking" and use the time to your benefit instead of getting impatient. In the Appendix you will find "directions for thinking" when you are standing.



## Section 2

### Preventing Stress

There are two approaches I suggest you can take towards preventing stress.

The first is to get to know and understand how you move your body when you do things (like using the 'phone, or cutting bread, or cleaning your teeth) and improve the efficiency with which you do them (i.e. reduce the unnecessary muscle contraction).

The second is to observe your environment closely (for example the chairs you sit on, the shoes you wear, the noise around you) and improve it to prevent it infiltrating your unconscious adversely, and causing tension below your threshold of awareness.

In both instances the onus is on you to "remember to remember" so that you can make improvements. But the stream of daily life draws on your unconscious patterns of movements so deeply that you will be hard-pushed even to stop and observe those patterns, let alone change them. Generally we are too busy to slow down and notice what we actually do when, for example, we are writing or when we are typing.

The prevention of stress can only be successful if we are able to exercise awareness of our bodies at far more subtle levels than is customary, whilst still attending to the tasks that have to be done. This obviously requires practice and cannot be achieved by the simple reading of this booklet nor by one day's concentrated effort to get it all mastered. Alexander teachers train for three years in order to achieve satisfactory basic standards of awareness and control of movement. I would advise anyone who wants to improve the ways they handle stress to take individual lessons with an Alexander teacher.

### Anatomy of Movement

I can outline some key aspects of the anatomy of movement here, but for practical purposes you need to pursue the study of your movement with an Alexander teacher if you want to make significant improvements to the way you use your body.

It is unfortunate that text books on anatomy examine the structure of the dead body rather illuminating the living, moving body. With a basic knowledge of the structures of your bones and muscles you can learn how to bend your joints with the minimum of effort.

I outline here the significant joints that matter most in movement and to which you should pay attention.

## Head-Neck Pivot

Alexander discovered that the primary control of our poise is governed by the balance of the head on the neck. It is important, therefore, to know where the head attaches to the neck and how that joint operates. More particularly it is important to know the typical ways in which the movement of the head on the neck is abused.

Any good anatomy book will show you pictures of the way in which the head balances on the neck. In practical terms you should avoid excessive muscle contraction in the back of the neck and across the shoulders. In the Alexander jargon we say "don't pull your head back".

A simple instruction I give to pupils to help them manage the poise of their heads is "let the nose drop forward very slightly" while maintaining the overall uprightness of posture. This encourages the head to tilt slightly forward to release the neck tension at the back. This little instruction needs to be given to oneself very frequently throughout the day because we seem to have an unconscious predisposition always to pull the head backwards and tighten the neck and shoulders. (There are anatomical reasons for this which are too complex to explain here).

N.B. You will find that as you begin to "play" with the balance of your head you will find you need to adjust your eyeline as well. "Dropping the nose" requires an adjustment upwards of the eyes.

## Shoulder Girdle

This is a highly mobile structure which enables you to move your arms with great freedom. This marvellous mobility however contains the seeds of its own abuse because the alignment of the shoulders is most readily displaced and permanently distorted by muscle misuse. Hunched and rounded shoulders are signs of this as are shoulders pulled up around the neck.

To remedy this you need to remind yourself, while you are engaged in your activities, to release the shoulders and "let them drop". You also need to soften the tension in the upper arms. In Alexander terminology we say "lengthen and widen" the torso.

## Pelvic Girdle

This is a very solid and firm structure designed to provide a stable platform from which the torso can rise up from the legs. The typical misuse here is failure to bend in the right place.

The joint for bending is the point where the leg inserts into the pelvis. Many people, however, try to bend themselves from the waist which is not designed for bending. Consequently, they may suffer from back trouble, often brought upon themselves through wrong use of these pelvic joints.

Whenever you bend, stop before you start and then remember to use your joints properly. And in bending you invariably need to bend the knee and ankle joints as well. You also need to adjust the poise of the head to ensure you do not pull it back and tighten the neck muscles.

## Environmental Hazards

Here are some specific environmental hazards. You can extend this list and make continual improvements to your surroundings and their effect on you.

