

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE FOR MUSICIANS

BODY AWARENESS FOR PERFORMANCE AND INJURY PREVENTION



Alexander Technique teacher and drummer Richie Barshay performing with Esperanza Spalding in Cape Town in 2011.

Friday, April 30th
2021 Jazz & Contemporary Music Festival
Wisconsin Conservatory of Music

“People imagine that their bodies are disobedient and unreliable in carrying out their wishes, whereas nothing could be further from the truth.”

–Walter Carrington
From ‘Thinking Aloud’

General Coordination

- Distinct from the specific coordination needed for any given skill
- Precedes & underlies all that we do
- Alexander called this 'the use of the self' or more simply just 'use'

General Coordination is Concerned With:

- Postural Support
- Breathing
- Movement

Primary Coordination

- How the musculature of the neck is organized to support the weight of the head, and how the musculature of the back is organized to support the trunk, is *the* way to improve general coordination.
- As you improve this organization, it leads to improved general coordination - to improved postural support, breathing, and movement.

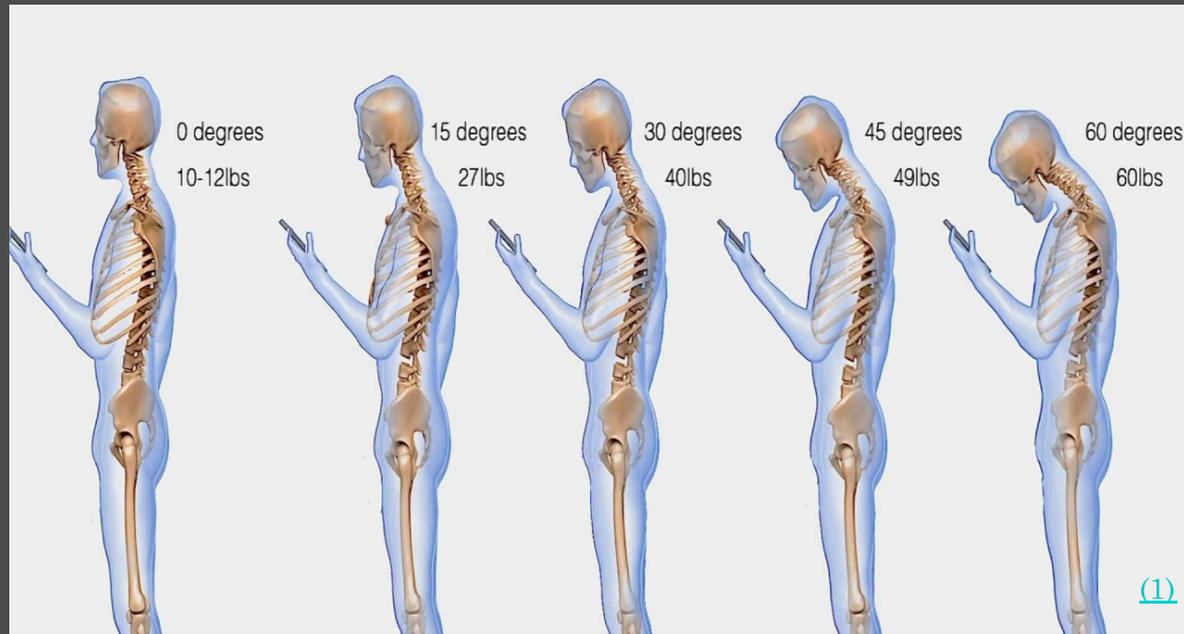
A Bit of Very Basic Anatomy



The average human head (including the brain, facial muscles, eyes, jaw, tongue, etc.) weighs a bit more than 11 pounds. It is poised on 7 vertebrae in the neck. The two vertebrae directly beneath the skull, known as the atlas and the axis, are about the diameter of a Red Bull can, and are the smallest vertebrae in the spine.

The head is moved around and kept in place by about 20 muscles with lots of connective tissue wrapping it all together. Connective tissue is tough, somewhat stretchy, made of collagen, and it encases every bit of muscle fiber from the smallest cellular division to the largest muscle group.

They call it 'Forward Head Posture' and It's Bad News!!



Imagine this whole structure, the 11 pound bowling ball with mustaches, moving forward and down - closer to a computer, a music stand, a cell phone, or an instrument. According to a 2015 study published in the journal 'Surgical Technology International:'

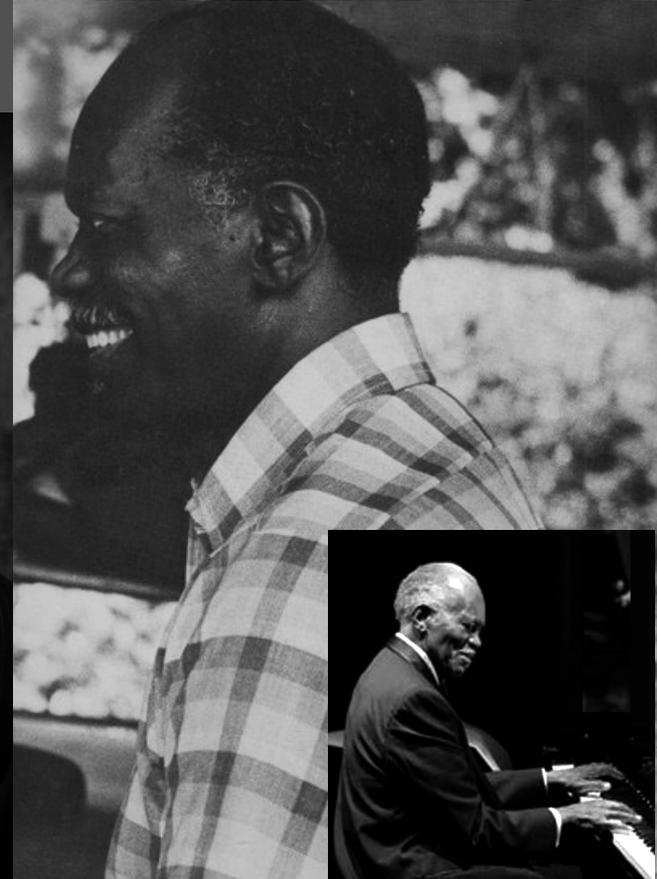
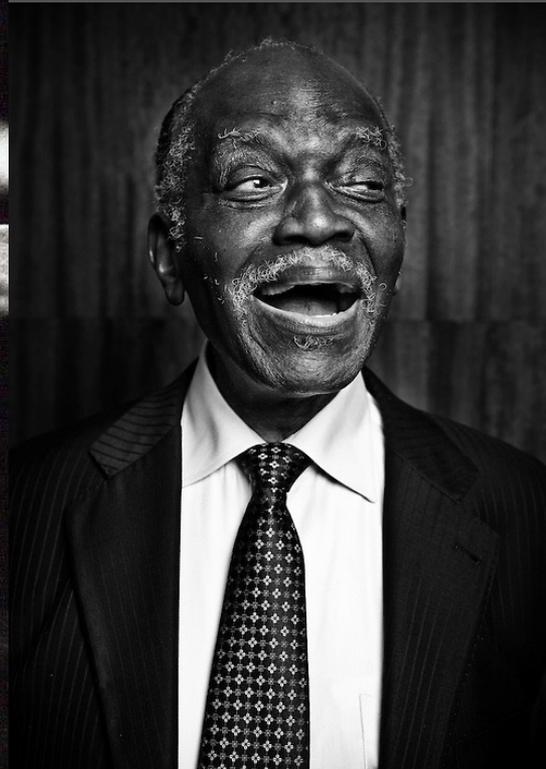
“If you lean 15 degrees forward, the head weight is more like 27 lbs. ... When you are hunched over at a 60-degree angle looking at a mobile device, your head puts a 60 lb. strain on your neck.”⁽²⁾

