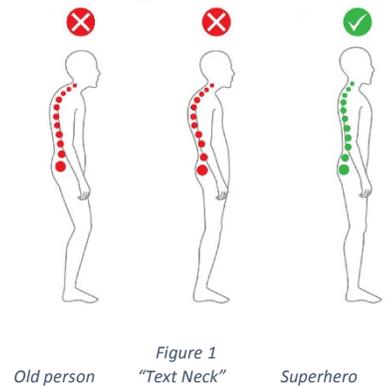


“You translate everything, whether physical or mental or spiritual, into muscular tension”
- Frederick Matthias Alexander¹

Our posture is the first thing people notice when first looking at us, whether standing like a superhero or more like an “old person” it can reveal a lot about you. Modern day life comes with many challenges which can often overwhelm our daily lives. Challenges such as feeling uncertainty about the future, deadlines, toxic people or even that avocado in the counter not being ripe yet can create psychological pressure on us while slowly pumping up our stress levels. This psychological pressure alongside with stress can seriously affect our bodies with symptoms ranging from headaches and muscle pains to severe insomnia and constant feelings of distress. Unfortunately, these problems only form the tip of the iceberg and by looking closely one can notice how we tend to sabotage ourselves by loading more unnecessary stress on ourselves.



Long before their second birthday every baby knows how to walk, and with great success, but sadly they then get sent to school. Bags filled with unnecessarily heavy textbooks way over the maximum weight limits recommended for kids, chairs with a main goal of being easy to stack and move - rather than being comfortable to sit! - paired with endless hours spent on computers and phone screens are the perfect mix for causing problems to almost every part of their bodies. Faced daily with many discomforts, the neck, back, shoulders, knees, and pelvis among others are forced to develop unnatural solutions and form new habits to cope with the symptoms of discomfort. Although on the face of it these habits might feel comfortable, not only do they unconsciously stick with us for the rest of our lives but also ruin our natural poise. Moreover, they cause a great deal of damage to our health, slowly creeping up on us even years after the formation of a habit.

The Alexander Technique is an educational process perfected throughout the last century with a goal of retraining these habitual patterns of movement and posture. Moreover, it promotes overall physical well-being through self-awareness.

Fixing bad posture, acquiring poise

Key to fixing bad posture through the Alexander Technique is by re-establishing the natural relationship of the core of your body, that being the head, neck and back.



¹ Frederick Matthias Alexander, *Teaching Aphorisms* (Austria: Mouritz Publishing, 2000), 207.

In order to achieve that, one has to start by *recognizing the habit or habits that prevent this relationship from happening* in the first place. These can vary from person to person, but some of the most prevalent are the tendency to pull the shoulders upwards and inwards or the unnecessary tension in certain areas of the body such as the neck, the back and the knees. Using a mirror can help identifying such bad habits.

The next step comes with the use of *inhibition*. As Frederick Matthias Alexander (the creator of the technique) noted: *“all those who wish to change something in themselves must learn (...) to inhibit their immediate reaction to any stimulus to gain a desired end”*². Inhibition, being one of the corner stones of this technique essentially weakens the strong neurological pathways - which prompt our habitual responses - by making us consciously stop the immediate reaction to stimuli our bodies have been accustomed to.

Figure 2: Four ladies gracefully standing on inflated balls

Only when the old habitual responses can be successfully stopped is it fruitful to introduce a new habit since the interference from the old one would be at the lowest level and hence will make the whole process smoother.

Next up comes the use of *direction*- the process of controlling movement. Its importance lies in remembering that movement must happen without actively doing anything, but rather using the subconscious and our reflexes. Alexander noticed that by using direction he sped up his progress of changing habits. An appropriate example for the use of direction in correcting bad posture comes from psychologist and professor John Dewey, *“It is”*, he explains *“as reasonable to expect a fire to go out when it is ordered to stop burning as to suppose that a man can stand straight in consequence of a direct action of thought and desire. The fire can be put out only by changing objective conditions; it is the same with rectification of bad posture.”*³

Although this was a quick rundown on the standardized process of getting rid of bad habits – through the Alexander Technique – does it really help overcome posture related problems? And is achieving good posture the end goal anyway?

Trying to improve posture often comes with predisposed ideas of what our body should look like, often ending up forcing us to adopt a more rigid, military like stance which can be equally damaging to our bodies. What we should rather look for is an easy and free way of existing in

² Frederick Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2001), 115.

³ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 248.

space that suggests rebalancing and ease both in stillness and in movement. That's why it's better to do away with the word posture and think more in terms of poise.

Acquiring poise comes with an understanding of what free movement should feel like and therefore allows for ease of motion, balance and lightness. Poise, after all, is a quality contrary to posture being a shape and that's partly the reason why there are no exercises for acquiring poise. Essential to restoring our natural poise - the one that we used to have as small children - is not only by being able to stand up straight gracefully and with ease but also by learning to recognize when our alignment is out of balance. In essence, face life with the confidence of a 14 year-old!

As Professor Raymond Dart once wrote: "Poise, (...) is not acquired like physical strength through the performance of exercise and sport, but through restful study and observation. Poise is a body state achieved only by steady and carefree education of the body and maintenance of balance. Poise is a character of repose or rest in the good body, whether it is in the relatively static positions of lying, sitting or standing or is actively in progressive motion during the activities of life's daily routine or of sport."⁴

Poise and music

Playing any musical instrument is an intricate process which involves great coordination of body and psyche. Aspects such as standing or sitting while holding the instrument for long periods of time, maintaining constant focus on the music, managing breath and controlling stress as well as being receptive to the environment among others make music playing a very demanding process. These are especially true for professional musicians, particularly in the classical music industry, which often have to undertake practicing for hours on end.

