

How to prepare by revitalising the whole person

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Taking Centre-Stage

Ruth Bonetti

✧ Posture

Breathing is closely linked with good posture. If we slump, we are effectively squashing down on our lungs, restricting their capacity.

What is 'correct' posture? The very word makes people instinctively over-compensate, often causing more problems. Find a natural, comfortable balance this way:

Stand up against a wall, with head and feet about ten centimetres away from the wall. Lightly press the torso, from shoulders to buttocks, against the wall as much as possible, given the inherent S-bend of the spine. Bend your knees slightly, thus unlocking their tension and tilting your pelvis forward a little. Do you notice how your chest has expanded out into that barrel shape common to good singers?

Accustomed to poor posture as many are, this may seem forced and unnatural, but you will become accustomed to it if you stand up against the wall for a few moments through the day. Make it a habit Sing, speak or play a sound in this posture, and you will probably be surprised at the improved projection, depth and quality of your tone.

• The Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is a system of therapy which focuses awareness on body weight, balance and posture. The principle was developed by Tasmanian Frederick

Alexander, whose recurrent loss of voice during performances threatened his career as an actor. Alexander spent desperate hours in front of a mirror, observing the muscles used in speech. He noted breathing interference and some curious movements of his head and neck, not only when he spoke, but also when he merely thought of reciting. The most common one, a tightening of the head backwards and downwards into the chest, eventually was proved to be a major cause of many common illnesses. When he learned to use his body correctly, his voice problems ceased. Alexander evolved a principle based on the premise that use affects functioning. It is a relaxed system of non-doing and awareness rather than busy exercises. The body is uplifted and harmonised in a blend of balance, relaxation and correct breathing. Mental directions to the crucial muscles and body parts achieve a sense of 'up-ness' to counteract gravity's compression. By eliminating rigid fixing habits, the back widens and spine lengthens, the neck 'lets go' of tension. Probably the most important exercise is easy: simply lie on your back on the floor. As we spend most of our waking hours struggling against gravity, we have to turn this to advantage. Support your head with a couple of books, just enough to be comfortable. Bend your knees, feet flat on the floor, slightly apart. Let your neck relax. Allow your spine to lengthen, your back flattening against the floor. If you lie in this position for about twenty minutes a day, you will find you feel more awake, energised and aware of your body posture.

The Alexander method has proved so effective that many music and drama institutions make such classes compulsory. How does this help nervous performers?

Let us go back to our basic fear, flight-or-fight mechanism. When threatened by that sabre tooth tiger in our cave or that rival sitting smugly in the audience front row, an instinctive reaction is to protectively hunch up the shoulders, constricting and shortening the spine. We pull the back of the neck closed, as if fearing a blow to the neck. This panic reaction also inhibits the crucial breath flow. Michael McCallion says:

One of the two major nerves responsible for our breathing takes as its point of origin the third, fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae. If we badly upset the relationship between these vertebrae, the uninterrupted and continuing exchange of in-breath for out-breath, the rhythmicity of our breathing cycle, is adversely affected. The other major nerve which activates our breathing starts working in overdrive, and we feel short of breath — no matter how much breath we actually have! This second nerve also supplies our digestive process, the muscles of the larynx and the heart.

No wonder we feel nausea, pounding heart, dry mouth — or need to keep swallowing!

A major focus of Alexander Technique is to make a natural habit of stretching and lengthening our spine, freeing and opening out our bodies. We reconsider how we move through everyday actions so that the head leads the body. Correct, comfortable posture allows us to move easily and with freedom and to project positively.

Alexander told his students one of the most beneficial actions was the ‘whispered aah’, for it improves freedom of the crucial neck hinge, opens the important bronchial throat passage and encourages deep, natural breathing.

To do this, stand balanced and upright with the neck free.

Smile broadly showing the teeth, which are lightly touching but unclenched. The jaw swings open easily while exhaling on a ‘whispered aah’. Repeat.

Another benefit of this is in opening passages to nerves, senses and sight, thus improving their functioning.

The ‘whispered aah’ is the purest uninterrupted sound you can make. It is helpful for the stutterer or stammerer and even helps seasickness, hangovers and nausea. This is because it prevents the tension caused by shallow breathing and helps to change the stale air at the bottom of the lungs. It allows more oxygen into the bloodstream, so you may well want to yawn or laugh as you release with the ‘whispered aah’.

Australian Broadcasting Commission journalist Josephine Cafagna confirms the value of this method: ‘I did some quick exercises before conducting forums for SBS television — very deep breathing along with yawning. It relaxed the shoulders, neck and jaw.. which all tend to clench up when the nerves set in. The whispering aah technique works well also.’

- Relax the jaw. . . through yawning

Singing and speech projection require a loose jaw and this also helps to prevent over-strain of the larynx. '0 As fifty per cent of brain signals pass into the body through a junction box at the jaw, all areas will function more efficiently if locked jaws are freed."

Do you have a 'dicky' jaw or do you chew on one side only? Do you clench your teeth at night through tension? These may be due to a dental or chiropractic problems of your temporomandibular (jaw) joint. A dentist can align your teeth and make a night plate. A chiropractic adjustment may improve this — and many other related problems at the same time. A big yawn is wonderfully relaxing. Let your jaw drop, your mouth sagging open. Massage the hinge of the jaw, just in front of the ear and under your cheek bones. Soon you will feel an irresistible urge to yawn deeply. Let it happen — this is one of nature's best remedies for tiredness and tension, as it releases toxins and waste material in the blood. It causes a strong downward movement of the diaphragm, pulls in more fresh air and releases the stiffness in the trunk muscles caused by tiredness. It improves circulation to the head and relaxes throat, jaw and face muscles. Consequently, vocal or musical tone and projection are radically improved.

✧ Brain Gym and Applied Kinesiology

I often tell my students to 'switch off their try-hard button'. This is because we as performers constantly strive to do our best, but being over-zealous is self-defeating. The essence of trying involves doubt. The analytical left brain is not only a critic, but also a doubter. Focus your awareness on one single aspect of your playing.

As passive observation is a right brain activity, that allows you to escape the critical and doubting words of the left try brain. If ever you want to put yourself off, indeed to 'switch off' your brain, just tell yourself to try or 'make an effort'. Yet, what a difference if you suggest to yourself you 'experiment' or 'challenge'!