Forward Head Posture, when present with decreased cervical mobility:

1. Decreases forced air capacity and lowers respiratory function ⁽³⁾⁽⁴⁾
2. May be an indicator for Carpal Tunnel Syndrome ⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾



Hank Jones

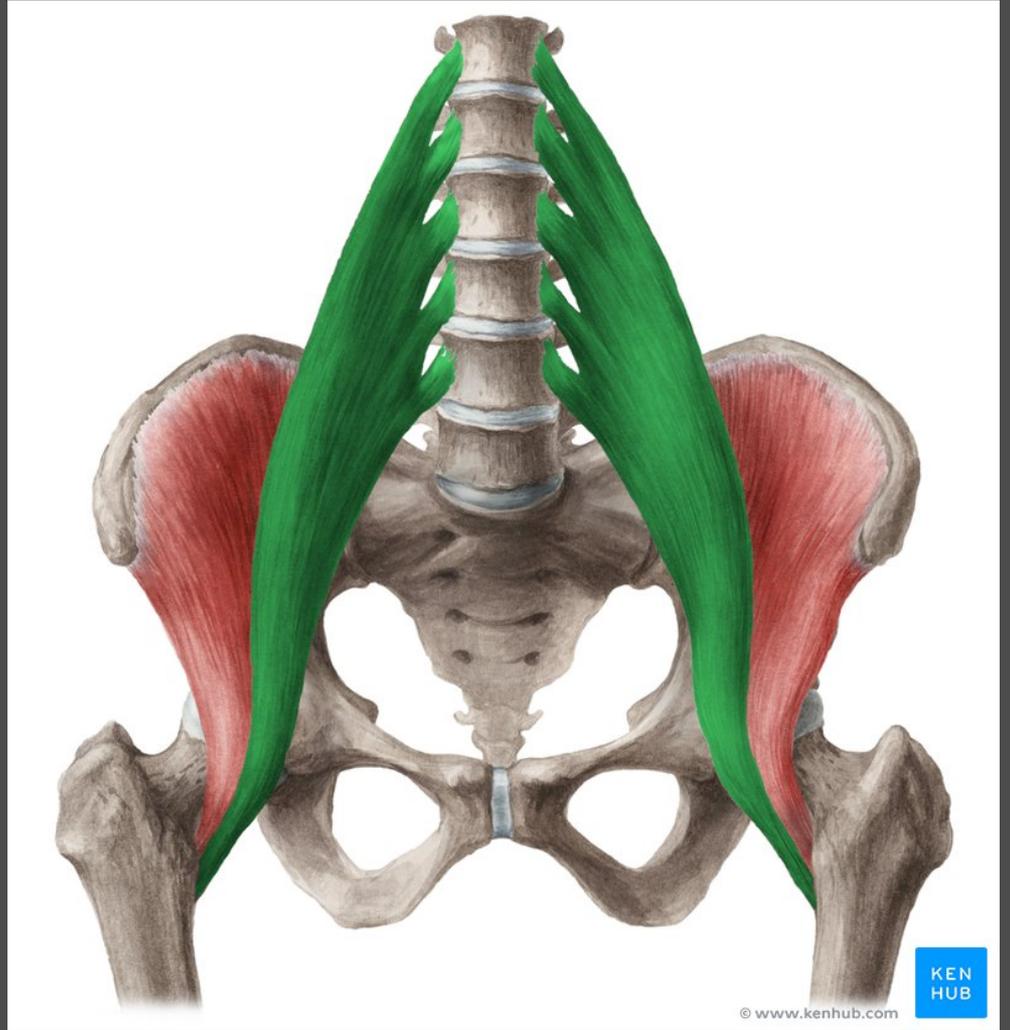
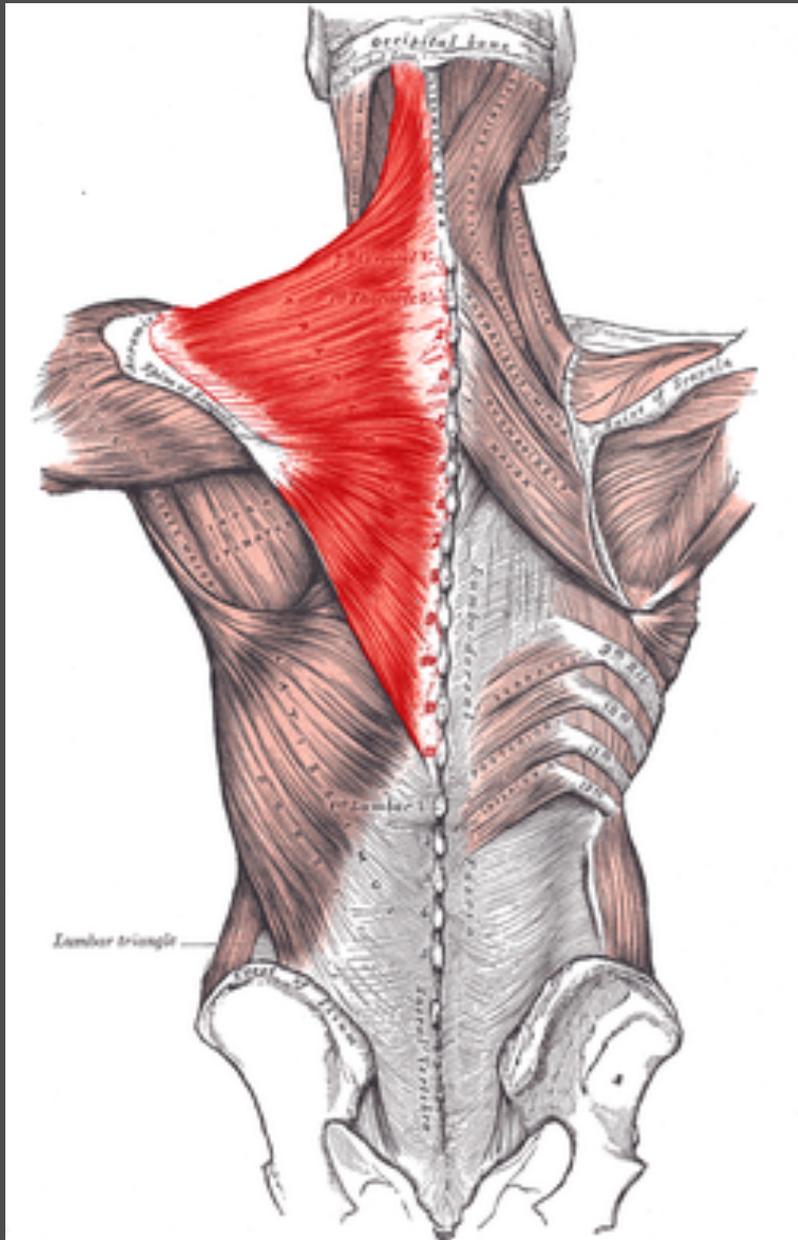


