

Alexander the great

The Alexander Technique is a gentle and balanced approach to better posture and dealing with back pain, but can it help people with osteoporosis and fractures? **Dom Hall** finds out more.

When doctors consulted by Australian actor Frederick Matthias Alexander were at a loss to explain the voice problems he was experiencing during his performances, he decided to take matters into his own hands. Starting by investigating his posture using a number of angled mirrors, Alexander realised his habit of pulling his head backwards before speaking was affecting not only his posture but also his breathing and vocal mannerisms.

Following his discovery, Alexander soon came to realise the habits he had developed over his lifetime were affecting his posture. From this starting point, he developed a theory that, if people could be taught to unlearn these habits and to stop using unnecessary levels of muscular and mental tension in their everyday activities, they could greatly improve their posture as well as their overall health and wellbeing.

Alexander made his breakthrough discovery in the 1890s, saying he believed we "translate everything, whether physical, mental or spiritual, into muscular tension". Today his technique, which is loosely a set of simple, practical mental and physical skills tailored to the individual, is taught worldwide and is practised by large numbers of people in their daily lives in all kinds of settings. Sting, Madonna, Sir Paul McCartney and John Cleese are all reportedly enthusiasts.

As with a number of approaches based

on complementary medicine, there has been little in the way of research to prove how effective the Alexander Technique (AT) is, though a report published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2008 did say one-to-one lessons from registered teachers have "long-term benefits for patients with chronic back pain".

Dawn Skelton, Professor of Ageing and Health at the School of Health and Life Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University, says the AT does have benefits.

"It's based on the premise of good postural alignment and strengthening core muscles around the spine. Many people benefit from strengthening postural muscles and in particular those with spinal fractures will benefit from improved posture control," she said.

Obviously a drug-free approach to dealing with back pain and posture will be of interest to those affected by osteoporosis, spinal fractures and other fractures, but is it something you should consider taking up?

Korina Biggs, an AT teacher based in Brighton, says a number of her regular clients are affected by osteoporosis and fractures and have found the technique to be extremely beneficial.

"I've seen lots of people with osteoporosis who are often in a great deal of pain when they come to see me and I work very gently with them and it has really helped them," she says.



Korina Biggs and client. "A lesson consists of working with someone standing, sitting and moving in and out of a chair."



"Basically you don't want to have osteoporosis and be compressing or pulling yourself out of shape as well. You want to be coordinating yourself so that movement and support come as easily and effortlessly as possible - this is where learning the Alexander Technique comes in," she says.

Because the AT is all about "learning" and "unlearning" certain postural behaviour and movement habits picked up through a lifetime, AT teachers like Korina refer to their sessions as lessons. So, what can someone interested in taking up AT expect to learn?

"A lesson consists of working with someone standing, sitting and moving in and out of a chair. The guidance is gentle and hands-on and directs their attention and awareness to bring about positive changes," Korina says.

"My clients also lie down on a couch and I work to encourage them to release the unnecessary tension that they may be carrying. We can look at how they are coordinating themselves in any number of activities from walking or bending to sitting at a computer or knitting."

Korina sees a range of people who come to her for different reasons, from people looking to do something as simple as improve their posture to opera singers looking for help in improving their singing technique. Does she think there are any dangers involved in the AT for people with osteoporosis, especially those who have suffered from vertebral fractures?

"Alexander work is so gentle, so there are no real dangers. When I meet a new client we never put them out of their comfort zone. Once I start work with them, they will start to feel lighter, stand taller and breathe more easily. I have had success in terms of helping people to stand up. I've had people lengthen and I've also found that doing AT positively affects their confidence and mood."

For people with osteoporosis who are affected by a pronounced kyphosis, or curvature of the spine, the prospect of overcoming years of stooping may seem an impossible task, but Korina says it is achievable and that she has helped many clients learn to stand up straighter.

"They do feel a release of pain. The Alexander Technique is all about the whole relationship between the head, neck and back and getting all of them to better improve their coordination," she says. "It does take some time. Some people find that six lessons, coupled with some exercise, work, but for long-lasting benefits more lessons are worthwhile to change deep-seated habits."

Korina says her approach to people with osteoporosis doesn't really differ if people are affected by other kinds of fractures, such as of the hip or wrist.

"It's the same principle; it's making sure the whole body is well organised in postural support and coordination. If someone has to use a stick, for example, we look at how they are using themselves with the stick. It's important to look at people's relationship to their environments, whether that's a walking stick or a piece of furniture."

What to expect in a lesson

- Initially you may discuss your reasons for taking lessons and your teacher will explain what happens in a lesson.
- Your teacher will guide you through simple movements and everyday activities such as sitting, standing, walking or bending, communicating through skilful hands-on guidance and verbal explanations.
- Part of the lesson may include lying down in the classic Alexander Technique semi-supine position, which allows maximum support for the back to relax and expand.
- Although you will not be engaging in any kind of strenuous exercise, the lesson relies on your active participation.
- Your teacher will recommend that you wear unrestrictive clothing. Trousers or leggings are ideal. You may be asked to remove your shoes.

Duration and cost

- A lesson lasts about 30 to 45 minutes.
- Your progress and particular needs and goals will determine the number of lessons you decide to take. Many people notice benefits from the very first lesson. A series of 20 to 30 lessons is a good foundation for you to be able to start applying the Alexander Technique in your daily life.
- The cost of lessons varies, depending on location and premises - for example, London prices range between £35 and £50 on average. Please contact your local teacher to enquire about specific costs.
- The Alexander Technique is taught in a variety of premises - Alexander centres, health clinics, pain clinics, schools, colleges, businesses. And many teachers run a practice from their homes.

Information supplied by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique. For more information or to find a teacher visit www.stat.org.uk or call 0207 482 5135. You can visit Korina Biggs' website at www.korinabiggs.co.uk

Case study: Cathy Fry

Cathy, 65, lives in Brighton and has suffered two vertebral fractures due to osteoporosis. She has been having Alexander Technique lessons for 18 months.

"A few years ago I unfortunately suffered two vertebral compression fractures and a friend told me that AT might help. I went along to a day-long course one Saturday that explained the theory of AT in the morning with a practical session in the afternoon. At the end of this first session, I was pain free. I booked a course and have now been seeing an instructor for 18 months.

"The sessions are a great help. I stand in the instructor's room, with her hands lightly touching me, and I'm aware I'm doing something. I may not know what it is, but it helps me to 'keep thinking upward' and improve my posture. The sessions have helped me enormously. When I walk, I walk using the AT. My teacher also helps me out in a number of other ways, such as showing me how to do my physiotherapy exercises using the AT.

"It is quite expensive and it isn't available on the NHS, so I'm lucky that I can afford the sessions, but I would recommend AT."