



# Alexander Technique Story Project

## Important Psychosocial Changes Linked to the Practice of the Alexander Technique

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The Alexander Technique Story Project is a piece of qualitative research examining the impact of Alexander Technique (AT) lessons on participants' psychosocial identity.

By psychosocial changes (PC) we mean changes in a person's self-image, and their relationships to themselves and others. For example, a person's inner wellbeing, availability of emotions, healing of past traumas, ability to manage depressing or anxiety-producing stimuli, sexual orientation, work identity, levels of introversion or extraversion, and so on.

The AT is a powerful and unique educational method. We started the research with an assumption that the work can launch sometimes surprising thunderbolt-like psychosocial changes, and therefore wanted to create a source of support in the form of stories, hence the AT Story Project. Following three years of work, we created a 38-minute video of the stories and our research results, including practical information for teachers about the important psychosocial changes. The video is available on our website: <http://atstory.wixsite.com/home>.

The AT work is psychophysical; as F.M. Alexander says, it is impossible to separate 'mental' and 'physical' processes in any form of human activity (as explained in *The Use of the Self*). For the sake of clarity, this paper uses the word *psychological* without a constant reminder about its connection with the physical. Primarily, the Alexander Technique practice is about the self, but the changes it brings about often manifest socially and in relationship to others.

### Why does the Alexander Technique bring about psychosocial changes?

Practicing the Technique involves becoming aware of habitual patterns and gaining an ability to alter them. A good body alignment and posture are maintained by releasing

body armour, restoring optimal muscle tone and balancing the gravitational relationship between head, neck and back. AT teaching uses gentle hands-on guidance and touch, and is usually conducted in one-to-one teacher-student lessons. One important aspect of the teaching method is an unconditional presence between teacher and student, and a collaborative working style. A student's relationship with the teacher is often similar to that between a therapist and client in psychotherapy.

Limited studies on the psychological impact of the AT include one in relation to depression accompanying Parkinson's disease (Stallibrass C 2002), and another on fear of falling in older adults (Glover 2018). However, research in other modalities that share aspects of the AT work, suggests psychological healing as a possibility.

There is a known link between body posture, muscular tension and emotion (Riskind J 1982), (Armitage 2009). It is also believed that traumatic experiences can be held as muscular tension in the body, and especially negative experiences in early development can cause increased activity in the 'body armour' defence system (Hartung T 2018).

Touch has healing and therapeutic effects (Jones T 2014), but these may not operate straightforwardly - transference can play a role in any one-to-one, intimate therapeutic relationship (Hanifin E 2000).

In an existential-integrative approach to psychotherapy, unconditional presence is brought to bear, supporting an environment of openness and acceptance. Presence includes being aware of oneself and the felt sense. This state has been found to foster psychological healing (Kenneth Bradford 2007).

The body has a capacity for healing when given the opportunity. This is true for psychological as well as physical maladies. Resistance and defensive structures are by nature unstable and impermanent and will unravel when given space to do so<sup>1</sup> (Kenneth Bratfold G, 2007).

Another important area affected by the practice of AT principles is one's sense of agency: The subjective awareness of planning, initiating and controlling one's own activities (Gallagher 2005). People suffering from depression generally have a low level of sense of agency (Ratcliffe 2014).

In this light it is hardly surprising that the Alexander Technique can contribute to major psychological changes.

## Research

An online survey was sent to Alexander Technique teachers through twelve national and international AT professional societies<sup>2</sup>, in order to collect data and connect with

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individuals that have experienced psychosocial changes linked to the practice of the Alexander Technique.

Of the 190 survey responses, 142 reported having important psychosocial changes. Sixty respondents offered to share their stories with us, and in the end 26 were recorded, of which 14 were selected for closer analysis.

The first-person testimonies of the experiences – the ‘stories’ - were collected in hour-long, semi-structured interviews with 20 Alexander Technique teachers and students. We also received three stories in written form and three audio recordings.