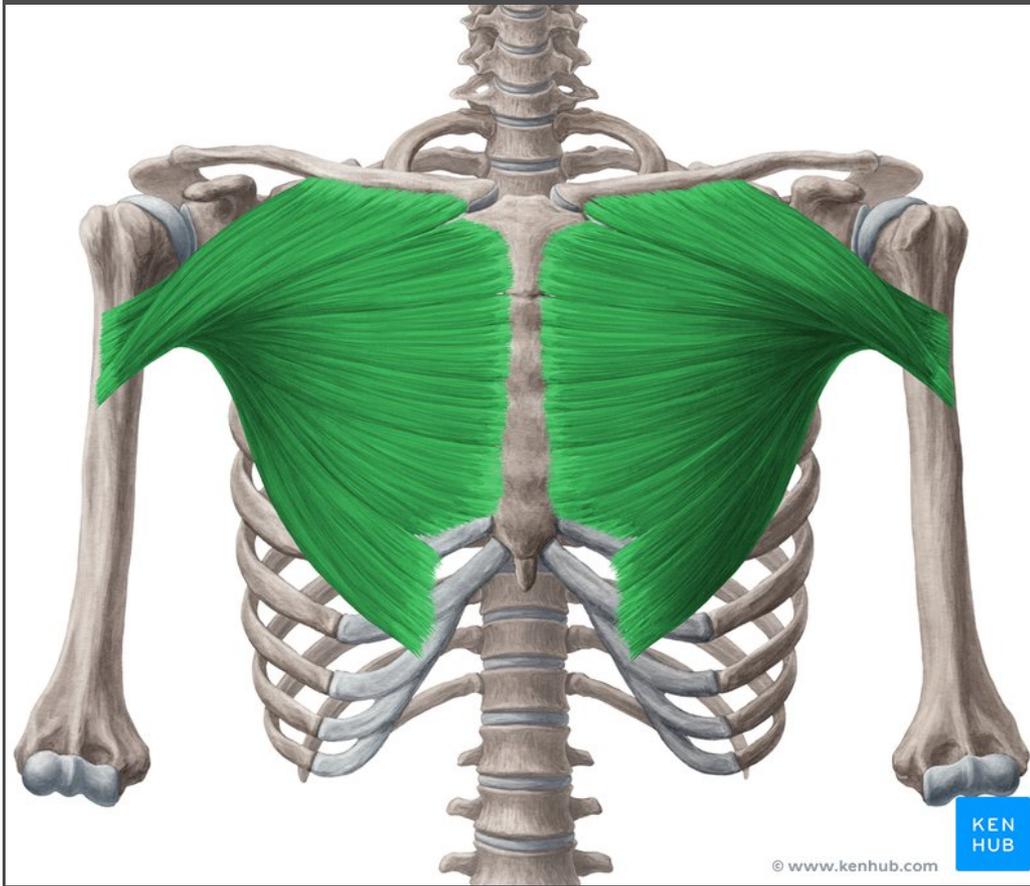
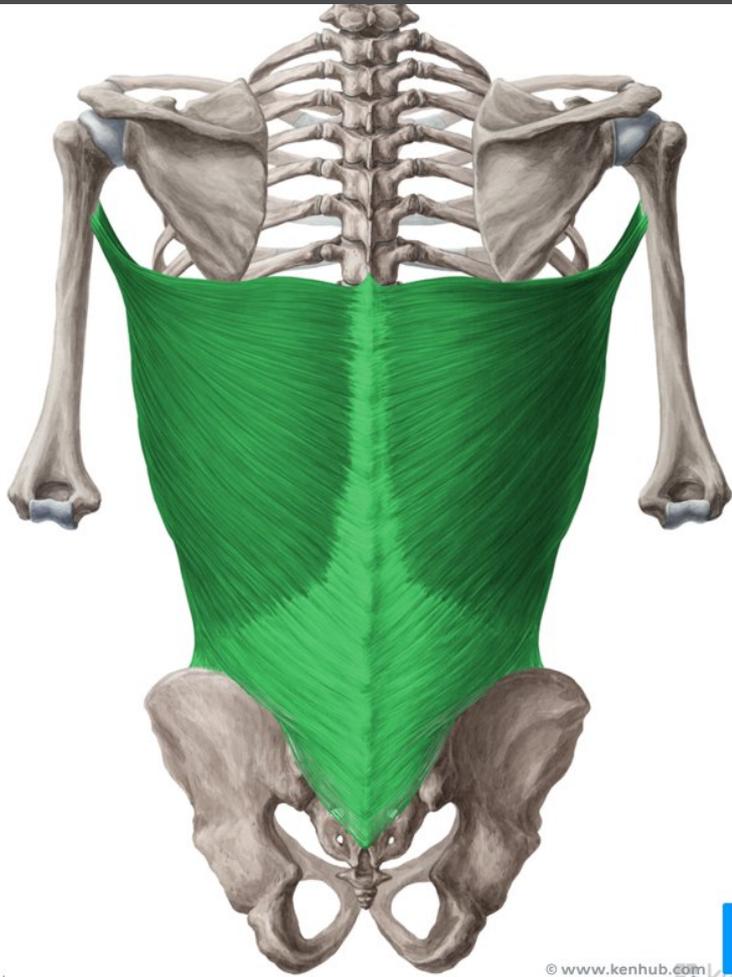