Chairs of all kinds are stress traps. The worst seating offenders in my experience are car seats, theatre seats, desk chairs, deck-chairs and settees or sofas. These are all seats in which we spend long periods of time and nearly all are badly designed for that purpose. My advice is never to remain seated for more than an hour without getting up and stretching; and if possible do it every half-hour. Support your back properly in the lumbar region when sitting down for any length of time and ensure your feet reach the floor.

Carrying shopping bags or suit-cases are hazards I put high on my list. Carrying anything, even quite small items, causes stress if it is badly done. You need to watch how you bend to pick something up and then make sure you do not hunch-up your shoulders, and over-tighten your elbows, wrists and fingers.

Clothing is the next major problem, particularly for women. High-heeled shoes distort the pelvic structure very badly and usually create massive tension in the muscles of the lower leg and ankles. Tight trousers create tension around the groin which in turn affects the abdominal muscles. Tight waist-bands constrict breathing precisely at the point where the rib cage needs maximum room for expansion.

Noise is the final stress aggravator on this short list which is perhaps the worst and most pervasive of all the offenders. Whether it is constant noise, as for example continuous traffic outside an office window, or intermittent, like a road drill, the effect is similar. In endeavouring to resist its invasion into us we tend to contract our entire muscle structure. When it is impossible to alter the external circumstance of noise, then your inner conscious work on opening out your body by "directing your thinking" is even more important.

What are your pet hates in the environment? Keep an eye out for them and use your imagination to find ways of over-coming them.

## Appendix

### Instructions for Lying-Down Work

If you put these instructions onto tape for yourself you should speak calmly and smoothly and pause between each sentence. You need to consider what the pace of your thinking is while you are lying-down and match your speaking and pauses to that rhythm.

"To begin, become aware of the weight of your head resting on the books and allow your head to be supported by them. Let the front of your face soften. Release the effort behind the eyes. Let the forehead widen. Unclench the teeth. Let the tongue rest on the bottom of the mouth. Return now to the sense of the weight of the head on the books. Let the head rest. Release the muscles of the neck so that the books carry the weight of the head for you.

Become aware of your shoulder-blades resting on the floor. Let the floor carry their weight. Feel how the floor supports you. Let the front of your body soften, around the shoulders and chest. Let the weight of the arms fall out and away from the shoulders. Allow the floor to support your upper arms and elbows.

Become aware of the distance from your shoulders to your elbows and let your body open out across the width from your left elbow to your right elbow. Travel with your mind back to the sense of your head resting on the books. Then move your mind down to your elbows again, observing the length or distance from your head to your elbows.

Become aware of your hands resting on your abdomen. Let each finger be released. Without moving your fingers at all, bring your attention to each finger, one at a time, and let it be released. Travel in your thinking back from your hands to your elbows. Be aware of the length between them. Travel back to the sense of your head on the books. Observe the distance from your hands to your head.

Notice the movement of your abdomen under your hands. This movement reflects the rhythm of the in-flow and out-flow of your breathing. Enjoy the gentle pattern of the movement, aware that the air is flowing deep into your body.

Return to the sense of your shoulder-blades on the floor. Extend your sense of the support of the floor to the whole of your back. All the way down from your shoulder blades to your pelvis. From the top of your back to the bottom of your back. And be aware of how broad your back is. Enjoy the broad, solid, firm support of the floor under the whole length and breadth of your back.

Return to the sense of the movement of the in-flow and out-flow of your breathing under your hands. The pattern of the movement, allowing the air deep into your body, also allows it deep into your back. Imagine the air filling the whole of your torso, deep into your back, deep into you front. Make no efforts to expand. Let this all be done in spatial awareness of your body, not in pushing or striving to expand air into your torso.

Now turn your attention to your legs and feet. Become aware first of your feet on the floor. Your legs are supported by your feet. Allow the floor, then, to support your feet. Release the toes. Let them uncurl. Behind the toes are the soft pads of the balls of your feet. Let them be soft. Then open out, in your mind, the arches of the feet. And let the heels of the feet rest onto the solid ground.