Our participants had had either private, one-on-one lessons, and/or group lessons.

The data was organised, analysed and studied in relation to the extant literature on the Alexander Technique, psychotherapy and somatic education.

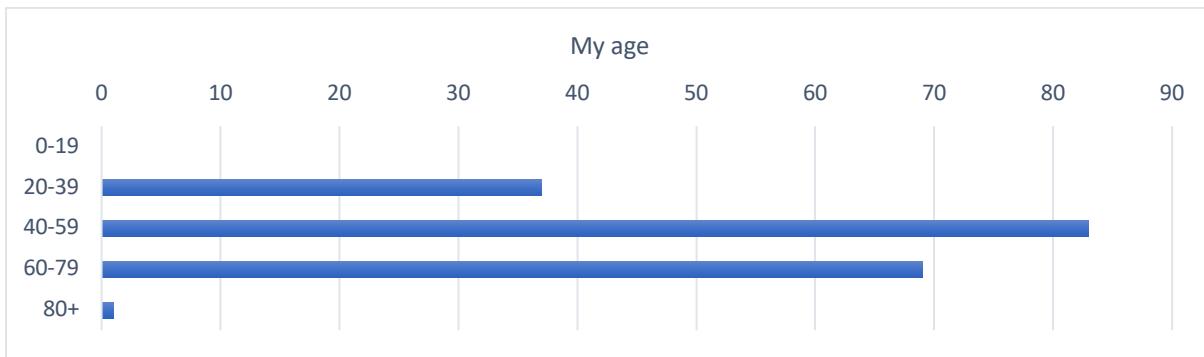
A video publication of the results was composed and presented at the Congress in Chicago. The video is also intended to work as source of support and information. It is available to view for free on our website: [www.atstory.wixsite/home](http://www.atstory.wixsite/home).

## The Survey

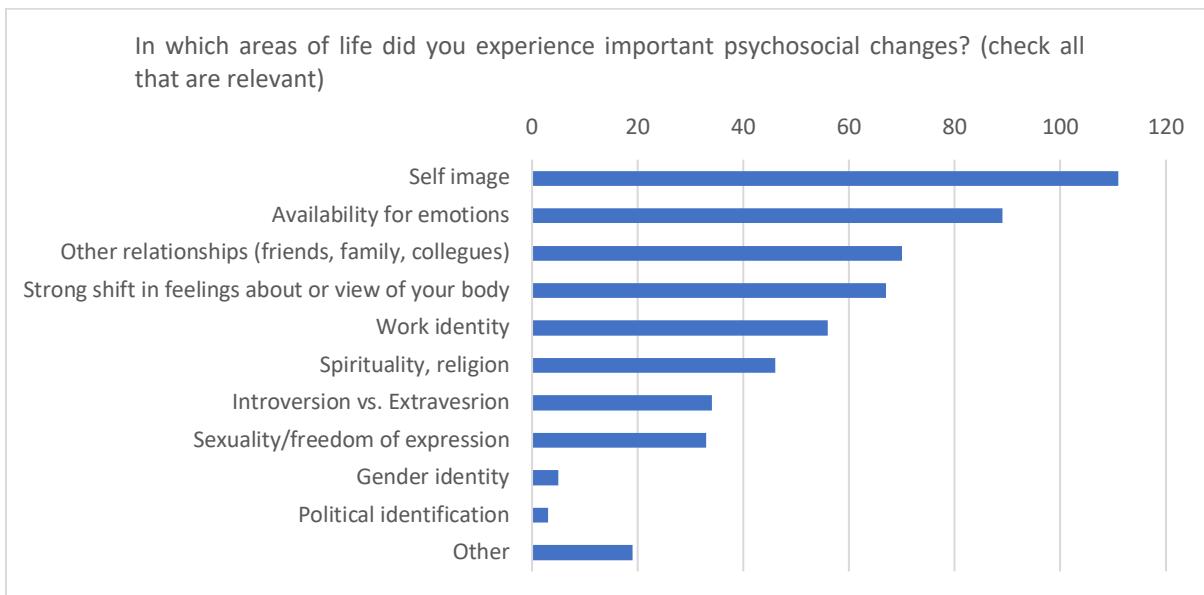
The survey invitation was sent to around 2000 Alexander Technique teachers (and their students)<sup>3</sup>. Of the 190 responses we received, 75% reported important psychosocial changes.