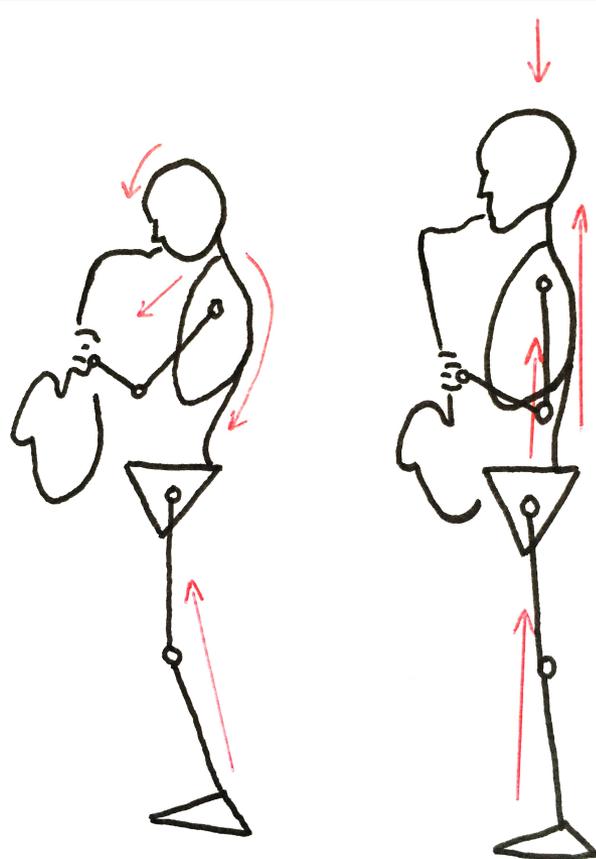
Bill Evans



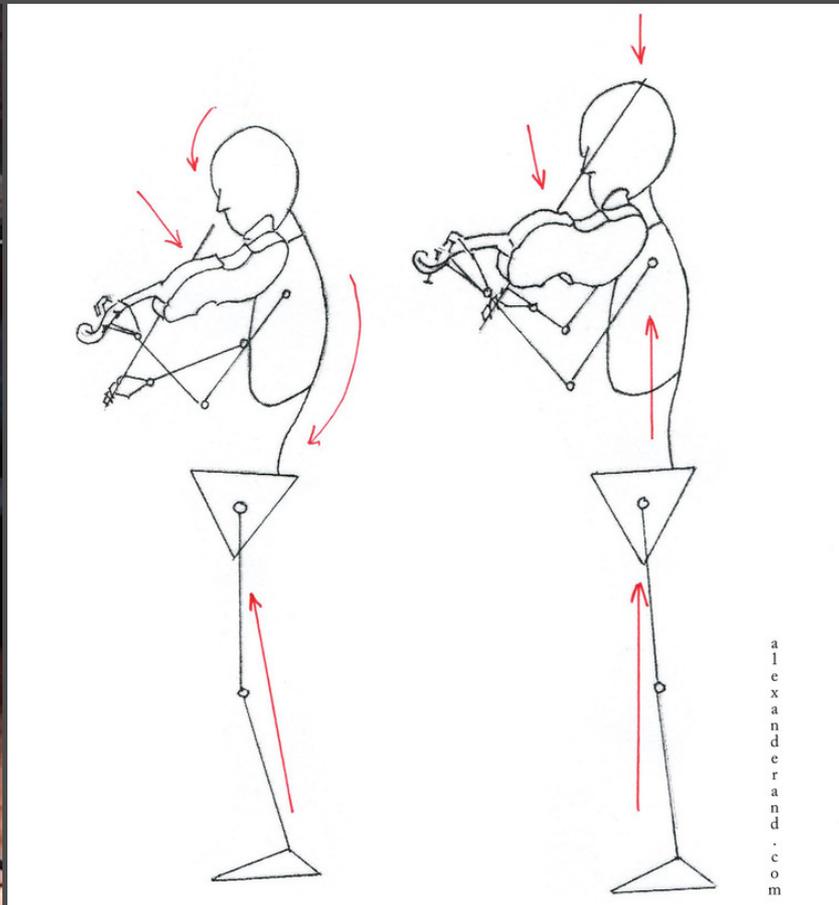












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Attitude Adjustment

- Our attitude towards making music has a powerful influence over our general coordination.
- Our everyday language can be revealing. For example:

“I never seem to get any better. It makes me so depressed.”

