

The Alexander Technique as a treatment for mental illness

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In our culture today the connection between physical and emotional problems is gaining currency. Surprisingly, the best answer to coping with the stresses of life is by using a hands-on approach that straightens the body. This technique can help in balancing moods, changing behavioural patterns and managing life's challenges. To most people the Alexander Technique is a method of improving posture or relieving backache. However, the emotional and psychological benefits have convinced many to continue lessons long after their aches and pains have disappeared. Hilary, a 38-year-old barrister from North London, gained enormous psychological benefits from having lessons in the technique.

Her psychiatrist had referred her to me after a two-week admission at The Priory Hospital for a psychotic, manic episode. Therapy and medication had had minimal impact on her subsequent depression, and both she and her psychiatrist were willing to try anything that might help. When I first met Hilary, who is married with a four-year-old son, her depression was so severe that she could not even engage in a 50-minute therapy session. Instead, I suggested three Alexander Technique lessons a week until her mood stabilised.

Hilary says she was suffering extreme depression at the time. "I was completely non-functional," she recalls. "My son, Peter, was three months old and I had to leave him with a full-time nanny to look after him. I wasn't doing anything except trying not to kill myself."

The effects of the technique in balancing her mood and helping her to think rationally were powerful. "Before, I had ten years of antidepressants and therapy to some effect, bringing some stability. Using the Alexander Technique helped me to achieve a degree of healing that wasn't possible with just talk therapy and pills. For me, the technique became a lifeline. I felt calmer from the first lesson." The Alexander technique is a way of re-educating the body towards balance and alignment. In individual lessons, a qualified teacher helps the student to recognise faulty muscular use and poor posture through gentle touch and guidance (see panel, facing page). There is an emphasis on lengthening and widening the back, and freeing the spine to achieve a more co-ordinated movement.

With the aid of the teacher's hands, the student learns to release and lengthen muscles that have been shortened over time because of stress and misuse. But how can stopping unnecessary muscular tension heal emotional wounds? Unconscious experiences, such as unhealed traumas, unexpressed feelings and painful memories can be pushed into the body where they are not free to be dealt with in the mind. These tensions might turn into physical symptoms and ailments, but can also lead to mental illness, such as depression and

anxiety. Frederick Alexander, the founder of the technique, taught that how we use our bodies has an extraordinary effect on our ability to accurately perceive the world around us, as well as our emotional and physical health.

“I had been holding fear in my muscles” Hilary says the technique helped her to cope with emotional scars from her childhood. “One experience I had is that I would just let the fear out of my body. I would lie on the treatment table and I would just let it flow out. I had been holding it in my muscles. So, with lessons over time, the world seemed like a less scary place. I had less fear. I look back now and realise that this fear made me perceive anything anyone did to me as a threat. As a result, I was basically confrontational all the time, with everyone. “Of course, at the time I couldn’t see it. As my balance improved, my perceptions softened and with less fear came less confrontation. I was better able to connect with reality.

“With balance in your body, you feel less vulnerable, more able to cope. A good example of that is my son’s crying. When I started Alexander lessons, Peter’s crying was the sound of my failure as a mother. It was heartbreaking to me. Obviously, a child’s crying is not that, but I had made it all about me, using it to condemn myself. With the Alexander Technique I was able to reassess the situation - it’s just the sound of a baby’s crying. It didn’t pierce my heart. A feeling of stability replaced the fear and self-loathing.”

For Hilary, the physical space gained in lessons in lengthening and widening the body translates to a mental space available for thinking and reflecting.

Another Alexander Technique student, Sally, a 50-year-old mother of two and a theatrical agent from Central London, initially came to see me for psychotherapy for family problems. Further into the therapy we agreed that it might be beneficial to use the technique. Sally says: “Whatever is thrown at me now, my spine supports me. I feel that I can hold myself physically and emotionally. I no longer see my brain in my head, I see my mind and body completely co-ordinated. I’m much more balanced, more selective in what I say. “I used to rescue everybody. That was my role in life. That was the norm. I’d get up in the morning and I’d rescue people. The armour was on and I went into battle because that was the only thing I knew. It’s very different now. I’m looking after myself, I think I’ve come out of it much more selfish. What I didn’t know was that if you look after yourself, you’re going to be so much better with other people.”

Anne, 39, a single woman from North London, had attended psychotherapy sessions for nearly seven years for depression. Although the insight she gained was essential for her to make sense of her life, she felt frustrated when her depression recurred at stressful times. “For me, the Alexander Technique was more helpful for depression than therapy,” she says. “With good posture and balance you are more able to withstand the physical and emotional knocks that life throws at you. A feeling of a lightness and ease in standing and sitting replaces the sense of being held together by tension and fragmented body parts. With lessons, my body started to feel less fragmented, more cohesive, and with that cohesion came a new clarity of thought.”

These three women had psychotherapy sessions alongside the technique, but all benefited from their improved body use. It helped them to translate the insights gained in psychotherapy into changed behaviour.

Another student, Tim, 52, a single professional man from South London, who also suffered depression, says the technique even helped him to contain suicidal thoughts. He describes how lessons left him with a heightened sensitivity to feelings, as well as a greater capacity to hold and think about these rather than being overwhelmed by them. He says: “You feel yourself getting into gear, but you don’t actually end up driving.” Making the neurological connection Missy Vineyard, who runs a training course for Alexander Technique teachers in Massachusetts and is the author of the book *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live*, describes the lessons as learning how to consciously stop unwanted behaviour at a neurological level. She believes that the technique teaches conscious inhibition by activating the pre-frontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for impulse control.

Lucy Brown is a professor of neurology and neuroscience at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and a student of the Alexander Technique. She is committed to understanding the technique’s neurological and psychological links.

According to Professor Brown, studies suggest that the technique activates those parts of the brain involved with cognition, learning and emotions. She says: “It is reasonable to speculate that areas of the pre-frontal cortex would be activated under the circumstances of a lesson and long-term learning from the technique.”

While further research is needed to establish exactly how the technique produces these benefits, people’s experiences speak for themselves. Students of the Alexander Technique will confirm that the mind is not just located in the brain, but in the muscles, cells and organs throughout the body. The writer and novelist Aldous Huxley, a student of Frederick Alexander’s, knew these truths all too well. In writing about Alexander’s work, he said: “If you teach an individual first to be aware of his physical organism and then to use it as it was meant to be used, you can often change his entire attitude to life and cure his neurotic tendencies.”

(The names of the students have been changed.)

THE LOWDOWN

What is it? The Alexander Technique was developed by the actor Frederick Mathias Alexander around 1900. He believed that correct alignment of the head, neck and spine would alleviate back pain, breathing disorders and stress-related conditions. He claimed the technique frees the neck of muscular tension. It also allows the head to move forward so that it balances lightly at the top of the spine, which encourages the back to lengthen and widen, giving the body freer movement.

Suitable for Treating neck and back pain, poor posture, migraines and arthritis. It is increasingly accepted as useful for treating chronic problems such as arthritis, Parkinson’s disease. What little good-quality research there is suggests that there could be some merit for these claims.

Cost £30-£40 for a 45-minute session.

Contact The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (0845 2307828; stat.org.uk) to find a teacher near you. Naomi Shragai is a psychotherapist and teacher of the Alexander Technique in North London. She is a member of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, the Association of Family Therapy and the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique.