

'TAKING THE TRYING OUT OF BEING'

Alexander Newsletter July 2004

THE EXERCISE ISSUE. THIS ISSUE IS FOR PEOPLE EVERYWHERE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WAY THEY EXERCISE.

WE GROW THROUGH YOUR RECOMMENDATION - PLEASE FORWARD THIS NEWSLETTER TO A FEW FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES.

Contents:

1. What really matters about exercise
2. How Madelene mastered the art of windsurfing
3. Exercise for Senior Citizens
4. What we've been up to this month

1. WHAT REALLY MATTERS TO YOU ABOUT EXERCISE?

Over the past month, the vexed question of exercise has repeatedly raised its sweaty little head. Or, to put it more conventionally, a number of pupils have been asking about either the best exercise to do, or otherwise the best way to exercise.

Popular wisdom generally postulates that beneficial exercise stimulates the cardio-vascular system. We have no problem with that. However in practice this view frequently translates into less elegant notions about 'pushing yourself' and 'working up a sweat'. Exercise is seen as being more or less synonymous with 'exertion'.

Then there is competitive exercise in which, contrary to what we were told at school, it's winning that matters, not taking part. In fact, winning seems to matter so much that it justifies putting the competitor's body through any amount of trauma. This was perfectly illustrated by Euro 2004 where stalwart footballers hurtled into one another with enough speed and force to crumple a Volvo. (But then shed-loads of money have always been a great anaesthetic - though not one available on the NHS, sadly.)

Finally there is exercise that is focused on working and strengthening specific muscle groups. Frequently, the preoccupation with working a single muscle or muscle group, hinges on the assumption that the rest of the body will take care of itself. Not necessarily.

Recently a delightful pupil of ours, in her 70s, was given exercises to do to alleviate painful plantar fasciitis. One of the exercises required her to stand about 80cm from a wall, put her hands out onto the wall at about shoulder height and bring her body forward, while leaving her heels on the floor, with a view to getting a stretch through her Achilles tendon.

Not having been shown how best to do this exercise, she ended up more or less doing vertical push ups and putting considerable strain on her arms and shoulders, without really getting the stretch she wanted.

The tendency when that happens is to do more; in other words, when exercise doesn't produce the desired result first off, the tendency is to exercise harder rather than better.

But exercising harder, simply exacerbates the situation. You get frustrated, or tired and end up performing the same activity worse. It's like banging your head against a brick wall, finding it doesn't work and banging it harder. (Daft as it may sound, we've all done that at some point.)

Applying Alexander principles enables you to achieve more of the result you want - whether that is a good stretch, or enhanced performance - without expending any more energy than is strictly necessary. So the AT can significantly improve your stamina.

Of course, if, for you, enjoyable exercise is synonymous with a beetroot red face, jangling muscles, gasping for breath, sweating buckets and a feeling of needing to sit, or lie, down before you drop; if, in short, you seek the kind of primal satisfaction Rambo must have felt after a particularly tough day, then making exercise easier and more effective with the AT, probably isn't for you.

2. HOW MADELENE MASTERED THE ART OF WINDSURFING

It was 1984 when I first stepped foot on a windsurf board. Within twenty seconds I had fallen off. A three day course with a qualified instructor didn't improve the situation a great deal. Perhaps I was standings and surfing for sixty second periods, always ending up unbalanced, off the board and in the water. With huge disappointment I abandoned my dreams of spending many happy hours in sunny climates freely and skillfully surfing the waves.

That was twenty years ago. I had no knowledge at that stage of the Alexander Technique, no knowledge of how to improve my balance to avoid the frequent dunking. There was no information offered about what might help balance. Nobody suggested that I might 'think up', let the board support me, free my ankles, trust the support that the board and the water can give me, trust myself.

Equipped with a little bit more knowledge on these matters, three weeks ago and twenty years later I gave it another go. The difference was incredible and I am delighted. I had great fun sailing and remaining out of the water for the whole 2hour class. I believe this is, without a doubt, all thanks to the Alexander Technique.