“Playing perfect time and nailing all of these changes is so much pressure.”

“I’ve got to do this gig with *him* - what a drag!”

“You know, the need to practice all the time is such a burden.”

“This audition has really got me down.”

“I can’t wait for the day when I can take some time off to decompress.”

“I just need more time and some room to breathe.”

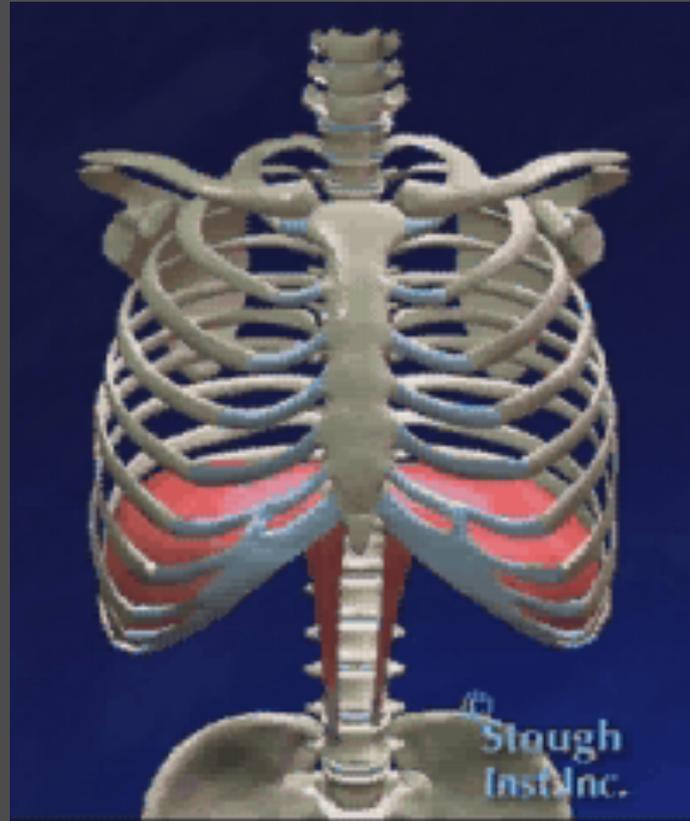
Etc.

- Pressure, Burden, Drag – more than just metaphor, and more than fleeting mental abstractions, these are attitudes. And they get can locked into us physically. We become habituated to them!
- The Alexander Technique is about undoing some of that. It is a practice of repeatedly noticing a sense of internal compression, and then gently, quietly, encouraging yourself to lighten up and open out in the direction of overall expansion.⁽¹⁰⁾

Inhibition

- Inhibition 1 – Stopping. Saying no. A pause to consider. “Whoa, wait a minute. Let me remember what I want.”
- Inhibition 2 – If I want to open out in the direction of overall expansion, that means, I don’t want to stiffen my neck. I don’t want to shorten my spine. I don’t want to narrow my back.
- Inhibition Zero – Quietening the sub-vocal chatter

Breathing



- The diaphragm descends when you inhale and ascends when you exhale.
- You can only get your ribs to move freely if you have not recruited the ribs to do the work of postural support.

Sensory Perception

- The long-term goal of lessons in the Alexander Technique is to reeducate and improve your sensory awareness, your feeling sense, so that it becomes more accurate and reliable.
- This gradually leads to ‘a standard within the self by means of which one will become increasingly aware of both faults and improvements.’ -F.M. Alexander

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE: SEMI-SUPINE

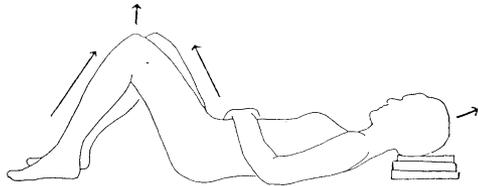
This is an invaluable practice that encourages the changes the Alexander Technique aims to promote.

The Basic Position:

Lie on your back on a firm surface - a carpeted floor is best - with the knees bent so that the feet are drawn up as near to the body as is comfortable. Feet should be far enough apart to enable the legs to balance with minimum effort (about shoulder width), the knees neither falling apart nor together, but pointing up to the ceiling.

Place some paperback books under your head so that they are supporting the bony bump at the back of the head (the occiput). The books should not be in contact with the back of the neck.

The height of the pile of books varies from person to person, and may even vary at different times for the same person. It depends of many factors, e.g. length of neck, size of head, curvature of spine. Reducing the size of the pile should not be seen as an end in itself. If you have too few books, your head will tend to tilt backwards (chin higher than forehead) and it will be difficult to encourage muscular release through the back and neck. If the pile is too high, your chin will press uncomfortably on your throat. The optimum height is somewhere between these two extremes. The arms should be placed with the elbows on the floor and the palms of the hands across the midriff.



Weight Bearing Points:

Ideally the weight should be distributed between the following points:

The feet - on the heel and the pads at the base of the big and little toes

The back rim of the pelvis - a little below the waist

The shoulder blades

The back of the head

Directions:

Now you are ready to turn your attention to the activity of directing (simply a combination of mentally asking it to happen and releasing any tension which is preventing it from happening).

1. The neck muscles need to be released so that the crown of the head tends to move away from the shoulders in a direction best described as "forward and out" [see arrows on Diagram]. The "forward" element is required because the strongest and most frequently over-contracted muscles of the neck are those that pull on the back of the head.
2. This direction of the head should be allowed to initiate a release and lengthening of the whole spine. As the spine lengthens, the back will naturally come into greater contact with the floor and will seem to broaden.
3. The knees should be directed towards the ceiling - which means a release and lengthening of the thigh muscles from the hips to the knees, and a similar release and lengthening of the calf muscles from the ankles to the knees [see arrows on Diagram].

To sum up, direct the neck to release to allow the head to go forward and out, the back to lengthen and widen, and the knees to point towards the ceiling.