Take your mind, for a moment, slowly back up the length of your body to your head. Become aware of the long distance from your head, resting on the books, to your feet resting on the floor. Check that you have not started to create tension around the head while you have been thinking about your feet. Take time to allow the head once again to be supported on the books.

Return your attention down the body, slowly, to the feet. From your feet your attention can move upwards to the ankles. Since your ankles can become very fixed and stiff, give time to allowing them to soften. From the ankles move your mind up your shins to the knees. Be aware of your knees pointing to the ceiling. Here is a direction for your thinking in which you can be active in helping to balance your legs. Be aware of the knees receiving support from your feet on the floor.

Take your mind from your knees up your thighs to the joint where they enter your pelvis. Let yourself become aware of the placing in your body of that joint. Release the tension that accumulates there. Let the feet support the knees rather than holding your knees up from your groin.

Let the front of your pelvis soften and rest into your lower back. Remind yourself of the whole of your back supported by the floor. Travel in your mind's eye up and across the broadness of your back. Up to the shoulders. Let them soften once more. Up the neck. Let the neck be released. Up to the head. Let it rest on the books."

When you are ready to finish your lying-down, don't rush to get up. Gently roll over onto your side, then onto your front. Wait for a moment, with your forehead resting on the ground, to adjust your balance before lifting yourself onto all fours. From the all fours position you can sit back on your heels. Then raise yourself onto your knees and stand up with the thought of the top of your head leading you upwards. (Make sure you don't pull your head back)

## Appendix

### Instructions for Giving your Directions when Sitting

If you put these instructions onto tape remember to speak slowly and calmly and to pause between each sentence. Try to tune the pace of your speaking to the rhythm of your thinking when you are sitting and relaxing.

"To start, become aware of your head poise. Let it be balanced easily on top of the neck. Gently nod the head, inclining it forward very slowly, then backwards very slowly.

Let your face soften. Release the effort behind the eyes. Let the forehead widen. Unclench the teeth. Let the tongue rest on the bottom of the mouth.

Take ~~with~~ your attention down the length of the neck to your shoulders. Let the weight of the shoulders drop down. Let the weight of the elbows drop. Let the weight of the hands rest on your thighs.

Become aware of the full length of your back from your neck down to your sitting-bones. Let the chair support the weight of your torso through your sitting bones. Give your bottom down onto the chair. Release the tension in the lower back.

Travel with your attention along the length of your thighs to your knees. Be aware that the direction of the knees is pointing forward, away from your torso. Now travel with your mind down the length of your shins to your feet. Soften the ankles. Let your feet rest down onto the floor. Release the toes. Let the whole of each foot make contact with the floor.

Take your attention slowly back up the length of your body. Notice the points in the body where each joint is bent as you sit. Rise up with your thought through the ankle joints, the knees joints, through the thigh joint into the pelvis. Then up the total length of the spine, with all its many joints to the topmost joint of the neck where the head sits, poised.

Be aware of the total length of yourself from head to feet. Allow the fullness of your length to register in your mind. Be aware of your width across the spread of your torso. Be aware of the depth of your body from front to back. Let yourself expand into the fullness of your physical form.

To bring yourself back into activity first wriggle your fingers and toes gently. Stretch your arms. Slowly open your eyes and look around you."

## Appendix

### Instructions for Giving your Directions when Standing

It is probably worthwhile remembering these instructions so that you can use them whenever you have an odd moment. Doing this will help you maintain your poise and equilibrium during a busy day. I have made these instructions simple so they can easily be recalled.

"Be aware of your head poised in space. Look out in front of you and gently turn your head following your eyes to ease any tension around the head and neck.

Be aware of your shoulders. Let them drop. Let your elbows be heavy. Let your hands be heavy, falling down from your shoulders.

Be aware of the length of your back down from your neck to your pelvis. Be aware of the width of your back between the arms on either side. Allow yourself to expand into the length and width of your back.

Be aware of your legs, from the pelvis down to your feet. Soften the knee joints. Let your feet rest on the ground. Allow the ground to support you.

Now let your attention rise up the whole length of your body, slowly, until you return to your eyes looking out around you. Be aware of the full length of your stature from your feet to your head."