

Excerpt from Integrative Healing

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INTEGRATIVE HEALING

Developing
Wellness in the
Mind and Body

Z ALTUG PT, DPT, MS, CSCS



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CHAPTER 11

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE FOR HEALTH

This chapter was completed with the assistance of Leah Zhang, MFA, AmSAT, CEAS II. Leah Zhang is a nationally-certified teacher of the Alexander Technique with over 1,600 hours of hands-on training. She is a graduate of the Alexander Training Institute-Los Angeles. Leah first learned of the Alexander Technique in 1999 as a young actress in Chicago, and her interests in mind-body unity and an improved posture lead her to train as an Alexander Teacher. In her many years of work with the technique, she has understood how easeful, upright posture brings about more confidence, pain-relief, flexibility, and mind-body awareness. She is passionate about guiding her students toward discovering how to apply this wonderful technique in their everyday lives.

Currently, Leah is the **Movement and Alexander Technique Teacher** at the prestigious **Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute** in West Hollywood, California. She also offers private lessons and group classes in Los Angeles, California. Her students range from actors, singers, and dancers to writers, office workers, and athletes. In addition to her Alexander Technique certification, she is also a certified ergonomics assessment specialist and has helped many office workers learn about proper and easeful positioning and habits while working in front of the computer.

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*“Change involves carrying out an activity
against the habit of life.”*

—F.M. Alexander

The Alexander Technique is a form of bodywork created by Tasmanian-born Frederick M. Alexander (1869–1955) that promotes postural health (Venes 2017). During his career, Alexander wrote four books (Alexander 1918, 1923, 1932, 1941). Gradually, he developed an educational system that helps reeducate the whole body in proper movement patterns and postural habits. This educational method is known as the Alexander Technique.

Z ALTUG'S PERSPECTIVE FOR DOING THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

In my clinical practice as a physical therapist, I typically recommend the Alexander Technique to musicians and individuals who want to improve performance and posture and want to move easier with common daily activities. Other general reasons to try the Alexander Technique include:

- Improve breathing
- Improve walking
- Improve balance
- Improve performance if you are a singer, musician, actor, or dancer

LEAH ZHANG'S PERSPECTIVE FOR DOING THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

My students come to me for many different reasons. Some students are performers and would like to gain more control of their physical instrument (their body) without any added or unnecessary tensions during the performance. Other students have experienced years of chronic pain and are searching for a method of moving and being in their bodies that can relieve the pain. I've had other students who are simply curious about themselves and are learning different methods and modalities to add to their self-awareness and self-discovery. For me, even though I have a performance background, I sought out the technique because of my poor posture as a teenager and young adult. During my teenage years I was always told to “sit and stand up straight.” I found myself trying to hold the “right” posture for 20 to 30 seconds, but then would collapse into my habitual posture because I felt the “right” one took too much effort. I thought my poor posture was unchangeable and that I had to live with it my whole life. I also didn't realize that my poor posture was contributing to other issues, such as painfully tense shoulders, shallow breathing (not helpful for a young actress working on Shakespeare's plays), lack of confidence, and anxiety.

Fortunately, through the Alexander Technique, I learned that posture is not permanent, and easeful, upright posture is not difficult or exhausting to maintain. I re-learned ways of moving and standing that were hidden under the habits I had developed. In this technique, you will take away a mindset of “to undo.” To undo habits, movements, or postures that might be contributing to performance anxiety, excess tension, back pain, shoulder pain, neck pain, difficulty breathing, and/or “poor posture.”

LET'S SEE WHAT RESEARCH SAYS . . .

- Alexander Technique may serve a role in reducing the negative changes in gait that occur with aging (Hamel et al. 2016).
- Alexander Technique lessons improved posture, mobility, and muscular strength, and led to fewer falls and injuries among those who had previously struggled (Gleeson et al. 2015).
- Alexander Technique lessons and acupuncture both led to significant reductions in neck pain and disability (MacPherson et al. 2015).
- “Alexander Technique sessions may improve performance anxiety in musicians” (Klein et al. 2014).
- “Dynamic modulation of postural tone can be enhanced through long-term training in the Alexander Technique” (Cacciatore et al. 2011).
- The Alexander Technique can significantly improve the posture of surgeons and surgical ergonomics and endurance, and decrease surgical fatigue and incidence of repetitive stress injuries (Reddy et al. 2011).
- “One-to-one lessons in the Alexander technique from registered teachers have long-term benefits [such as decreased back pain and improved quality of life] for patients with chronic back pain. Six lessons followed by exercise prescription were nearly as effective as 24 lessons” (Little et al. 2008).
- “Lessons in the Alexander Technique are likely to lead to sustained benefit [such as less depression and improved activities of daily living] for people with Parkinson’s disease” (Stallibrass et al. 2002).
- Alexander Technique instruction may be helpful in improving balance in older women (Dennis 1999).



PRACTICAL ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE LESSON

The following Alexander Technique lesson was designed by Leah Zhang for you to use in the comfort of your home or at a local park.

In this lesson, I (Leah Zhang) will be leading you through an observational experience while standing for you to gain awareness of your balance as you stand and also how to gently undo the tensions and misalignments that might be interfering with you standing in a more balanced and natural way. We’ll finish this short lesson by doing a couple of explorations to find balance in your head and neck.

1. Start by standing still somewhere relatively free of visual, audio, and mental distractions. This is a short few minutes where you get to take care of yourself by observing yourself without distractions and judgments.