Some Questions and Answers:

- Q How often should I do this and for how long?
A. At least once a day for 10 - 15 minutes at a time.
- Q Can I do this lying on my bed or sofa?
A. Not with the same usefulness. A firm surface demands a response from the body that a soft one does not.
- Q How can I avoid just falling asleep or drifting into day-dreams?
A. If you find you have been day-dreaming for some time, gently bring your attention back to your body, sense the weight bearing points and begin directing again. If you persistently fall asleep, you may be over-tired and in need of more sleep generally.
- Q Is this akin to yoga relaxation and meditation exercises?
A. Not exactly. The aim is not to sink into the heaviness of total relaxation. It is an "active" lying down, requiring mental alertness to promote a redistribution of muscle tone.
- Q Can I listen to the radio, watch T.V. or read while doing this?
A. Listening to the radio is probably all right. Watching T.V. or reading is too distracting and likely to fix the eyes, head and neck in an immobile position.

Collapse – Broad Generalization

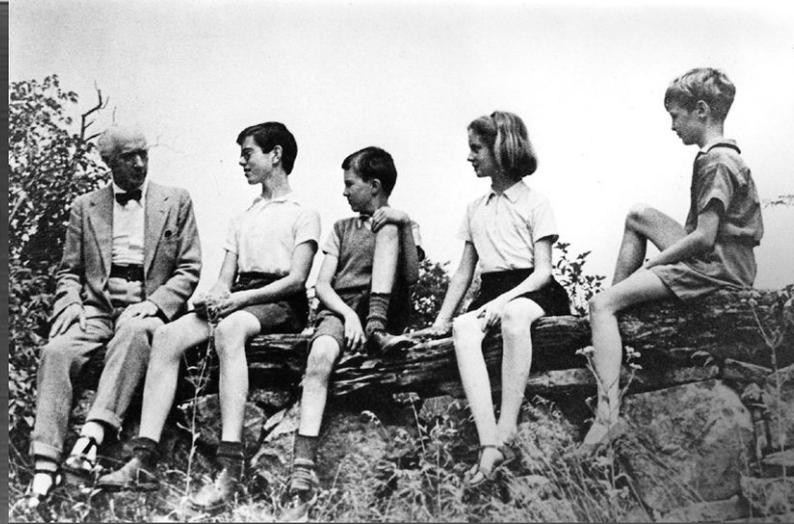
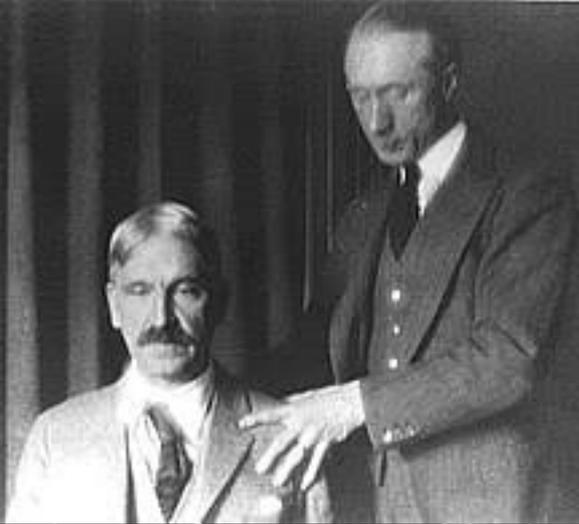
- Spine, neck, and back seem overwhelmed, unable to maintain upright balance.
- Neck stiffens as it works harder to hold the head. Head may be forward and down, or simply back and down.
- Heavy arms drag on the spine, or alternately seem disconnected from the spine. In either case, the arms contribute to a fractured sense of struggle in the upper back. The upper arms pull into the torso and pull on the front/sides of the neck.
- Without a supportive spine and back, the upper thorax collapses into the organs of the abdomen.
- Ribs, including the low ribs, stiffen under the downward pressure.
- Shallow, low-energy breathing.
- Legs, like arms, seem alternately heavy or anxiously disconnected from the low back. In either case, the legs, esp. the upper legs contribute to a sense of the legs being pulled into the lumbar spine, hips, and/or pelvis.

Rigid Bracing – Broad Generalization

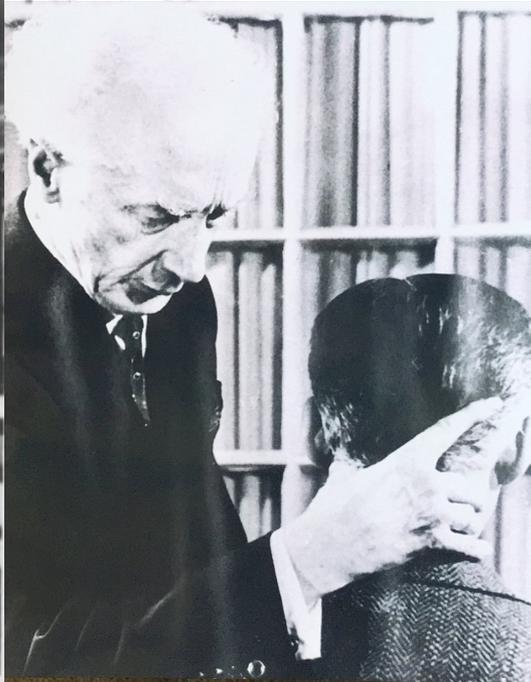
- Traditional posture advice like ‘Sit up straight!’ or ‘Shoulders back, chin in, chest-up, tight core, back straight!’
- Neck stiffened, attempting to ‘pull’ the head up
- The chest gets raised, sternum goes forward and up.
- The low back narrows, stiffens. Muscles along either side of spine stand out like cords.
- The ribs stiffen, especially the low ribs, under the excessive effort. It’s almost as if the ribs are trying to do the work of postural support, work that we’d prefer be done by the low back.
- Limbs seem alternately heavy or anxiously disconnected from the spine/low back. In either case, the arms contribute to a sense of rigidity and fractured struggle in the upper thorax; the legs colonize the hips, pelvis, and lumbar spine. The arms and legs get pulled into the torso.

