



THE WELL-TUNED BODY

Banish back pain with gentle exercises
based on the *ALEXANDER* technique

PENNY INGHAM & COLIN SHELBOURN

THE WELL-TUNED BODY

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Penny Ingham and Colin Shelbourn

To Polly and Russell,
for giving me direction (PI)

To Mary, onward and upward (CS)

CONTENTS

- INTRODUCTION.....11**
how to use this book – chapter sections explained
– read this now
- 1. ANYONE FOR TENSION?.....19**
observing tension – starting to break those habits
– recognising what you are doing to yourself
- 2. FIRST STOP AND THINK.....25**
introducing the idea of a thinking space – pause to
reorganise – the power of thought
- 3. IS WORK A PAIN IN THE NECK?.....29**
head balancing for beginners – the relationship of
head, neck and back – how to become taller, feel
better and look more confident
- 4. RECHARGING THE BATTERIES.....39**
why you should lie down three times a day – flat
out benefits for the spine – practising vital body
maintenance
- 5. ARE YOU SITTING COMFORTABLY?.....51**
sitting can damage your health – find your sit bones
– balance in the chair – sitting: a whole body thing

6. IN THE CHAIR.....65

mastering the chair – desk and table manners without strain – an easier, freer way of performing activities whilst sitting

7. REACH FOR THE PHONE.....79

simple actions cause problems – damage limitation – learn to lean longer

8. LOOK LIVELY.....87

the eyes have it – the way you look at the world affects your well-being – have a visual spritzer – the holiday effect

9. LYING DOWN – AND WORKING.....93

exercise without exercising – a lying down workout

10. STANDING STILL AND GETTING ABOUT...101

standing and walking tall – first steps to freer and lighter movement

11. THE WORLD ON YOUR SHOULDERS...117

allow those shoulders to drop – re-educate your arms – smile across the shoulders

12. FLEXIBLE FRIENDS.....129

exploring all the parts – regain lost mobility – where have your moving parts been today?

13. LIFT OFF.....139

bend those knees – climb those stairs – be buoyant

14. DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH.....153

breathing more usefully – let go the out breath – whisper an ‘ahh’ and relax

15. PAIRING UP.....159

working with a partner – staying in the moment

16. EVERY DAY IN EVERY WAY.....165

putting it all together – using all the book in every situation

17. WHERE NEXT?.....179

you never stop – signposts for the future – where to find a guide

APPENDIX 1 – BODY MAP.....181

a guide to the body

APPENDIX 2 – THE POSTURE POST-ITS.....185

essential affirmations

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....187

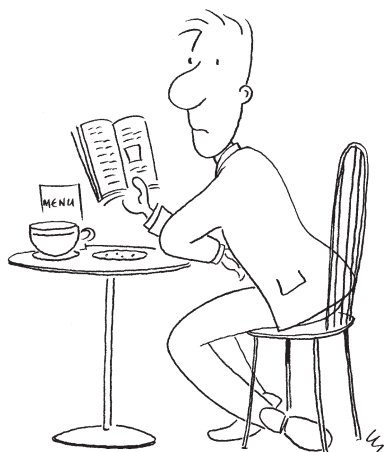
INTRODUCTION

How are you holding this book? Is your chin jutting out? Head pulled back? Shoulders hunched? If you are standing, is all the weight on one leg? How are your hips? Hitched to one side? Is your lower back tight?



THE WELL-TUNED BODY

If you are sitting, are you arching your back or slumping in the chair? And by the way, how is your breathing?



Do you suffer from backache, tiredness, stiffness in the joints, digestive problems, lack of energy, shortness of breath, onset of RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury), irritability, or low self-esteem? If you have answered yes to some or all of these questions, you need *The Well-tuned Body*.

The way that we habitually stand, sit and move can cause all the symptoms above. Few of us have the alert, easy posture we had as children. Over the years we have acquired damaging postural habits which incorporate and reinforce the strain and tension of everyday living. But because we have learnt these habits, we can unlearn them.

Difficult or impossible though this seems, one remarkable man, F. Mathias Alexander, did just

INTRODUCTION

that. Alexander (1869–1955) was an Australian actor who developed a persistent vocal problem. Acutely observant, he set out to identify the cause for himself. He noticed that whenever he prepared to speak he became tense. Anyone might observe that in themselves and in others in a general way, but Alexander noticed particular details. Using mirrors, he saw himself pulling back his head, raising his chest and becoming shorter in stature as he prepared to speak. He further observed that, to a greater or lesser degree, this very negative pattern was present in many everyday actions and that most of us carry these patterns of tension in our bodies until they produce pain and impaired movement. Of course, observing is not enough. At first he tried to *make* his body do what he wanted but this only created more tension. Realising this, he set about creating a technique for the re-education of his body, essentially a programme of consciously noticing and inhibiting habitual responses and directing his body to a much more natural and poised way of being. He went on to teach his methods to others and the Alexander technique is now taught worldwide.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book does not set out to teach the Alexander technique (for that you would need to have lessons with a qualified teacher) but it is based on Alexander's principles. It is important that

THE WELL-TUNED BODY

you should read Chapters 1 to 4 before going on to other sections. These chapters form the foundation of the book and are fundamental to understanding later chapters. Begin with these and then you are ready to dip into any of the remaining chapters in or out of sequence, with the exception of Chapter 16, which should be read when you have looked at the book as a whole. Each chapter can be used as a self-contained piece of work but your understanding will build up chapter by chapter.

