

The **Alexander** Technique

Using 'effortless poise' to stop pain

By Jane Palmer

When Barbara Wilcox retired from her phone company job eight years ago, she looked forward to having more time to play her cello. But her body had other ideas. A pinched nerve in her left arm made it so painful that she couldn't even finger basic notes, and eventually she had to stop playing. Then a friend introduced her to a little-known mind-body practice used by musicians for nearly a century, and Wilcox's desire to play received a new lease on life.

"The Alexander Technique was a key part of helping me relearn to play my cello so that I didn't hurt myself," says Wilcox, who now plays with community orchestras in Boulder and Denver.

The Alexander Technique is a methodology for redirecting destructive patterns of movement. It has proved successful in addressing the root causes of many painful conditions, such as carpal tunnel syndrome and shoulder pain. And a recent study published in the British Medical Journal established what many students of the technique already knew—that it has long-term benefits for people with chronic back pain.

ALEXANDER'S STORY

F. M. Alexander (1869-1955) was an Australian-born Shakespearean actor whose career was prematurely halted when he began to lose his voice onstage. Unable to get relief from traditional therapies, he embarked on a journey of self-discovery and ultimately self-healing. Through a process of trial and error, he found that he could regain his voice by adjusting the position of his head and neck on his torso. Remarkably, he found that when his head and neck were in optimal alignment, he felt a sense of release, length and ease throughout his entire body.

Alexander spent years refining a technique to educate the body to attain that alignment. At first, the technique was embraced primarily by performing artists—singers, musicians and dancers who found it effective not only in preventing injury but also in improving their performances. Gradually it has gained a more widespread following, and its tenets of natural, efficient movement have helped cyclists with their bike-handling skills, golfers with their swings and university lecturers wanting to project their voices.

Beth Ben-nett, a well-known rock climber who attended an Alexander Technique intensive course in 2008, says it taught her how to hold her body when she went running. "And I've had fewer neck and back problems since," she adds.

A baby's perfect posture shows the natural head-neck-torso alignment that the Alexander Technique helps adults regain.

PHOTO BY BARBARA KLIPP

For more information about the Boulder Alexander Technique Summer School, visit <http://spot.colorado.edu/~brody/alextechbasicinfo.html> or e-mail James Brody at James.Brody@colorado.edu. The course runs July 13-17; the one-day intensive is July 11.

To find a certified teacher near you, visit the website of the American Society for the Alexander Technique at www.alexander-tech.org, or call Susan Beech at 413-584-2359. The website for Alexander Technique International is www.ati-net.com.

"I found the Alexander work originally when I was looking for something to cure my sciatic pain caused by jogging," says Posie Green, who is now one of eight Alexander teachers in Boulder County. The technique is typically taught in a one-on-one lesson format in which the teacher, after ascertaining the movement patterns of the student, uses her hands to guide the student into the optimal head-neck-torso alignment. The student then practices performing everyday activities such as standing, sitting and walking—plus singing, playing a tuba or swinging a golf club—while maintaining his alignment.

UNCOILING A SPRING

The benefits can be immediate. After a lesson, says Boulder scientist Teddie Keller, she feels "relaxed, lighter, and full of energy."



James Brody (right), professor of oboe at the CU-Boulder College of Music and host of its summer Alexander Technique Summer School, works with clarinetist Kellen Toohey.

That kind of response is typical, Green has found. "People get a sense of lightness and ease," she explains, "because what we are doing with the Alexander work is really undoing the tightness and energy blockages that are making us shorter, more tense and more compressed."

Each July, oboe professor James Brody, of the University of Colorado's College of Music in Boulder, hosts a week-long summer school and a day-long intensive in the Alexander Technique. Attending students include performing artists, athletes and a number of people seeking a natural way to cure chronic pain. Some bring their bikes to learn how to ride more efficiently, some bring their instruments to learn how to play without incurring pain, and some simply want to know how to sit at a computer in a way that doesn't drain their energy. Under the guidance of experienced teachers, the students practice using tools such as body awareness and "effortless poise," which they can then apply in their daily lives.

"With the practice, you are uncoiling a spring and finding that state of expansion and ease," says Green, who has helped teach the course for the last 10 years.

The sculptor Michelangelo believed that every stone had a sculpture within it, and that the work of sculpting was simply a matter of chipping away all that was not a part of the statue. In a similar vein, Alexander believed that the body possesses an innate wisdom, and that by stripping away our learned habits we can connect with our natural ability to move with unforced ease and youthful agility.

Barbara Wilcox agrees with both of them. A seasoned practitioner of the Alexander Technique, she says, "I feel more at home in my body now, like I'm not fighting it." ♦

Jane Palmer, a freelance writer and former scientist, attended the 2008 Alexander Technique Summer School and learned how to run without hurting her knees.



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