The participants were 82% female, and mostly teachers over 40 years old with more than 10 years of teaching experience.

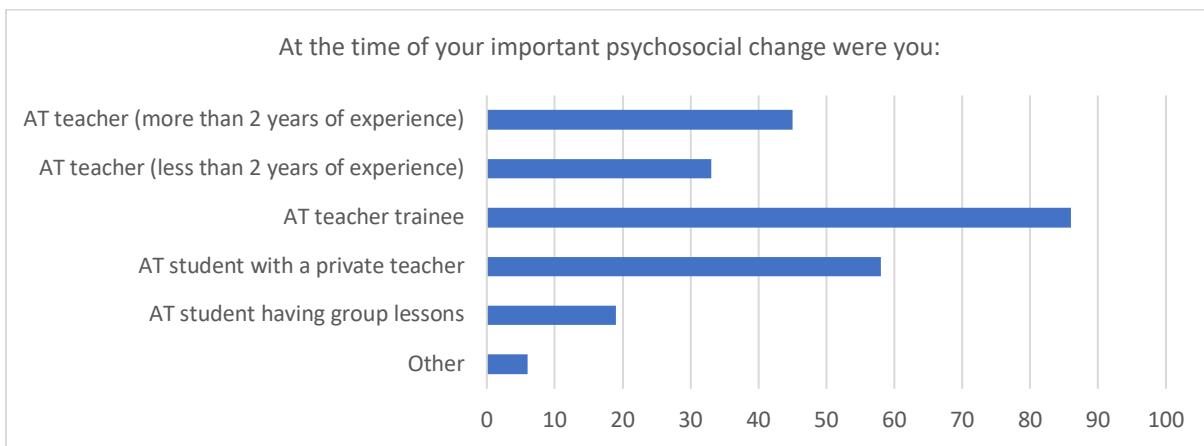




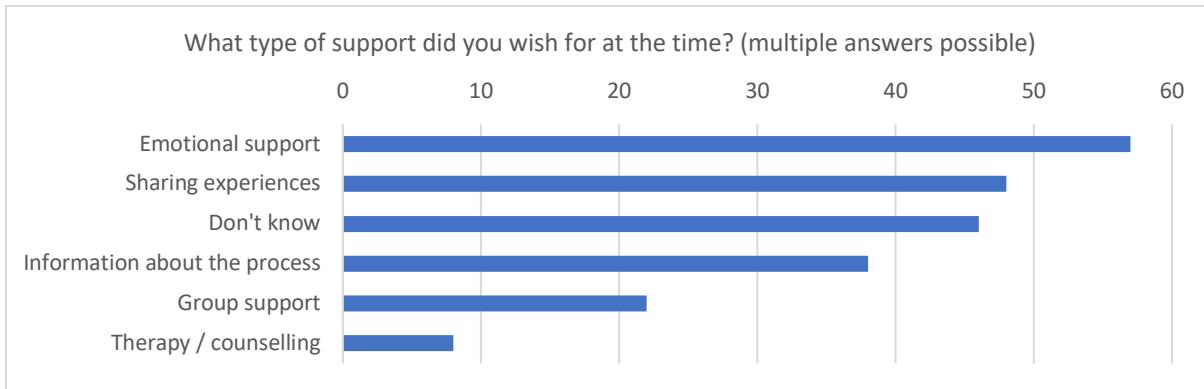
The survey respondents indicated having had changes in various areas of life from self-image to gender identity to political identification.



