

## **Dystonia Society 30<sup>th</sup> January 2010 Ringwood Greyfryer's Community Centre**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I have to confess that I hardly knew anything about Dystonia before I met Val. Meanwhile I have learned a lot about the condition and the way people live with it.

I see this afternoon as an opportunity to explore more together with you. I am going to talk for about 20 minutes and invite questions on the way. We shall hear about Val's thoughts and experiences. At the end I shall be available for more questions and tasters if you wish to try out what the contact-work feels like.

What I am aware of is that Dystonia is a lonely and painful place to be. Every human being builds up an identity including her/his body. A condition like Dystonia challenges not only the physical but all levels of a person's life.

My assumption is that most of you know of the self-help advice by the Dystonia Society. Those suggestions are really good and I have taken those suggestions and related them to the procedures of the Alexander Technique. Some of you may have heard of the Alexander Technique and when I read the website of your society I was wondering whether the people who put the page together had heard of the technique because so many aspects are very close to the ideas of the technique.

### **Comparing and Contrasting**

The Alexander Technique can certainly be classified as a self-help method. The technique invites people to take responsibility for their wellbeing the Alexander Technique is a way to be guided to good self-help by a teacher of the Alexander Technique in order to create a body memory of good practice and only later towards independent appliance of the procedures. That means, you are not left alone but have somebody accompanying and guiding you. I think this is important since most conditions are very isolating already and being told to do more work on one's own seems very demanding. Furthermore, it is one thing to practice on your own and another to apply the learned skill in social contexts. That seems particularly true for Dystonia sufferers because your condition is so visible. So, the Alexander Technique is an invitation rather than a "must do"

The Dystonia Society explains how individual your condition is. That insight is probably true for all conditions and illnesses. At the same time, we experience our conditions differently when we are on our own or when we are with others. The Alexander Technique works on a one-to-one basis and therefore works very closely with the individual experience of any condition.

I read with interest the section on stress and how the society correctly points out that one can work with stress factors and the way we deal with it. They call it Stress Inoculation, ie avoiding the "circle of anxiety and avoidance", including "automatic and habitual self-statements". In the Alexander Technique we learn how we in our bodies can avoid to be stressed by allowing ourselves to ease into ourselves. That is a bodily learning ie a learning that connects our body and our sensing what is happening. To achieve this, we apply something that is called "the concept of inhibition" which involves being able to stop reacting to an incoming stimulus automatically but to be able to respond to it in the way we wish to. In so far, the Alexander Technique gives us more control in our lives. The Alexander Technique works both on the physical and the level of reasoning.

Some of the sensory tricks reminded me of the Alexander Technique. One of the tricks for Torticollis is to touch the chin, the head and the neck. That is exactly the classic contact in the technique. In the technique we work with establishing a good relationship between the neck, the head and the back. And of course, the neck is the way towards the brain. In so far the sensory trick is just on the same wavelength as we are. What the physiological reasons for the benefit of that touch are I do not know from a proven and scientific but only from an experiential point of view.

### **What the Technique does**

The Alexander Technique works with all the unnecessary effort we make in order to do what we need to do. Alexander called those efforts habits. They can be physical and emotional habits. So, whatever we do we bring our habits into play even though they are completely unnecessary for the activity and often they are even getting in the way of what we wish to do. But without some explorations into our habits we do not know that and take all our movements and thoughts for granted. With a teacher of the Alexander Technique we explore those and if necessary open them up for a freer movement or thought. In the case of Dystonia, it works in so far that when a spasm comes along, instead of reacting in your habitual possibly tense way, we would work with it so that you manage the spasm in the best way possible for you. That does not cure you but it establishes a healthy practice of living with your condition. Also, in almost all people I have worked with I notice over and underused muscles. My assumption is that this is true for everybody before they developed Dystonia – which does not help. With the Alexander Technique we work to the effect that the muscles all work in the way they should and would do if we let them. So, the Alexander Technique is a way of re-educating your habitual ways of doing things. With it goes that every time you respond to a stimulus in your case a spasm differently your nervous system has a new input and creates a new pathway. (I should say that there is now slowly going to be some research into the Alexander Technique and Neuroscience). When I read about the Deep brain stimulus – which

seems a quick miracle cure – I was wondering whether with the Alexander Technique we work in the same area of the brain and with the same result but just much slower and by including the person's conscious and unconscious processes. More research would be interesting into this.

### **What I do which is not AT**

On the webpage your society, the emotional and psychological impact of the condition has its place. It seems obvious that changes in the body have an impact on our emotional life. The Alexander Technique does not explicitly address that fact. I am training as a Psychodrama Psychotherapist and do integrate the emotional and the bodily side.

### **Summary**

The Alexander is an individually tailored way of working with a condition. It invites the person to re-learn unhelpful patterns and provides theory and practical procedures for a person to absorb and apply on a long-term basis. Initially people go to their individual sessions and they apply the new sensory experience in their daily life. To engage with this technique is a long-term commitment. Long after we see our teachers we still work with the technique – in fact it is a life-long process to take responsibility of our wellbeing whatever the challenges in our lives.

### **Who benefits?**

The Technique is for people who are prepared to engage in explorations within themselves, have something called a “hardiness personality trait” and welcome change.

### **What does a session with the AT look like?**

A session takes about 45 minutes and involves chair and table work. The amount of sessions varies and I continuously monitor and discuss with the client where we need to go. Sessions cost around £30 - £40. Alexander Technique Teachers often negotiate to adapt to low income.