

Alexander Technique
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By Rivka Robinson

What do Annette Bening, Andrew Weil, Vanessa Redgrave, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward and John Cleese have in common?

They have all benefited from the Alexander Technique, a way of learning how to clear tension from your body. Taught worldwide for more than 100 years, it's designed to restore good posture, balance and poise.

"It's about helping people to be aware of choices they have in movement, so they can have more freedom and ease in whatever they do," says Lilly Sutton, Knoxville's only Alexander Technique teacher besides an instructor in a master of fine arts program at the University of Tennessee.

Some of her students have suffered pain from injuries or discomfort from repetitive strain in movement. Others are actors and musicians.

F.M. Alexander, founder of the technique that bears his name, was an Australian performer. Born in 1869, he began his career as a Shakespearean orator and developed chronic laryngitis while performing. Doctors told him to rest his voice, which helped temporarily. But the problem always returned.

Determined to restore the full use of his voice, he carefully watched

himself in a mirror while speaking. Alexander noticed that the way he bent his head before opening his mouth created a pattern of tension throughout his body.

He had the self-discipline to break the habit of movement, says Sutton, adding, "As he freed up his neck, he freed up his whole body."

Alexander discovered when he reduced neck tension, his head no longer compressed the spine, which was free to lengthen. He restored his natural capacity for ease by changing the way he thought while initiating an action, explains the Web site www.alexandertechnique.com. Sutton says he was one of the first to make the mind-body connection in health and well-being.

By solving his own medical mystery, Alexander created a hands-on teaching method to encourage all the body's processes to work more efficiently, as an integrated whole.

How does the Alexander Technique work?

"It's not so much a therapy," says Sutton. "It's not going in and fixing something. It's more listening to the whole."

She discerns patterns of tension in the body and helps students learn to release them.

As Sutton explains, "Each lesson is different, according to what the student needs at the time, but all work is done with the student fully

clothed and eyes open. I use dialogue and gentle hands-on guidance to help the student gain awareness of habitual patterns that cause excess effort and interfere with natural coordination. The student learns to let go of unneeded effort and to respond in cooperation with the body's natural design."

With 1,600 hours of Alexander Technique training under her belt, Sutton says she appreciates that the work is respectful. "It's not about forcing change or telling people how to be, but more about kinesthetic listening, and opening the students to choices that they didn't even know existed."

She, like F.M. Alexander, had suffered from laryngitis – in her case, on and off for 15 years. Seeking answers, Sutton read about the Alexander Technique in the 1980s – "when holistic health was a new term."

Her laryngitis cleared up after she started taking Alexander Technique lessons. More recently, the technique has helped with her singing.

"It has also helped greatly with my confidence, so that I'm not as shy as I used to be," says Sutton, whose interests include improvisational comedy, songwriting and performing.

For more information about the Alexander Technique, call Sutton at 387-7600.