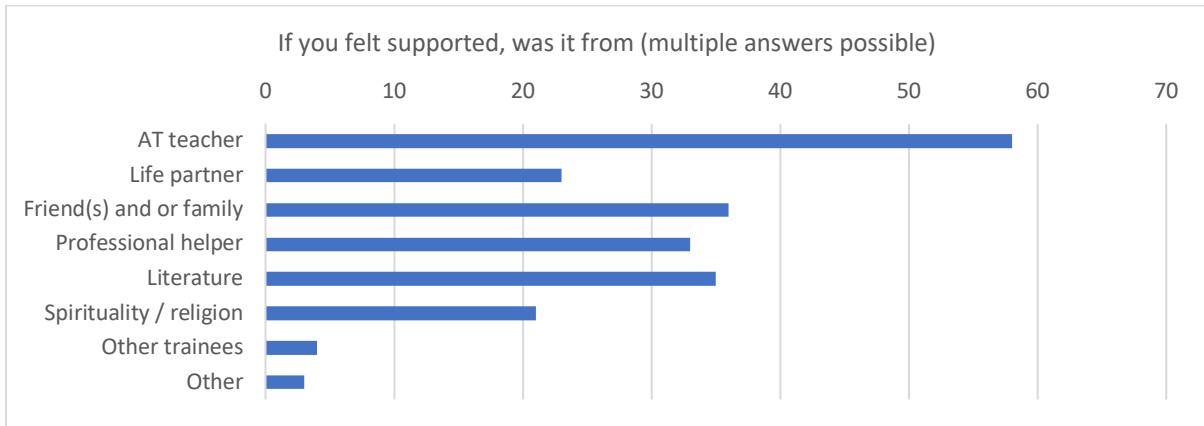
Most of the important psychosocial changes reported by the study appeared to happen during AT teacher training (59%).



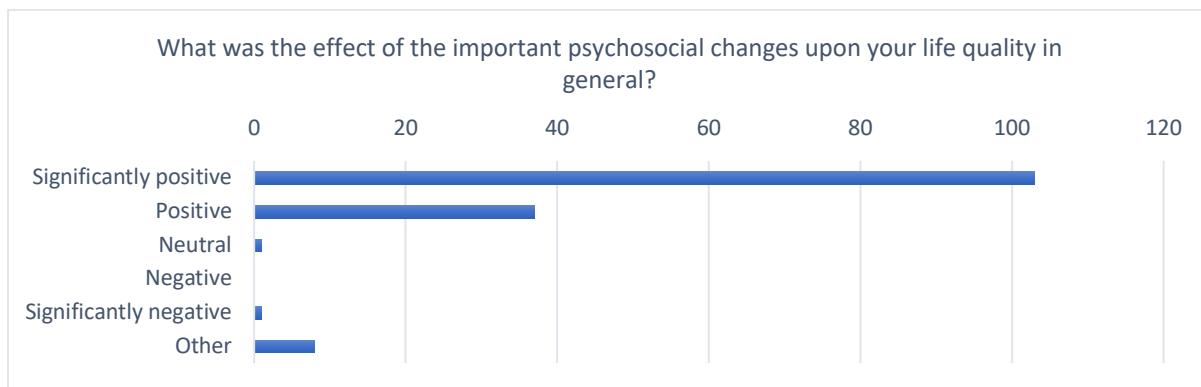
Of those who had had important psychosocial changes, 53% reported a wish for support during the changes. We asked what kind of support they wished for. What seems to be important is emotional support, as well as an opportunity to share the experiences with someone, and receive information about the process.



The first source of support is the Alexander Technique teacher. People also turn to friends, family, literature and professional helpers like psychotherapists and counsellors.



The data also indicated that the important psychosocial changes linked to the Alexander Technique have strong positive long-term effects. 94% of the respondents reported that the long-term effect on their life quality in general has been either significantly positive (69%) or positive (25%).



