

Psychotherapy Guidebook

**THE
ALEXANDER
TECHNIQUE**

Deborah Caplan
Frieda Englard

The Alexander Technique

Deborah Caplan and Frieda England

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Copyright © 2012 by Richie Herink and Paul Richard Herink

Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

The Alexander Technique

Deborah Caplan and Frieda England

DEFINITION

The Alexander Technique employs conscious awareness to achieve a physical result; namely, the improved use of the body. Specifically, the Technique enables its students to move with free and well-coordinated musculature, to breathe without tension, and to use their bodies with optimum efficiency, whether walking, playing the violin, or sitting at a desk.

The Technique is both physical and mental in approach. As with most psychotherapies, it depends for its effect on what the student or patient learns to do for himself rather than on something done to him. Alexander students learn to control their bodies through the use of their minds.

HISTORY

Frederick Matthias Alexander was born in Australia in 1869. By his early twenties he had become an actor who kept losing his voice while performing; doctors and voice coaches could provide only temporary relief. Since his voice problem occurred only while he was speaking on stage,

Alexander reasoned that it was probably caused by something he did with his voice mechanism while performing. To find out what that was, he observed himself with a network of mirrors, and thus began an exhaustive ten-year process of self-exploration.

Alexander observed that tension and compression in his neck, larynx, and rib cage were causing his voice loss. He could not feel that he was doing anything wrong: his habitual way of speaking had come to feel “right,” even though it was wrong and harmful. His efforts to speak in a less harmful way were unsuccessful until he made the discovery that the misuse of his voice was just one small part of the total pattern of misuse involving his whole body. He could not effectively improve the use of his voice until he improved his total musculo-skeletal use, a discovery that led to the development of the Alexander Technique.

The Technique has since attracted the attention and acclaim of people in diverse fields. The medical profession has shown ever-increasing interest in its therapeutic uses, as evidence mounts that many disorders are caused or aggravated by inefficient or stressful use of the body. For more than half a century many actors and musicians, who must use their bodies as vehicles for artistic expression, have considered the Alexander Technique an essential part of their training. The more philosophical aspects of Alexander’s work have been explored by John Dewey, Aldous Huxley, and George Bernard

Shaw, all of whom studied with him.

TECHNIQUE

Part of the task of the Alexander teacher is to help the student accomplish in a relatively short period of time what Alexander's mirrors helped him do during his years of research: identify faulty habits. The student gives largely passive mental directions (for example, "Let the back lengthen and widen") to his own body while the teacher uses his hands to guide the student into an improved kinesthetic experience. In time, the directions become associated with improved balance and alignment, which feel and are "right," although invariably they feel "wrong" at first.

The improved use begins with the balance of the head on the neck. Alexander found that if the neck muscles are allowed to release during activity, the head will balance up off the spine instead of compressing it. The spine can then lengthen, and the whole body move in an integrated fashion. Under the teacher's guidance, the student consciously inhibits faulty use, saying no to unwanted responses and directing the body into the desired use.

APPLICATIONS

Although the Alexander Technique has usually not been included among the psychotherapies, it constitutes a significant psychotherapeutic tool or

orientation to life. Its approach is holistic, furthering positive change and self-awareness through mind-body integration. As Aldous Huxley stated, "It breaks the pattern of determinism." Frederick S. Perls was profoundly influenced by Alexander in his development of Gestalt Therapy, since it emphasized a need for change beyond exploration of cause, catharsis, and/or body work.

As in neurosis, if a symptom is not ego dystonic or uncomfortable, the possibility for change is diminished. Avoidance and denial lead to self-stagnation even when motivation for change prevails, and the focus of the Alexander Technique on the body armoring helps break this bind. Delaying action lets memories and affects (feelings, emotions, or moods) emerge into consciousness. This may at times offer clues to the cause of the primary faulty use of the musculature. For example, a patient with a persistent squint was helped to release the tension in his eyes. Without the use of this armoring, he became nauseated. Eventually he realized that he tended to close his eyes so as not to see things as they were. As he increasingly learned to free the occipital areas, he became more open to himself.

The feeling of freedom and "lightness" produced in the body by the Alexander Technique is very helpful with depressed patients, as it provides energy for meaningful and nonhabitual behavior.

The narcissistic patient can benefit, too: his need to control others becomes slowly diminished by a feeling of mastery of the body, since the postural change also results in a more positive self-image. Thus, inhibition of superfluous activity liberates energy for new, nonstereotypic behavior. If one becomes aware of tension in the neck and shoulders, one may become aware of anger. The emotion, rather than building up into nonproductive intensity, is transformed into an awareness that something or someone is causing it. The Technique may remove the “panic from fear” (Jones, 1976) when concentration on breathing is implemented; this also reduces mind-wandering with a reinforcement of general alertness.

The Alexander Technique differs markedly from behavior modification in that the authority is not the therapist but the student, who inhibits overloading a musculature with superfluous activity and redirects it to a natural, conscious, self-integrative use. Thus, it has proved to be a very effective adjunctive tool in the enhancement of the psychotherapeutic process.