

Moving Beyond Fight or Flight

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How would you respond if someone yelled, “LOOK OUT!” What would happen if you touched a hot stove? Have you ever had a near miss traffic accident? In situations like these, we tend to react quickly and instinctively. On a physical level, there is a tightening of muscles and an overall contraction of the body accompanied by a sharp intake of breath. The heart may race and body temperature may fluctuate. This reaction is known as the fight or flight reflex. Alexander Technique teachers refer to it as the startle pattern. Typically, we return to equilibrium once a particular incident has passed. The muscles release, breathing returns to normal, and we move on with our day. Unfortunately, some residual tension may remain without our realizing the after effect.

In times of large scale crisis such as September 11, 2001, many people respond by going into a startle pattern repeatedly as each episode unfolds and is replayed in the media. Some people become so overtaken by fear that they are unable to function in daily life. In all likelihood, the fight or flight reflex has become a habitual state of being. When this happens, muscles become chronically tense, breathing becomes shallow, and it may be hard to think clearly. The startle pattern has such a lock on the person that even simple activities become strenuous and exhausting.

There is no denying the mind/body connection. Numerous health modalities acknowledge the importance of the mind in both treatment and prevention of disease and stress related symptoms. Proponents of the somatic (body oriented) approach rely on a variety of methods to encourage clients to participate consciously in their own healing process. The Alexander Technique may be categorized as somatic movement education. A key principle of the Alexander work is understanding the startle pattern and our habitual responses to various stimuli. Through conscious awareness of habits and a desire to change patterns that interfere with our ability to function, we can improve coordination and learn to move with greater ease and vitality.

Certified Alexander Technique practitioners are called teachers, and their clients are referred to as students. The work is really a method of self-learning rather than a treatment. Alexander teachers combine verbal instruction with gentle hands-on guidance. The student’s job is to pay attention with all the senses, particularly the kinesthetic sense or sense of movement. By making subtle changes in the poise of the head in relation to the spine, the entire body gains better balance with reduced effort. Through repetition of the process, the student begins to recognize habitual patterns and learns how to prevent unnecessary tension and stress.

Except in extreme circumstances, most of us have no reason to live in fear, yet many people have carried excess tension for years, often without realizing it. When they experience pain, perhaps an aspirin or a hot bath helps temporarily, but unless the source of the tension, *HABIT*, is addressed, the cycle of discomfort will repeat. In the months after 9/11 and more recently with the collapse of the housing market and financial instability, the overall fear level rose and remained high. Consequently, the fight or flight reflex was triggered repeatedly and for sustained periods for a great number of people. As an

unconscious reflex, this pattern is meant to provide a quick halt to movement followed by a resolution of the situation. We either retreat from the danger or fight back. In uncertain times, if we become too vigilant and fearful, the quick reflex becomes a sustained pattern of tension which may result in fatigue, insomnia, headaches, indigestion or any number of ailments.

Even though we may not be able to control what happens to us, we CAN control our response to any given situation. We can choose consciously how to act most appropriately. Rather than the all or nothing high stakes of fight or flight, we can prevent the startle pattern thus allowing clarity of thinking, easy breathing and unrestricted movement. It takes practice and a willingness to change old habits. The Alexander Technique does not offer a “quick fix” because, as with learning anything, each person progresses at an individual pace.

There are some simple things you can do to bring more awareness to how you are using yourself in daily life. At any given moment, you can ask yourself, “What am I doing with myself here and now?” By pausing and observing without rushing to change anything, we can become sensitive to subtle shifts in muscular tension and learn to direct our movement toward ease and efficiency. One of the simplest and most beneficial activities we can practice requires nothing more than floor space. Take a few moments to lie on the floor on your back with knees bent and a book under your head. Notice your contact with the floor and observe the movement of your breath. Tap into your kinesthetic sense and ask your whole body to expand. The more you can be aware of subtle movement, the more you will be able to allow muscles to release by thinking rather than doing. The idea is not to make something happen or to impose change. Rather, taking time to pay attention and observe yourself creates the possibility for changes to occur.

The best way to learn more about the Alexander Technique is through private or group sessions with a qualified teacher. The principles can be applied to daily activities and can improve performance in athletics and the arts. Some people use the technique to alleviate back pain and repetitive stress syndrome while others seek to increase flexibility and improve coordination. Because the work is a process of learning about ourselves, the possibilities are endless.