## Characteristics of important psychosocial changes.

We differentiate between various kinds of psychosocial change. Different kinds may be present within one person. Also, there is some overlap between the different types.

In the 14 first-person testimonies that we analysed, we divided the stories into two domains, depending on whether the person was, at the time, independently applying the Alexander Technique principles, or not. We named these two different domains Skill Based Psychosocial Changes (SPC) and Emergent Psychosocial Changes (EPC).

### Skill Based Psychosocial Changes (SPCs)

With the Skill Based Psychosocial Changes, the person is able to independently and actively apply the Alexander Technique principles. In other words they are able to stop or change certain reactions (semi-) voluntarily by recourse to inhibition, direction, mental imagery, using focused attention, and so on. It denotes those with a working knowledge of the primary control, the relationship between the head, neck and back.

An empowering realisation that often accompanies these changes is ‘I have a choice’. Applying the AT skills can improve someone’s life in many ways; for example, gaining control over depression or anxiety, or improving their handling of stressful situations.

The SPCs tend to be gradual, but we also recorded some people having short ego-dissolving experiences, and other important self-realisation and ‘a-ha’ moments.

#### Example 1. Control over depression

This man was at the time a dance student, also taking AT lessons with two teachers twice a week. He had had about 40 private lessons and had learned to observe his own psychophysical state and apply the principles.

Depression had been a problem for him, and on one evening he reported a dark mood descending, and growing anxiety that made him worried for his well-being. Would he fall into a deep 'hole' of depression and perhaps harm himself? As he walked several blocks from the subway station he noticed that his head, neck and back were tightening up severely. So he began to repeat the directions ('I can let my neck be free, I can let my head go forward and up...') and continued to do so. As long as he persisted, his contracted muscles appeared to ease, but when he stopped, the tension returned. He also noticed a connection to his dark mood, which seemed to abate as he repeated the directions.

He woke up the following day feeling merely sad. He was relieved to have avoided a plunge into serious depression.

### Example 2. Control over anxiety

During her AT teacher training one woman reported discovering greater scope for exercising choice when it came to managing anxiety states.

It occurred to her to try applying the principles when she was feeling heart-broken and sad. Having given herself permission to experience any negative feelings, she sought at the same time to keep releasing her neck. To her surprise the experience changed, and she felt better.

With repetition of this experience, she reported becoming able to avert disabling emotional storms.

### Example 3. Work Identity

Another story is from a female in her sixties, and an experience occurring after four years of private lessons. Motivated by fear of injury following a bout of flu, she repeated the four main directions over and over for 45 minutes while driving to her local ski area.

On pushing off at the top of the hill she discovered, 'I was a completely different skier; I was light, in control.' It was evident that the new 'body' was a result, mysteriously, of the AT, and the experience was so compelling that she determined a new life-path, including teacher training, before she arrived at the bottom of the slope.

## Emergent Psychosocial changes (EPCs)

The 'thunderbolt-like' EPCs tend to be sudden, and may uncover pre-existing trauma, dissociation, hidden identity issues and the like. They are often accompanied by strong emotions, or the sudden recognition of a sense of purpose, or an experience of relief from a factor that has been causing stress.

The EPCs often arise in a lesson involving touch and hands-on guidance from a teacher, but not necessarily. They typically happen when a person starts AT lessons,

even at the very first touch of a teacher. They may also follow a period of intensive practice, as during an AT teacher training course.

Descriptions of this EPC include reported experiences of finding ones' 'true' self or calling, or realising or remembering something that was previously hidden or misinterpreted.

#### Example 1. Embodying a traumatic experience, childhood abuse

One young woman sought lessons because a crippling knee inflammation had not improved by any other treatment for many months. Her healthcare provider also offered alternative therapies, and she randomly chose the Alexander Technique.