I've spent much time since then boasting and showing off to all friends and pupils about this wonderful achievement and I've enrolled myself on the next course. I think some of the pleasure experienced with this result is the knowledge that, yes, I am changing as I get older, and it's change for the better. At the great old age of thirty eight I can actually do something much more effectively than my young eighteen year old self could. That makes me feel good.

Perhaps that's what it's like with some of changes that happen as you take Alexander lessons-you don't always know that they've occurred until you give yourself an opportunity to look back on how things used to be.

The sort of change that comes with the Alexander Technique is not always immediately obvious, as you move slowly into your new way of being. Some weeks into lessons it might occur to you that perhaps 'those headaches that I used to have every month don't bother me any more', or 'I remember when I used to be tired and exhausted and aching after using the computer for a few hours; now I barely notice it'.

Or, indeed, it might occur to you that: 'I am now British Ladies Windsurfing Champion whereas before I could barely stand on the board'. (Dream on!!).

3. EXERCISE FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

Some years ago when Annie bought her beloved Shih Tsu, (now blogging at <http://sharonkornfeld.blogspot.com>), a friend informed her that Shih Tsus are old ladies' dogs. Annie had what, in coaching circles, is known as 'a light bulb moment' as she realised that senior citizens, which we will all become if we are fortunate enough to live that long, show far more discernment than arrogant youth gives them credit for.

Senior citizens also tend to exercise with more thought and care than their younger counterparts, as the following story suggests.

'I just came across this exercise suggested for seniors to build muscle strength in the arms and shoulders. It seems easy, so I thought I'd pass it on to some of my friends.

The article suggested doing it three days a week. Begin by standing on a comfortable surface where you have plenty of room at each side.

With a 5-lb. potato sack in each hand, extend your arms straight out from your sides and hold them there as long as you can. Try to reach a full minute, then relax.

Each day, you'll find that you can hold this position for just a bit longer.

After a couple of weeks, move up to 10-lb.potato sacks, then 50-lb. potato sacks, and eventually try to get to where you can lift a 100-lb. potato sack in each hand and hold your arms straight for more than a full minute.

After you feel confident at that level, put a potato in each of the sacks; but be careful.'

4. WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO THIS MONTH

While Madelene has been windsurfing and sailing and generally being Action Woman and pushing back the boundaries, Annie has confined herself to hopping on and off boats commuting between Sorrento and other places of interest in Southern Italy, with her most daring exploit being the day she fetched up at Capri without her sunscreen.

Annie's biggest challenge this month was posing for a photographer for a mug shot of herself and her daughter for 'The Express'. To say it was a steep learning curve is putting it mildly.

One of the things that they don't tell you at Alexander School is that in order to achieve those - apparently -effortlessly smiling, and flattering, poses that Victoria Beckham and others do with such an air of naturalness, you have to contort your body mercilessly.

Photographers seem to favour the curious 'double twist' technique, which means that you twist your body one way and your head the other. (For your average snake it wouldn't present a challenge at all.) So if, say, you have your right foot forward and your body angled toward the right, the photographer will stand way to the left of you and ask you to turn your head to him and smile radiantly.

We wouldn't advocate that you try this one at home or anywhere else. It was surprising to realise how quickly such a posture could become acutely painful, with the radiant smile turning, in an instant, into a manic grimace.

Annie resisted for as long as she could, on ethical and professional grounds, but the photographer told us we would thank him for his - and our - pains and ultimately we did. The end result was relatively flattering and, curiously natural looking.

It was that one-off occasion when no pain would have resulted in no gain. At least we didn't look like the Incredible Hulks or Dr and Miss Blobby. Even if it did take hours to ease out the kinks in our spines. The penance for this, and all other sins of posture, was, of course, extra hours in semi-supine.

(If you would like to see the offending photos and article, they will be posted on www.joyful-coaching.com in the next few days.)

Have a great July and spare a thought for what really matters to you about exercise.

Annie and Madelene

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madelene.webb@virgin.net

Or

email@annie-kaszina.com

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