

Alexander Technique: The Newest 100-Year- Old Trend

By Dana Ben-Yehuda

Movie stars, world-class athletes and the European elite just don't seem to age like the rest of us. But it's time to let out the best-kept secret of European wellness centers, from Switzerland to Germany to England: the Alexander Technique. A method to restore and maintain poise and balance of mind and body, the Alexander Technique is listed by "The Wellness Resource" as the wave of the future for spas that are "...operating on the leading edge of cultural change."

Embraced by Stars

The most celebrated movie stars look elegant and stay upright in their carriage, open in their movements and strong in their voice. Noted actors, musicians and athletes have embraced the Alexander Technique for decades to enhance performance and stage presence. For more than 100 years, it has been taught in drama and music schools across the country, from Julliard in New York to ACT in San Francisco. It is even required study for first-year acting students at the Actors Studio Drama School at New School University in New York. Students of the technique include Sir Colin Davis, William Hurt, Jeremy Irons, James Earl

Jones, Kevin Kline, Paul McCartney, Kelly McGillis, Paul Newman, Lynn Redgrave, Maggie Smith, Mary Steenbergen, Sting, Robin Williams, Joanne Woodward and members of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Athletes, too, have discovered and reaped the benefits of the Alexander Technique, successfully using it to improve their game. *Sports Illustrated* reported in *Golf Plus Notebook*, "Last week at the PGA Tour's Q school, 39-year-old Jeff Julian of Norwich, Vermont, gave himself back his career. He did it using ... Alexander Technique."¹

Total Wellness

The spa trend is wholeness; fully integrated modalities for body awareness and balance with complete offerings for total well-being and feeling one's best. "Integration means to make whole or complete by bringing various parts together," reported Nancy Griffin in the 1997 Spa Business Report of "The Wellness Resource." "Therefore, a spa is the epitome of integration. In fact, The International Spa Association Education Committee defines ten areas of spa education, including ... Alexander (Technique)." Presented at the 2002 International Wellness Conference in the United States, the Alexander Technique is a coming trend in spa and wellness centers.² "A source of healing is what the spa can and should be," say Anne

and Sara Bramham, The Bramham Institute at PGA National. "Spagoers are no longer satisfied with superficial treatments and superficial answers; the spa is an area in which we can restore the connection of the person to themselves, to the earth and to other people."

Griffin also reports, "In general, body-oriented therapies use the wisdom of the body to heal. Mind/body modalities unleash the power of the mind and spirit to heal the body. Integrative therapies—which go to work on mind and body simultaneously—can have the most powerful effect."

A foundation to maximize the benefit for all other exercise and touch therapies, the Alexander Technique is a basic tool for those who seek release from the stress of daily life, look to get back in touch with their bodies and maintain good, youthful, balanced posture. Working to teach the body to move better and feel better, the Alexander Technique is about maximizing the benefit of every activity and it helps reduce excess effort in everything from brushing teeth to getting up out of a chair, thereby freeing up energy to use for living well.

It is an integrative, mind-body modality that people can experience at a spa and continue at home with a private practitioner. The Alexander Technique is the missing

link for total body wellness ... and anti-aging.

Anti-aging technique

Even Stanford University's CAMPS (Complementary and Alternative Medical Program at Stanford) program states that "... New research is dramatically changing the way we view aging and the aged. Some of the most important research demonstrates that much of what we call aging is not the inevitable decline we have long assumed it to be. And, to a surprising extent, we are responsible for the quality of our own old age."³

Much of aging is a function of yielding to gravity. Maintaining a youthful posture means staying upright. Having good posture in activity makes people look better, thinner and measurably taller. It is only common sense to realize that an open chest and upright spine offer room for better breathing and digestion. Look better, feel better and move better; things not to be taken lightly as the body ages.

Think of an old person and what comes to mind? Hunched over shoulders, collapsed chest, heavy steps, lost height, protruding stomach, zapped energy and difficult movements.

