



RELAXATION: Ethan Kind, who teaches the Alexander Technique, works with Lenore Shamey on letting go of tension.

Good Moves: Technique developed by actor puts easiness where tension reigned

By Kim Underwood
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Lenore Shamey forgot how to walk. That may sound odd, but Ethan Kind believes that it's true of most people. As children, everyone instinctively moves easily and naturally, Kind said. But, along the way, people begin holding tension in their bodies and moving in ways that, over time, may result in chronic problems, such as back pain or stooped shoulders.

Perhaps the trouble started in the first grade when the child – hoping to produce perfect letters for his teacher or parents – hunched over his pencil. Years later, that young student becomes the adult humped over his computer keyboard and plagued with chronic neck tension. For Ethan Kind, learning how to return to that more natural, released way of moving and balancing the body can provide a long-term solution to such ailments. He teaches people how to do that through an approach called the Alexander Technique, which helps people let go of bad habits and learn better ways to perform the movements of everyday life.

The Alexander Technique was developed by F. Matthias Alexander, a Shakespearean actor, who in the late 1800s found himself suffering from chronic vocal problems. “He was losing his voice trying to project it,” Kind said. After experimentation, Alexander discovered how to move in a released way that solved his difficulties. He taught his technique to others in England and the United States until his death in 1955. Among those he worked with were George Bernard Shaw, John Dewey and Aldous Huxley.

Kind, who studied for three years at the American Center for Alexander Technique in New York to become qualified to teach the Alexander Technique, works to help others learn how to move with balanced, easy posture. In essence, Kind said, he is teaching people to trust their bodies. People often mistakenly think that they have to tense up to be in control, he said. “I teach them that they are being in control being at ease,” he said. “When a person moves in a way that is very natural, they don't lock up their body.” In general, people tend to tense up as soon as they start thinking about doing something, he said. Through the Alexander Technique, people learn to remain in a released state. When it's time to move, they do.

Shamey, one of the people Kind has worked with in Winston-Salem, came to him because she wanted to work on her posture. “I run and walk and have been having some discomfort with that,” Shamey said. “I had developed some bad habits.” Stretching and yoga helped alleviate the problems that had developed over 20 years of running, she said. But problems persisted. So when she heard about the Alexander Technique, she decided to see if it would help. In six or seven sessions, Kind helped her re-educate her body to move the way it was designed to move.

He did this in several ways. For one, he had her walk on a treadmill. Placing his hands on her neck to draw attention to the area – “it's giving a message to the neck” – he showed and described to her the proper way to balance her head. He also showed her how to move her hips and legs. “It's helping her let go of the habits that were hurting her,” Kind said. Placing his hands on her neck, he released the tension, Shamey said. “There's a biofeedback quality to this work,” Kind said.

“By increasing the awareness, it's helping me change the habits,” Shamey said. “A lot of it was slumping forward in the shoulders and the position of my head being forward too far.” Her discomfort has lessened, Shamey said, and she has found a new sense of balance in her body. “It feels very natural. It's not so much work to be in this position....There's a nice comfortable place for me now.”

In addition to dealing with a specific problem, Kind might show the person he is working with the proper way to move while executing such day-to-day maneuvers as walking, sitting down and standing up. When standing up, for example, it's best to pivot the upper body forward and let the thighs do the lifting rather than,

say, pushing off the thighs with the hands. “In walking, I teach people to really bend their knees easily,” he said. “When most people walk, in a sense, they fall forward.”

Initially, Kind said, people may feel out of control moving a new way because they are so used to the old way. And it may be hard to give up the old pattern of moving because they performed whatever task they were doing quite well that way. “But, eventually, if it’s wrong, it will get you into trouble,” Kind said. Problems that appear when people are in their 50s and 60s may be caused by patterns that were established years earlier, he said. Sometimes, people may think they are correcting a problem – say by standing up straight instead of slumping – but they may do it in a way that creates new problems. “I help them change that without creating more tension,” he said.

Re-educating the body is a gradual process, Kind said. Each person integrates the information at his own rate, he said. When people work with him, he gives them as much information as they can assimilate each session. Some people might come a single time. In general, he said, people come because of specific complaints and might work with him for 10-20 sessions. “I like the idea of coming and going when they want,” Kind said.

Kind first came to Winston-Salem in 1968 to go to high school at the N.C. School of the Arts. He graduated in 1970. Kind came to appreciate the value of the Alexander Technique through the relief it afforded him. In 1973, he was studying classical guitar at the Royal College of Music in London when problems developed in his left arm – a consequence of years of playing guitar. “I was very close to ruining my left wrist with carpal tunnel syndrome,” he said. Someone suggested the Alexander Technique might help. It did. He discovered that one of his problems was squeezing too hard.

“It was like holding onto the guitar for dear life,” he said.

Creating tension by getting caught up in trying to do something perfectly is a common hazard, he said. After changing the way he sat and played, his pain disappeared. Kind went on to receive a master’s degree in music at the University of Tennessee and to a career playing and teaching classical guitar in Illinois and Connecticut. Eventually, he began thinking that it was time for a new career - in part because he had been playing guitar seriously since he was 8 and was ready for something new. “I had spent my childhood practicing six or seven hours a day. I needed something that connected me more to my body and my self, psychologically and spiritually,” Kind said.

He decided to become a teacher of the Alexander Technique and received his professional certification in 1992. The technique is used at such institutions as The Julliard School in New York, New York University, Boston University, the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Institute and the Royal College of Music in London.

After working in New York until 1993, Kind moved to New Mexico. He returned to Winston-Salem about six months ago and is teaching the Alexander Technique to students in the music department at Wake Forest University.

