

Alexander Technique breaks bad habits with brainpower, writes **Arlene Harris**

Sit up and take notice

If you were asked what John Cleese and Kevin Kline had in common, you would probably say they were both actors. But if I were to include Roald Dahl, Edna O'Brien and George Bernard Shaw, perhaps you wouldn't be so sure.

Well, the link behind all these well-known characters is a pain in the neck — or back, or even the knee joints.

The above personalities are among many thousands of people who have turned to the Alexander Technique to help them overcome muscle problems, poor posture, anxiety, asthma and a variety of other ailments.

Founded in 1908 by Australian actor Frederick Alexander, the technique is a simple yet

effective method of relaxing muscles and improving health in general.

He stumbled across the technique when trying to discover why he kept losing his voice during recitals. Physicians were unable to help him, but eventually, he realised that he was causing his muscles to tense up — and the only way to rectify the problem was to relax.

Over the years, he developed a technique to combat problems caused by stress and this month sees the 100-year anniversary of the extraordinary healing process.

Richard Brennan is the director of the Alexander Centre in Galway. He runs courses to help people re-train their bodies and perform a variety of everyday tasks with less strain and tension.

"Millions of people suffer from back pain because of poor posture," he says. "During Alexander lessons you will learn how to sit, stand, walk and make your body become more efficient."

"Posture is very important and most children possess it without doing anything. This is the sort of posture the technique offers. The common 'sit up straight, shoulders back' mentality that

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MIND OVER MATTER: Richard Brennan, director of the Alexander Centre in Galway works on a client. Picture: Andrew Downies

is the sort of posture the technique offers. The common 'sit up straight, shoulders back' mentality that we see today, in fact only leads to more problems," Richard adds.

Introduced to the technique after an injury, Richard knows the benefits and says the lessons are suitable for everyone from five to 95.

"People come to us for three main reasons — health, performance and self improvement," he says. "And while the technique doesn't offer a 'cure' as such, it enables people to see what they are doing to cause the problem and with increased awareness, the body gets better by itself."

New research cited in the British Medical Journal has shown that patients with chronic back pain who were taught the Alexander Technique had an 85% better chance of recovery than those going down the more conventional route of physiotherapy and medication.

"Change can take place very quickly with some people, while others may take 20 sessions," says Brennan.

"But I cannot remember a case where someone didn't make a full recovery."

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PRESSURE POINTS: Niall Kelly demonstrates the Alexander Principle in his office on Louise Madden.

Picture: Brian Arthur/Press 22

Niall Kelly injured his back while playing rugby in his early 20s. He endured many painful years of "frequent, intense debilitation" and spent a lot of time and money trying to rectify the problem.

Now 63, the Limerick man has a new lease of life. Having gone down every avenue, he heard about the Alexander Technique by chance in 2001 and decided to give it a go. He was 'cured' on the first visit.

"I described my problem, and was told that the muscles in my back were very hard," he recalls. "I was then advised to visualise them getting softer."

Despite thinking that he was wasting his time on a 'quack' remedy, Niall decided to give it a go and at the end of the first session, his muscles had relaxed enough to relieve much of the searing pain that had become part of his life.

"I couldn't believe what had happened as I was sure it was just mumbo jumbo," the management consultant says. "But it worked straight away. By learning how to de-stress my muscles and training myself to maintain a good posture and calm body, I have been able to enjoy a totally pain-free life."

He knows that there may be many sceptics out there, but says "if you haven't tried it, you can't knock it".

"The Alexander Technique has given me a completely different perspective on life — it's

amazingly simple and totally effective. My only regret is that I didn't do it years ago."

Kelly has gone on to train as an Alexander practitioner and incorporates it in his work.

Violinist Brian McNamara is also an advocate of the technique. The 62-year-old was suffering from general fatigue and "pain all over".

"Everything seemed to be such an effort and I thought that there must be an easier way of doing things," he says. "Alexander lessons have made me aware of my bad habits and taught me how to move the way I did as a child."

The music teacher believes that most of us are looking too hard for a cure and by simply changing the way we do things, we can make a huge impact on our health and general wellbeing.

"Over the years, we lose some of our sensory perception and our faculties become faulty," says McNamara. "Our mental and physical health is inseparable and when they are both finely tuned, our body and mind works in harmony."

■ For more information on the Alexander Technique visit www.alexander.ie. To find a qualified teacher in your area visit www.isatt.ie Lessons start from €50 and the next course starts in October. To book, call 091-555800.