

Don't be a Victim of Stress

By David Langstroth

Stress. Heart disease, ulcers, depression and blighted relationships. We would all be better off without it. So maybe we should seek the perfect job which is fulfilling and stimulating, well paid, with only moderate hours, no deadlines and a boss who is caring and sensitive, only interested in what's good for us. Unfortunately such a job doesn't exist, and even if it did can you imagine the stress involved in competing to get it? Maybe we should drop out and spend our days sitting beside a stream thinking peaceful thoughts. That might be all right until it starts raining or you need to buy some food. No, we want the financial security that only a decently paid job can bring but not to be another middle-aged victim of a heart attack, burn out, or repetitive strain injury. So what are we to do?

In principle, the answer is really quite simple. Stress is a convergence of two factors: environment and manner of reaction. If you can't change the former then change the latter. Stress is what we do to ourselves in reacting to environmental stimuli. If you can get your head around this you have made a start to dealing with it. This is where the Alexander Technique comes in.

Frederick Mathias Alexander (1869-1955) was a Shakespearean actor who suffered from persistent hoarseness and vocal problems. Fortunately for us he did not just put them down to stress but asked how he himself might be contributing to the problem. So he began to study himself in a mirror, to see what he was doing whilst performing. His observations revealed that the stimulus to perform brought about a series of habitual reactions, most notably unduly stiffening the muscles of his neck and pulling his head back and down, compressing his spine and shortening his stature. Over a long period of experimentation Alexander finally taught himself to respond to this stimulus without activating this destructive pattern. In doing so he learned how to cope with the demands of his profession. It was no longer stressful to him.

What Alexander discovered was not just a technique for actors with vocal problems, but a general principle that applies to everyone. It can be demonstrated that most people, like Alexander, develop the same basic pattern of habitual reactions, which are both impairing of performance and damaging to long term health. This pattern of reaction is known in Alexander Technique as the misuse of oneself.

The reason that this pattern of misuse is practically universal is that it is the inevitable result of disturbing the fundamental mechanics of poise and equilibrium in the human body. Alexander discovered that this poise and equilibrium depends on a dynamic relationship between the head, neck, spine and limbs which when operating well establishes general co-ordination in any

activity and ensures good use rather than misuse. He called this relationship the primary control in the use of ourselves. When we interfere with this mechanism we create chronic strains and distortions leading inexorably to the physical and mental consequences which are so often labelled, 'stress related disorders'. In learning to revitalise and maintain the primary control we gradually regain our natural poise in our working activities and in the process become increasingly able to cope with situations without inflicting damage on ourselves.

For example, someone working at a computer who habitually stiffens their neck, pulls their head back and down into their spine compressing it and fixes their eyes on the screen, is maintaining a constant state of tension for the whole day and is very likely to be shattered at the end of it. They may have a headache, their eyes may be hurting, and the tension may have driven up their blood pressure. These are the daily stresses which, in a few years, may make them a candidate for a stroke, or some other 'stress' related disorder. The more demands that are put on them during the day, whether they be awkward clients or deadlines to be met, the more they will exaggerate this habitual pattern of tension and misuse of themselves. They may also turn to junk food for comfort and a few too many drinks after work. Misuse of the self is a gradual downward spiral in which stress breeds stress.

The Alexander Technique shows you how to turn that into a virtuous spiral. By learning to avoid your habitual patterns of reacting to work situations, and instead maintain an improving use of yourself through a conscious awareness of the primary control you will find yourself feeling lighter, freer and more at ease. The demands of the workplace will seem less difficult and you will meet these demands with greater enthusiasm and success. Aches and pains, weaknesses and limitations - even those that you may have attributed simply to ageing - will gradually diminish, and your general health and well-being will improve.

The Alexander Technique is a long term educative process. In starting to improve your use of yourself you are investing in your long term future and it is important that you get it right. We have each spent a lifetime practising our patterns of misuse, and we need very close guidance in attempting to remove them. For this reason you can't learn it properly in a group or from a book; the misconceptions that people can pick up through these methods can be more harmful than the initial problems they are hoping to solve. Individual tuition with a properly qualified teacher is the way to guarantee that your investment pays maximum dividends.

Stress can debilitate you, undermine your potential, and can even kill you, The Alexander Technique is a scientifically sound and entirely practical means of freeing yourself from its grip. So don't you owe it to yourself to find out more? For further information and advice contact Alexander Technique Atlantic (902) 346-2065, www.AlexanderTechniqueAtlantic.ca.