

Reversing gravity's effects

Using the Alexander Technique, clients become more expansive

Local teacher grew an inch and a half in height

JANICE MAWHINNEY / LIFE REPORTER

Photographer Steve Edgar, 36, does a lot of heavy lifting, squatting, bending and twisting in his work. Last year he found that his body was objecting strenuously to this treatment.

'I was having quite a few aches and pains and I couldn't identify where they started,' he says. 'Muscles would seize up in my back. Some days it was very debilitating. I play a lot of sports, too, and all of my small injuries were catching up with me.'

Edgar's girlfriend, an actress, told him that the favourite approach her profession takes to these matters is called the Alexander Technique. She recommended that he find an Alexander teacher and try it. Edgar sought out local practitioner, Graeme Lynn, and began a series of sessions with him, twice a week at first, then once a week for a while, and now less often than monthly.

The aches and pains cleared up, and Edgar says he gained a new understanding of how he stands, sits, lifts and moves.

'Now I'm much more aware of how I'm coordinating my movements,' he says. 'Graeme introduced me to an awareness of my skeletal system and what he calls my core dynamic. It's a logical approach to how my body works. And it has definitely helped me to be physically stronger.'

'I'm now more aware of what I am doing and how I am doing it. When any pain crops up, I can often identify where and why it is happening, and how I can adjust my actions to keep it from happening again.'

The English-born Lynn, 50, has been trained and certified to teach the Technique, also the Feldenkrais Method and several related methods, and has himself taught seriously for four years. His various trainings took him to five countries over fifteen years. Recently he established his practice near Bloor and Bathurst and is one of 10 Toronto area Alexander Technique teachers.

The Alexander Technique involves the conscious use of intention and understanding to make healthy changes in the use of the body. The teacher uses refined and gentle physical manipulation while also helping the client to learn what to notice and watch for, and what to do to free the body to work more easefully and more effectively.

As life goes on, an individual responds to gravity, movement challenges, stressful events, and other factors by fixing or patterning the musculature in complex ways, depending on the person's history. The long-term result of this can be seen, for instance, in the way older people are shorter than they were in their youth and in the multitude of forms of crookedness one can see everywhere on the streets today.

This compression and these imbalances can also result in problems with joints, muscles, and posture, and can be the cause of repetitive stress injuries, and many other kinds of pain and difficulty. The Alexander Technique helps reverse these unhealthy patterns that are causing problems of various kinds.

Lynn says his clients have used the Technique to improve in a range of areas, including pain, clumsiness, posture, limited body awareness, and the painful after-effects of automobile accidents and sports injuries.

'The Technique can deal with anything from pain to a poor golf game,' he says. 'Most functional problems can be addressed through the Alexander Technique. It's useful, too, for people who want to improve their singing or acting or any kind of performance-related activity.'

Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward are students of the Alexander Technique, as are Kevin Kline and William Hurt. George Bernard Shaw was one of its great advocates, as was Aldous Huxley. Almost every performing arts school in the world has an Alexander teacher on staff. It's been a secret device used by actors, singer, musicians and dancers for several generations.

The Technique's founder, Frederick Mathias Alexander, was a Shakespearean actor himself.



Alexander Technique teacher Graeme Lynn guides Laretta Stewart to use her body in a healthier, more effective way. Lynn says the technique helps his clients reverse their bodies' compression.

Born in Tasmania in 1869, Alexander studied acting in Melbourne and established a successful career in Australian theatre. It was disrupted, though, when he repeatedly lost his voice on stage. Medical advice gave him no lasting help.

Looking for answers, he began studying himself in movement, at first using an arrangement of mirrors. What he initially discovered was that a certain complex pattern of muscular contraction was causing his problem with his voice. This basic pattern he observed in others as well.

When he resolved this, which wasn't a straightforward matter, his voice problems vanished, and he found that his general health also got much better. From this investigation, which lasted some nine years, he went on to develop his method, which he introduced in London, England in 1904.

The Alexander Technique has long been used by actors, singers and dancers

Today there are some 2500 Alexander Technique teachers in 22 countries. Tens of thousands of people are working with these teachers to improve the use of themselves, aimed at easing a great range of problems and promoting general well-being.

'By using awareness in healing, and the natural intelligence of the nervous system, we can transform the patterns of a lifetime,' Lynn says. 'The Alexander Technique is about learning to be expansive and free in the body. The opposite, compression, can have all kinds of consequences - everything from sexual impotence to breathing difficulties to poor posture to dull thinking.'

When Lynn first took up the Technique, he wasn't sure what to expect for himself.

'The most significant effects for me personally were that I grew an inch and a half in height, and I became more life-positive,' he says. 'I also became more relaxed and more present in my life, and generally more capable and aware.'

Lynn teaches clients to understand their

bodies in movement and to release the patterns of contraction that cause problems.

'You use your intention to release the patterns that are binding you,' he says. 'Successful change involves release and expansion. Then, you are no longer compressing the tissues, joints, and spine.'

Such change is not always easy, he says, because old unhealthy habits of movement and posture generally feel familiar whereas new healthier patterns can feel quite unfamiliar. At the same time, understanding and persisting with the new patterns leads to great benefits.

Barry Bichard, 34, an assistant director in the film industry in Toronto, has been working with Lynn weekly for 18 months. He says he is so pleased with the results that he wants to continue for a while longer even though the original reason he started has been resolved.

'I originally went to Graeme because I had pain in my lower back, but I got something much more out of it than the relief from that pain,' he says. 'My singing voice has started to resonate. My speaking voice has dropped a quarter of a note. And I'm being educated about my body.'

'It's not a quick fix, and it requires effort and attention, but here I am involved in my own improvement rather than looking for the help to come from the outside. There are patterns of movement I used to be completely unaware of. Now I have a sense of when I go back to old patterns that caused my back pain. It's like singing off pitch, and learning to hear that and correct it.'

Bichard says he appreciates the way Lynn communicates difficult ideas clearly and simply.

'Graeme is a good teacher,' he says. 'His language skills are extraordinary. I certainly value the intelligence I find in the system, and how he transmits that. He teaches with integrity, and he really wants the best for this walking wreck that enters his office.'

'There's something here that's real. I feel that I've been helped tremendously.'

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