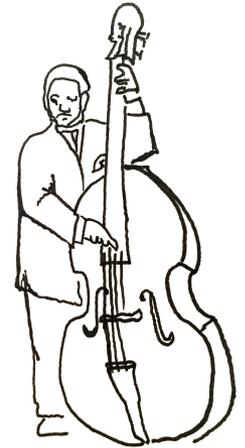
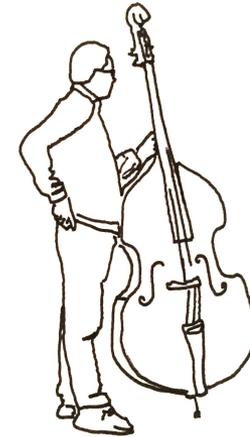
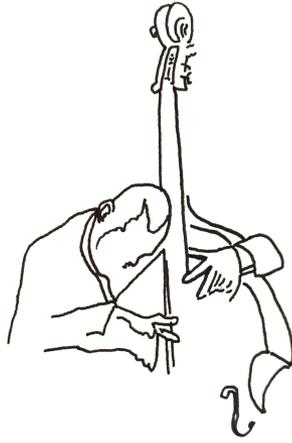
Elastic Bracing

- ‘Let the neck be free, to allow the head to go forward and up, to allow the spine to lengthen and the back to widen, and the knees to go forward and away.’
- The demand of upright posture is evenly distributed throughout the back. The entire ‘suit’ of musculature tones up, widens, and spreads, particularly through the back line of the body – from the back of the head, right down to your heels on the ground.
- The ribs move for breathing, especially the low ribs. The movement of the ribs for breathing refreshes the back, encourages a lengthening spine, and tends to allow the limbs to undo out of, and away from, the torso.
- As the arms and legs are directed out and away from the torso, they begin to ‘support the back’ - exerting a tiny intentional pull on the fascia of the low back, further ‘toning-up’ the back.
- Legs and feet act as conduits for a flow of energy from the ground through the legs, up the spine, out and down into the arms. ‘Release down, to go up, to widen to breathe.’



F.M. Alexander





Your body, your whole self, *is your first instrument.*

How you use your neck, spine, ribs, arms, mind, etc., has an influence on how you are able to play the piano, trumpet, drums, bass, etc.

How you use your whole self has a dramatic influence over *how you feel* while you are playing:

Tight breathing, forward head posture, rigid arms and legs *feels like* anxiety.
Shallow breathing, lead heavy arms, a collapsed spine *feels like* depression.

Balanced upright posture, full easy breathing, and limbs that are able to move freely *feels like...* Well, things are pretty good!

Try it!

“The message repeated again and again is that *we are responsible for how our energies are directed*, whether we are conscious of it or not, that we can learn how to redirect those energies into more useful pathways, and that inhibition, direction, and primary control give us both the means to do that, and the criteria for reviewing whether we are actually succeeding in doing so.”

—John Nicholls

How to Continue?

One on one, in-person lessons are the best way to study the Alexander Technique. As that becomes more possible, you can locate a teacher near you through The American Society for The Alexander Technique (AmSAT) [Here](#). Or internationally through The Society of Teachers of The Alexander Technique (STAT) [Here](#).

For videos, podcasts, articles, etc., John Nicholls' [website](#) is an excellent resource.

If you'd like to study via Zoom, try [Cindi Kim](#), [Phyllis Richmond](#), [Daria Okugawa](#), or the AmSAT office for recommendations.

If you'd like a recommendation of a teacher in your area, or on your instrument, please feel free to email me at: clayschaub@gmail.com

Additionally, this presentation is available for download in powerpoint and pdf formats on my website: www.clayschaub.com

Sources, Resources, and Further Reading

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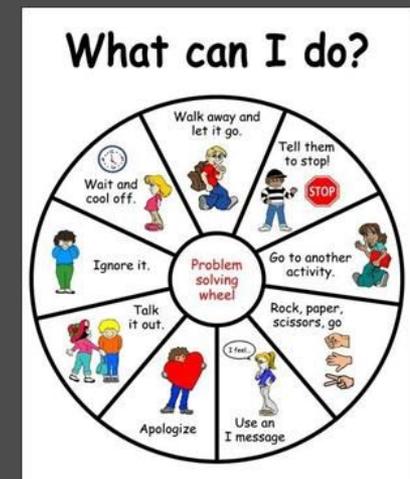
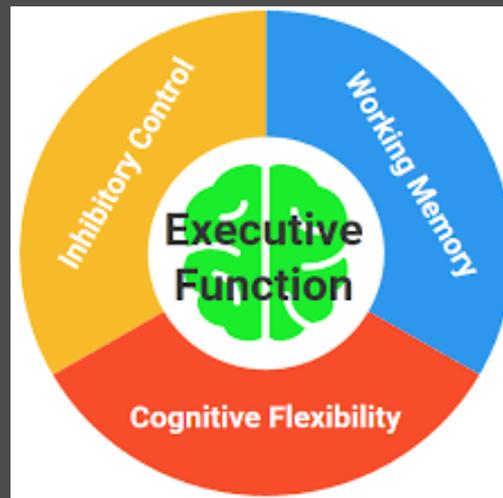
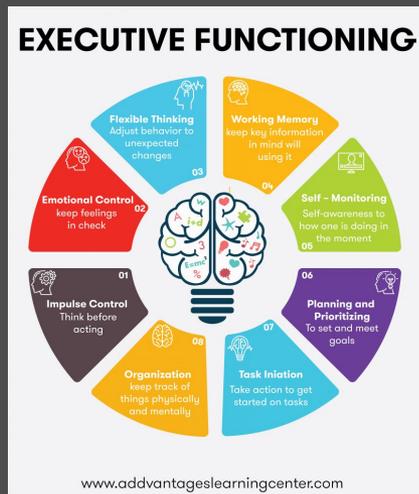
Arthur Rubenstein



Inhibitory Control

Alexander's term 'inhibition' bears more than a passing resemblance to the modern neuroscience and psychology concept of Inhibitory Control, which is best understood in the context of Executive Function. So, executive functions represent a constellation of cognitive abilities that allow us to plan, focus attention, adapt, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Executive function depends on three types of highly interrelated processes:

- Working Memory - Governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time.
- Mental Flexibility - Helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings.
- Inhibitory Control - Enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses [\(12\)](#)



One way scientists have of studying inhibitory control is with the STROOP TASK. Named after Dr. Stroop who came up with it in the 1930's, it is an example of 'proactive inhibition,' the decision to not react before taking part in an action.