Unfortunately, music teachers don't always pay the necessary attention to this body and mind relationship. While often touching the subject superficially, they put their focus on the music and mind relation by only working on the side of the body to correct minor postural or technique related mistakes, easily spotted with the naked eye. The student is frequently left to figure out (or not) this delicate coordination by themselves, which can leave their posture and poise damaged. Moreover, it is often the case that teachers make their students - consciously or subconsciously - to adopt their techniques and ways of playing, even extending this to getting them to copy their posture. With the justification that their way of playing and posture didn't

⁴ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, 252.

cause them any problems in the long run they try and put a mold on their students, which ends up leaving them playing in a very rigid way.

Apart from the lack of poise this can also lead to several catastrophic problems such as tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome or even dystonia (a neurological movement disorder characterized by involuntary, prolonged muscle contractions, which cause affected parts of the body to be twisted into abnormal postures⁵) Relevant studies have found an abnormally high percentage of professional musicians affected by musculoskeletal disorders that can reach as high as 40 percent in adults.⁶ Musicians tend to brush off these problems and rarely seek medical help with most of them writing them off as part of their jobs. Even more common are chronic pains (mostly in the neck and back areas) which almost two thirds of professional classical musicians suffer from.⁷

These problems can develop throughout a musician's career, but the scale of the problem is such that even students as young as in secondary school can't escape. When 17 percent⁸ of young musicians' report music related discomforts we can notice the direct correlation between this kind of pains and bad posture/lack of poise.



Although for musicians the most important aspect of *Figure 3: Conductors frequently demonstrate great poise and elegance* regaining poise might seem to be preventing injuries the benefits don't just stop there. Regaining poise also allows for better sound quality and projection as well as improved endurance - regardless of the instrument - through the more efficient use of the muscles paired with increased awareness of their surroundings. Furthermore, being more present and removing unnecessary tension from the body aids in reducing stress and anxiety, especially in a concert setting.

⁵ The Dystonia Society, "Musician's cramp" What is dystonia. Accessed May 13, 2019, <https://www.dystonia.org.uk/musicians-cramp>

⁶ Christine Zara, "Playing-related musculoskeletal disorders in musicians: a systematic review of incidence and prevalence," Canadian Medical Association journal (journal de l'Association medicale Canadienne), 158 (1998), Accessed March 7, 2019.

⁷ Anabela Silva, and Filipa Lã, and Vera Afreixo, "Pain Prevalence in Instrumental Musicians: A Systematic Review of medical problems of performing artists", (2015) Accessed March 7, 2019.

⁸ Zara, "Playing-related musculoskeletal disorders in musicians: a systematic review of incidence and prevalence,"

A disentanglement of fire maintaining good

Having good posture and restoring our natural poise is crucial on making a great first impression. In musicians it can tremendously decrease the chances of chronic pain, injuries and musculoskeletal disorders all while improving both the sound and the overall quality of playing music drastically, but do the advantages stop there? Quite the opposite!

For starters, studies have shown that a proper upright posture is linked with better blood flow. Slouching or leaning forward on the other hand can decrease lung capacity by as much as 30 percent.⁹ Better blood flow paired with increased oxygen intake not only aids brain function but also allows us to feel more energetic.

A properly aligned body also allows for a much more effective use of the muscles, something that decreases fatigue as it allows for a more efficient distribution of energy. This more efficient use of the muscles also allows for reduced tension which can also help with being more present via lowering stress and anxiety. This way one can remain more physically and mentally stable under stressful



Figure 4

situations. This is especially helpful for musicians and athletes which are often required to practice and perform for prolonged periods of time, often with little to no breaks.

A big topic revolving around posture and poise is that regarding the unity of body and mind. Our body, being the complex mechanisms that it is, work in a holistic way with seemingly unrelated parts of it responding to each other in a unique way. A fitting example is the sensation of butterflies in our stomach when the “fight or flight” response kicks in.

This unity of body and mind also extends to the unconscious way our body responds to negative thoughts. We’ve all noticed ourselves shrink when we are in a bad mood or when anxious, but



⁹ Dr. Rene Cailliet, “Advancing the field of musculoskeletal medicine by making the complicated understandable” (2013). Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24332228>

we tend to forget that this relationship runs both ways. A properly aligned body affects both our thoughts and our psychological state, allowing us to think more clearly while our creativity and mental faculties are significantly enhanced. In contrast, when slumping our body can get into a state of anxiety and feel threatened thus clouding our thoughts and ideas while forcing our performance to decrease.¹⁰

Finally, a good posture means better eyesight. When slumping there's unnecessary stress loaded in the optic nerve since its path is disrupted from the downward or upward stance of the head. This translates to blurred and tunneled vision, something that further decreases our ability to feel present.

Conclusion

Figure 5: Route of the optic nerve from the eye to the vision center of the brain

Posture holds a vital place in our everyday lives. And that's for good reason, a balanced body offers countless advantages whereas one that is out of alignment can have devastating effects on both psyche and body. Musicians are especially susceptible to such posture related issues through the wrong use of their bodies, but replacing harmful habits is not only attainable but also beneficial for one's professional development.

Through the use of the Alexander Technique one can start recognizing when their alignment is out of balance and improve it through inner expansion. Also significant is the use of what F.M. Alexander called "primary control", that is the tendency of the spine to lengthen in motion. Doing so relieves tension and discomfort, especially from the areas of the head, neck, shoulder and spine while allowing for an easier and smoother relationship between them. This approach to movement, by being a reliable way of reducing and eliminating tension is especially helpful to those living in modern societies.

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