Appendix 1 – Body Map – is also essential if you want to successfully navigate round your body.

Each chapter contains five sections: The Problem, The Exercises, The Principle, The Posture Post-it and Reorganise Your Life.



THE PROBLEM

An unwelcome symptom such as backache is your body giving you useful feedback. Listen to it. The aches, pains and stiffness may well be the result of something you are doing to yourself. Over the years, you may have acquired damaging postural habits or methods of working and moving which put unnecessary strain on your body. But, if you are doing harm to yourself, you can learn to undo it. What you need is this book and a little insight, patience and perseverance.

It is important to realise that body problems are interrelated. That stiffness in your fingers, for

INTRODUCTION

example, may be caused by the way you sit. The symptoms listed in this section are a rough indicator of what might be going wrong; all the chapters in the book will be beneficial, even if you think you need to address only one particular problem.



THE EXERCISES

These are quite unlike conventional keep-fit exercises. They are habit-breakers. They require mental rather than physical effort. They are designed to examine and remedy the tense and over-effortful way in which you have been making everyday actions, and to encourage your body to revert to its natural, tension-free way of doing things. Take your time over each exercise – if you do it too quickly, your muscles will take over and repeat the old, habitual way of doing things.

Throughout this book, we use words and images which help you make less effort. For example we say: 'Let your elbows drop to your sides', 'Allow your shoulders to widen', 'Think of a string taking the crown of your head upwards'. All these phrases help you to naturally adopt these ideas, which is the very opposite of forcing the body into a good posture.

When you attempt the exercises, do so with a positive and interested attitude. The quality of your attention is a key factor in the effectiveness of each exercise. If you perform them quickly in a let's-get-this-done sort of way, your body will miss

THE WELL-TUNED BODY

the point. Staying with the process can be difficult at first. If you find that your mind is elsewhere, find another time when you are in a more receptive mood. Work on these exercises when you feel you can give them your full attention and then you will be making real changes.

Remember that just as you acquired damaging postural habits by repeating the same thing over and over again, so you need to unlearn the habits by repeating the exercises. Like skilled craftsmen or musicians you never stop practising. Continue to work on yourself.



THE PRINCIPLE

In this section we explain more about why and how you might have acquired a particular problem and the relevance of the exercises. It puts the work you are doing into a useful context. You will find it helpful to read these sections along with a glance at the Body Map.



THE POSTURE POST-IT

The chapter in a nutshell – thoughts you repeat to yourself to direct your body into its easier, natural posture. They act as antidotes to bad postural habits and reinforce the new you.

They work in a similar way to affirmations. They help to change the unhelpful script most of us have running around our heads most of the time

INTRODUCTION

(for example substituting the positive 'I can do this' for the negative 'I can't do that'). Repetition is the key factor to affirmations; the positive thought consciously replaces the negative until a new way of thinking is formed.

Thoughts work on our body in a similar, very potent way. The Post-its help remind you of useful thoughts on posture. We offer some suggestions for these but feel free to add your own – making up your own will help you think about the work you are doing on yourself. But keep them positive – 'do' is more useful than 'don't' and is less likely to introduce the wrong idea. For instance, if we say: 'Don't think of an elephant!' what is the first thing you think of? Exactly.

Once you have your thoughts, distribute them about your desk, computer screen, your fridge door; anywhere you will see and be reminded of them.



REORGANISE YOUR LIFE

In this section there are practical tips and hints on how to modify your lifestyle and environment to help maintain the new you. Be a rugged individualist; look after yourself in a practical, organised way and get back in control of your body.

... AND FINALLY

Once you understand the problems poor body use can cause, you can use that understanding to get back in control of your busy life. Furthermore,

THE WELL-TUNED BODY

the principles in *The Well-tuned Body* can be incorporated into your everyday actions. Whatever you are doing, you can be using the ideas in this book to make yourself feel better, fresher, more in control and more energetic. *The Well-tuned Body* sets out a programme for change. It is a body owner's handbook to help you regain and maintain ease, poise and pain-free movement. Although you can treat the exercises individually, their effect is cumulative. Any of the exercises will be a useful re-education of your body, performed wherever, whenever you can. The more you practise, the more you get out of it. It's not just about work or play – it's about life.

CHAPTER 1

ANYONE FOR TENSION?

THE PROBLEM



Are you doing too much?

Most of us are tense to a degree – you might be breathless, have a bad back, headache, digestion problems or just feel more tired than you think you should be. You're doing too much.

It's nothing to do with a heartless boss or unsympathetic co-workers, it's you! You can be lying on the beach and still be doing too much. It's all down to the habits you've learned since you were a child.