Let's Try It!

It has 3 parts, and try to complete each part as quickly as you can.

AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN:

1) Name the Colors

AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN:

1) Name the Colors

XXXXX

XXXXX

XXXXX

XXXXX

AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN:

1) Name the Colors

XXXXX

XXXXX

XXXXX

XXXXX

2) Read the Words

AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN:

1) Name the Colors

XXXX

XXXX

XXXX

XXXX

2) Read the Words

Blue

Red

Purple

Green

AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN:

1) Name the Colors

XXXXX

XXXXX

XXXXX

XXXXX

2) Read the Words

Blue

Red

Purple

Green

3) Conflict – Ignore the Words & Name the Colors

AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN:

1) Name the Colors

XXXX

XXXX

XXXX

XXXX

2) Read the Words

Blue

Red

Purple

Green

3) Conflict – Ignore the Words & Name the Colors

Green

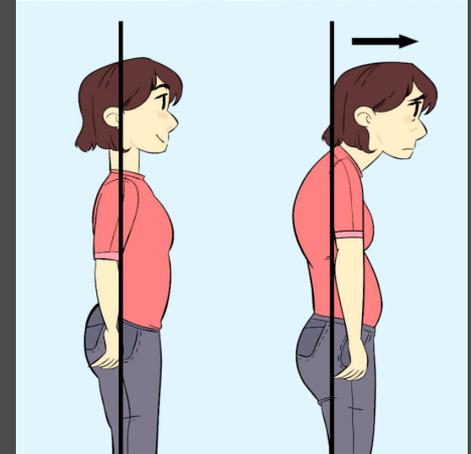
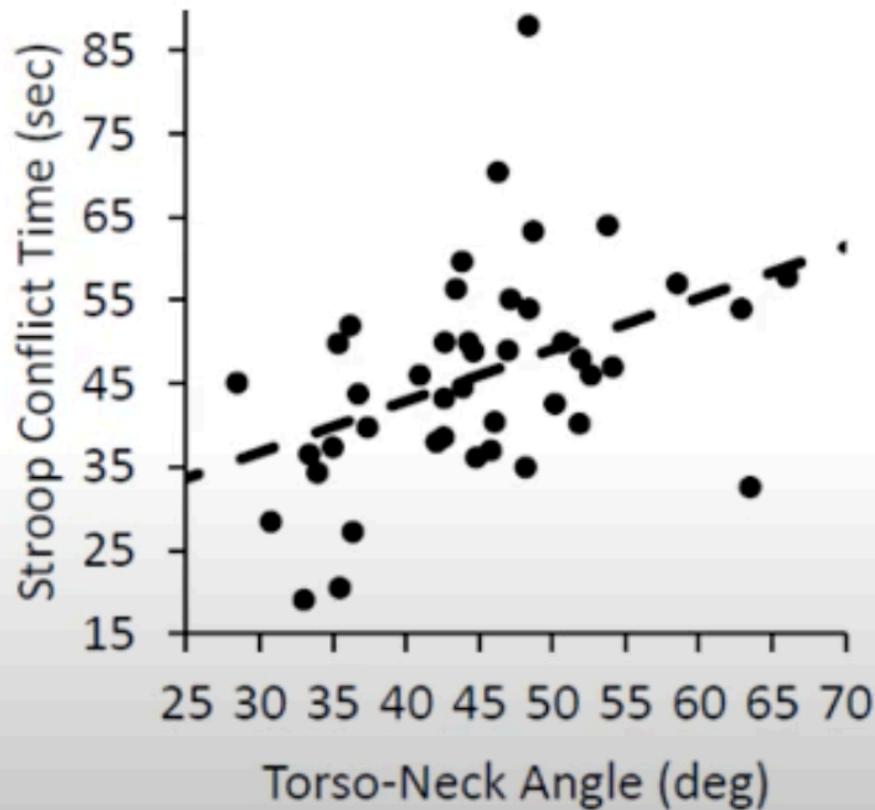
Red

Blue

Purple

Most people find this conflict condition of the Stroop Task a little challenging. Interestingly, however, is that *there is a strong correlation between how difficult it is for an individual to correctly answer the Stroop conflict condition, and how far forward that individual carries their head from their body.*

Inhibitory Control is Related to Habitual Head Carriage



Posture, Inhibition, and the Alexander Technique

This study is a great example of how much we can learn about the mind and body from even the most mundane activity. It also helps explain why we approach posture the way we do in Alexander lessons.

It is common to conceive of posture as a static position. If postural problems like forward head posture are also static, then the solution would be to hold our bodies in a different way. And this is what a lot of traditional posture advice has you do—“chin in,” “chest up,” “shoulders back,” “back straight.”

But if postural problems are dynamic—if forward head posture increases in anticipation of movement—then the solution may be found in understanding how we prepare to move. And if problems with posture correlate with difficulties with inhibitory control, then mindfulness practices may be as crucial in improving posture as any kind of posture exercise. And this is at least partly why we spend so much time in Alexander lessons cultivating the skill of inhibition, especially in our most compelling activities. What this study shows us is that when students come for lessons in posture and their Alexander teachers talk about inhibition, their teachers aren’t changing the subject at all.

Andrew McCann

So, a tense, stiff neck with a head pulled forward and down, or back into the spine, is detrimental. Furthermore, *what we do with our head and neck is important to the long term health of our limbs, hands, back, and breathing.*

Whether you play brass, winds, strings, or percussion, what we’d like is a neck that is free of excessive tension and a head that is poised on a lengthening spine. This helps to allow for the free movement of our limbs and encourages a widening, breathing back. Alexander teachers say:

‘Let the neck be free, to allow the head to go forward and up, to allow the spine to lengthen, and the back to widen.’



The Bearing Rein, or Check Rein: Forcing the heads high resulted in serious breathing and back problems for these unfortunate horses. Furthermore, it increased the difficulty of pulling uphill by preventing the efficient transfer of power from the hind feet, around the haunches, and into the back and harness.