

Nothing Doing

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As soon as I finished telling my student that the Alexander Technique does not prescribe specific exercises, I realized that he might really benefit from something called “constructive rest.” Also called an “Alexander Lie-Down” and often used by AT teachers, it came originally from the world of Ideokinesis (using imagery to effect changes in the body). It is also used in the pedagogy of Centered Riding®.

Constructive rest, in its purest form -- simply lying down once or twice a day for 5-20 minutes in the described position and allowing gravity to do the work of releasing holding patterns and excess tension -- can be quite revealing, refreshing and restorative. The addition of simple suggestions, such as to allow the neck to be free, notice the rise and fall of the breath, or any number of creative images can enhance the procedure, as long as we do not add a component of trying to accomplish something -- nothing doing!

Basic procedure:

“Lie on your back, bend your knees to about 90 degrees, and place your feet on the floor in line with your hip sockets, 12 to 16 inches from your buttocks. Be careful not to flatten or exaggerate the curves in either your lumbar (lower back) or cervical (neck) spine. Rest your hands and forearms on your rib cage or on your pelvis. In this position, you don't need to perform any muscular action. Gravity will do the work. Shift your awareness to the support of your bones. Begin by sensing the weight of your bones sinking down toward the floor. Take note of any part of your skeleton that feels as though it is suspended, any place where the muscular contraction prevents the bones from surrendering to the pull of gravity. Gradually, the distribution of weight will start to feel increasingly even throughout your body.” --Adapted from a Yoga Journal article by Liz Koch, author of The Psoas Book

Try it for a few minutes a day and see what you notice. I've found constructive rest useful in bringing me a more refined awareness of my back and the space behind me (horse riders, you understand the importance of that!) and also for showing me the positive effects of gravity while sensing the skeleton as the body's active support (in contrast to our habitual patterns which usually attempt to hold the body with muscular effort).

When you wish to get up, allow your spine to lengthen as you roll your head, then shoulders, and the rest of you over onto your side and around onto your knees and then come to standing. There's no need to tighten yourself up again by pushing or trying to sit directly up. Always look for the path of least resistance.

The concept of non-doing, so foreign to our goal and achievement-oriented culture, is expressed in the Japanese calligraphy "mu" above: “Nothingness is not an absence of being; it is the fullness of existence that brings forth all things.”

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