The Alexander Technique is a way of un-doing habits of poor posture, and turning back the clock by releasing the head and neck from the unnecessary pressures.

Through this gentle re-education, the restoration of a proper poise of the head, neck and back is achieved, patterns of excess tension are undone and a natural balance is restored.

The results can be very dramatic: regain an inch and a half in "lost" height; give lungs room to breathe and restore the literal breath that is life; regain an upright carriage that allows room for the natural process of digestion to take place; relieve pressure from the joints allowing freedom in movement; and, very often, reduce pain.

Alternative Modalities

The trend toward alternative care in medical and beauty treatments is well-documented.

A landmark study published in the November 11, 1998, issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) found that approximately 33% of U.S. adults had used alternative therapies in 1990, and by 1997 this number had increased to 42.1%. In another survey conducted between April and May of this year by Intersurvey, a market research company, 66% of 1,148 American adults reported using alternative therapies.⁴

While the Alexander Technique is not a medical practice or a treatment, it is a holistic, mind-body re-educational approach to well-being that can have profound

health benefits. Experience shows that how the body is used in the normal course of a day affects how it functions. Many thousands of people have found that by taking a series of lessons in the Alexander Technique, they have obtained tremendous relief from problems ranging from back and neck pain to arthritis, carpal tunnel and a host of stress-related illnesses. It is quieting to the nervous system and centering; it is a method of learning self-care that leaves its students empowered to continue forward on their own.

"The Champneys Group (England) is Europe's leader in health and fitness. Its treatments include ... the Alexander Technique."

Founded by F.M. Alexander, an Australian actor born 1869, the technique was developed to cure what his physicians called his "incurable" vocal troubles. He made his discoveries and solved his voice problems around 1890 and began teaching and improving his technique as he applied it to help others with similar problems. He went to England in 1904 where he continued his teaching practice. Physicians began sending him their "hopeless" patients, who kept getting better under his guidance.

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Nineteen physicians published the results of their successful case studies of the Alexander Technique in the *British Medical Journal*.

In the early 1930s, Alexander embarked on a journey to train teachers in this technique, so future generations could reap its benefits. It has been in continuous practice for all this time. Taught now by highly trained teachers⁵ in individual lessons working with the specific needs of each person, the Alexander Technique is a gentle way of working, using a combination of words and thoughts to guide the body.

“Grayshott Hall Health Fitness Retreat ... offers a range of alternative treatments [including] the Alexander Technique.”

Learning the technique requires very gentle hands-on guidance from a teacher who simultaneously gives a correct kinesthetic experience. That experience, repeated in a series of lessons, often results in profound changes both in appearance and the actual experience of health; it is true mind-body well-being.

Time Has Come

The Alexander Technique can restore the natural balance, poise and coordination that is the birthright of childhood. Efforts to

maintain youth are for naught unless the effects of bad posture habits in activity—being too tense and stressed, or being overly collapsed and pulled down—are counteracted. All the exercises in the world are only as good as the way they are performed. The Alexander Technique is a way of improving the overall use and coordination in all activities. It can:

- Increase energy
- Decrease weight
- Improve circulation, breathing, digestion and sexual function
- Improve skin tone, color and overall vitality and oxygen capacity
- Relieve joint problems and back and neck pain
- Alleviate systems of arthritis and carpal tunnel syndrome
- Restore some, if not all, height lost due to poor posture

People can look younger, feel better, and function better in all aspects of life, both of mind and of body. The movement toward holistic approaches is clearly present in Europe, and promises to be the next wave of the future of the United States. The secret is out and the demand will race across the Atlantic to wellness centers and destination spas striving to offer the best services to their discriminating and knowledgeable clientele. This

is an idea whose time has come.

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References

¹*Sports Illustrated, Golf Plus Notebook, “The Alexander Technique, The answer to a stress test,” December 18, 2000*

²www.iwellcon.com/default.cfm
camps.stanford.edu

⁴www.reliefband.nl/4.html

⁵www.alexandertech.com

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