



The Alexander Technique and migraine





The Alexander Technique (AT) helps people recognise, understand, and avoid poor habits that affect their postural tone and neuromuscular coordination. It allows people to re-learn and undo bad habits that have been picked up over the years, such as bad posture and regain control of their body helping them to make improvements to their posture, balance and movement in everyday life.

It teaches more efficient and less stressful ways of carrying the body, through a combination of gentle hands-on and verbal instruction. The technique was developed over 100 years ago by Frederick Matthias Alexander, a Shakespearian actor who kept losing his voice. He believed that through learning a correct use of

the head, neck and back we can improve bodily functions, such as posture and balance, and reduce the build up of unnecessary tension in the muscles.

It is based on the principle that the way in which we use ourselves as a whole

- mind and body
- affects the way we function. If we improve the overall use of ourselves, it will lead to improvement in our overall functioning. This in turn will help us in managing other health conditions, such as migraine, which can be as a result of excess muscle tension.



How migraineurs can benefit from The Alexander Technique

Tension (e.g. in the neck muscles) and stress has been commonly identified as a cause of migraines and headaches, particularly for tension-type headaches which affect 80% of people from time to time. These are often brought about by too much concentration on computer screens at work and poor posture; this can cause unnecessary strain and tension on our neck muscles making them stiff and causing them to trigger tension in other muscles around the head.

According to AT teachers, pain anywhere in the body is usually due to a tension pattern throughout the whole body, starting with tension in the neck. It is based on the important relationship of the head to the spine and it is crucial to the overall function and well-being of an individual.



AT is fundamentally concerned with the release of these neck muscles and works by teaching people how to release and reduce tension in these muscles, even in active or demanding situations. This in turn can prevent headaches or migraines from occurring, helping you to break out of the vicious circle of tension, pain, stiffness and exhaustion, enabling you to use your body more loosely, easily and efficiently.

AT works by re-establishing the natural alignment of our head, neck and body, and in the process helps to reduce stress and tension implicated in causing headaches and migraines.

What does The Alexander Technique involve?

Lessons involve an individualised approach designed to provide lifelong skills for self care that can lead to a wide variety of benefits. People learn to 'use themselves' - mind and body - in a way more like the way they are designed to function.

In one-to-one lessons qualified teachers use gentle hands-on guidance and verbal instructions to teach people to undo years of habits that lead to excessive tension by helping them become more aware of and stop reacting with too much tension to the stresses of life.

Through learning to release unwanted muscular tension, muscles that were overworked and shortened, tend to relax and lengthen, and muscles that were under-used and lax, tend to tone up. Gradually any activity like sitting, standing, walking or bending can feel easy and more balanced. The new knowledge gained can help to prevent a build up of tension that can lead to headaches and migraines.

AT is a highly practical method for self-improvement and self-help. The technique has been learned and used by people from all walks of life and involves no specific exercises, requires no special equipment, and can be practised wherever you are. It is suitable for people of all ages and levels of physical fitness.



The number of lessons required depends on your particular goals and needs, and would need to be discussed with a qualified AT teacher.

AT helps you to learn to release tension and rediscover balance of mind and body. Learning to use yourself better with poised natural body alignment will help overall functioning and well-being as well as helping to prevent migraines.

Tips to help reduce tension and improve posture

- Whilst undertaking daily activities try to take some time out to consciously allow the head and neck and shoulders to realign. Allow the neck to be free, the head to release forward and up, and the back to lengthen and widen (Mind and Body Stress Relief with the Alexander Technique by Richard Brennan, HarperCollins, 1998).
- Try the following resting practise daily to help reduce stress, allowing gravity to help release the back to lengthen and widen for 10 to 20 minutes each day.
 1. Lie with your back on the floor, your knees bent and your head rested on a small stack of paperbacks.
 2. Adjust the number of books until you feel the back of your neck release and the muscles along your spine lengthen. Too many books will drop your chin toward the chest. Too few books will tilt back the head. If you're uncertain how many books to use, simply use a firm pillow
 3. Keep your eyes open whilst lying down, as this will help you to focus on the places in your body where you hold tension.
 4. Think of your neck muscles lengthening and your shoulders widening. Think of your knees pointing up to the ceiling and your feet flattening to the floor and widening.
 5. As your body relaxes, focus on the feeling of your back having lengthened and widened and your neck becoming freer. Summon this sensation in your body when you get up and resume normal activities or whenever you feel it tense up.
- Try to maintain your posture whilst sitting – whilst seated make sure both feet are flat on the floor and allow the back of the chair to support your spine, resting the weight of your body on your sitting bones. Allow your shoulders to widen and release away from the neck and your back lengthen and widen. With lessons from a qualified teacher and with practise you should be able to sit comfortably in this position for some time, but get up every 20 minutes to ensure muscles don't tense.



FAQs

Have any research trials been conducted using the Alexander Technique in migraineurs?

No there hasn't been any research trials conducted using the Alexander Technique in migraineurs. There has been many research trials conducted in back, shoulder and neck pain though and we know that migraine can be triggered by muscle tension in these areas.

How is The Alexander technique different from other approaches?

It is not a treatment, such as chiropractic or massage; any treatment has its own unique benefits. The Alexander Technique's unique contribution is a mode of self-management that gives you independence in maintaining your health. You learn to release your own tension and balance your own structure.

How long will it be before I see results?

Each lesson will bring new insights that you can apply immediately and you will probably feel the effects of your Alexander Technique work within the first 6 – 10 lessons.

How much does a one-to-one lesson cost with an AT teacher?

AT isn't available on the NHS so you would need to find a private teacher. Sessions last about 45 – 60 minutes and cost approximately £40 - £60 per session.

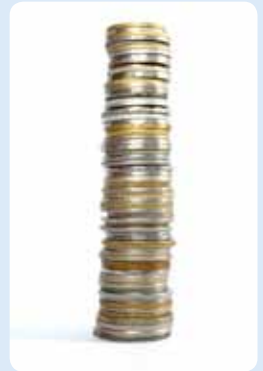
Case studies

"For about 15 years I occasionally suffered from very severe migraines. Two years ago I had the opportunity to attend some Alexander Technique workshops. During the subsequent months I realised that I hadn't had a single migraine since the workshops. I continue to go to an Alexander Technique teacher for one-to-one lessons every few weeks and still haven't suffered from a migraine."

Anon, London

"I suffered from recurrent and debilitating headaches for over five years and struggled to find anything that would help. Since starting Alexander Technique lessons I have experienced a vast improvement in both their frequency and severity. In fact, for the first time in years I am headache-free almost all of the time. I have found the sessions restorative and, as an added benefit, they have helped me greatly in improving my posture and reducing stiffness in my neck and shoulders."

Yvonne Hunter, London



Useful contacts

The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT)

The Society, founded in the UK in 1958, is the oldest and largest representative regulatory body for Alexander teachers (practitioners) with nearly 800 members in the UK and 12 affiliated societies in other countries. STAT-qualified teachers (M.S.T.A.T.) have completed a three-year, full-time training course approved by the Society or affiliated Society. STAT adhere to the Society's published Code of Professional Conduct. For information and a list of teachers in the UK or for details of training courses, please contact the Society on **0845 230 7828** or email enquiries@stat.org.uk.





For further information, advice on migraine management and for updates on the latest migraine research, please contact Migraine Action by calling **08456 011 033**, emailing info@migraine.org.uk, or visiting the charity's website at www.migraine.org.uk. All of our information resources and more are only made possible through donations and by people becoming members of Migraine Action. Visit www.migraine.org.uk/donate to support one of our projects or visit www.migraine.org.uk/join to become a member.

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