During the initial meeting, the teacher laid her down on a massage table. On the first touch of the teacher's hands she was flooded by bodily sensations she found hard to describe. These were accompanied by strong emotions of mortification and shame. She said nothing to the teacher, but surprisingly decided to return the next week for another lesson.

Subsequently she came to understand that a traumatic sexual assault suffered in childhood had never been felt in her physical body; the teacher's connection with her through touch seemingly opened the embodied awareness of what had happened.

The result after a course of lessons was deep psychological healing as well as a resolution of her knee problem. She also continued further with psychotherapy and later decided to transition as a man. Currently he is studying to become a body psychotherapist himself.

#### Example 2. Work Identity

On the first touch of her first teacher, this person experienced a new way of 'being in the world' that was so deeply positive and compelling that she determined then and there to completely reorient her life.

At the time she was working as a physiotherapist and therefore was used to analysing what was happening in the body, as well as between the therapist and client. She describes how the aid provided by the teacher's hands helped her to experience a new psychophysical re-organisation. She reported having had an immediate conviction that if she could spend more time in this state she would be happier and healthier. She also 'knew' she was supposed to be teaching this to other people as well.

She soon gave up her work as a physiotherapist, moved to the other side of the country and embarked on a new career, training as an AT teacher.

### Example 3. Sexual Orientation

For this woman the major psychosocial change happened while taking an Alexander Technique group class at her music conservatory. She attended group lessons and had a few short individual lessons during the semester, but more importantly, was practicing the Alexander Technique 20-minute lie down exercise every day, at least once, sometimes twice a day.

She didn't have any previous experience in any body-mind technique. She had always been fit, doing a fair amount of sport and exercise.

To her great surprise, she began experiencing new emotions and romantic attractions towards other women. This was completely novel to her, and confusing. When she asked her AT teacher if there could be a connection to the technique, her teacher said "no".

In retrospect, it seems possible that she had suppressed parts of herself that were not consistent with a particular self image. In her own words the softening and being better in tune with her body allowed her 'true self' to come to the surface.

### Conclusion

The analysed first-person testimonies and data from the online survey supports the inference that the Alexander Technique can lead to major changes in a student's psychosocial identity.

While generally positive in the long term, the changes can be unsettling when they occur. People undergoing important psychosocial changes generally wish to have emotional support, and the opportunity to share the experiences with someone, and to gain insight into the process.

Most of the changes happen during the (three year) Alexander Technique teacher training, but it is possible that just having a few lessons or following group lessons is enough to set off important psychosocial changes. The changes can happen in a 'thunderbolt'-like experience, or occur gradually over a long period of time.

Alexander Technique teaching brings in many factors that are therapeutic in effect, like touch, changes in body posture, the release of 'body armour', and unconditional presence. Learning to apply the principles appears to increase a person's level of awareness of their psychophysical state, giving an empowering feeling of ownership and control over their activities and an ability to regulate (indirectly) psychophysical and emotional balance.

As the Alexander Technique teaches, the body and mind cannot be considered as separate – such a conception doesn't reflect the underlying reality. Resistance and defensive structures are psychophysical in nature. The unravelling of these structures

and behaviours, which are by nature unstable and impermanent conditions, will happen when given the psychophysical space to do so.

### Future plans

Traditionally, Alexander Technique training hasn't always been open about the emotional changes and there are still many teacher training courses which don't include information about how to deal with the emotional and psychological side of the work. Some students in our study reported feeling like it was inappropriate to tell their teachers about the psychological and emotional shifts and questions they had. Some felt that their teacher would not know how to handle the information and perhaps it would be 'too much' for them. We wish to work together with the training courses, professional societies and the AT community to bring our learnings into wider use.

The Alexander Technique is a drug-free method that seems to bring positive long-term effects in anxiety, panic attacks and depression. Further research is needed in this area.

One perhaps surprising area of change or growth is suggested by the reports of some study participants' that they experienced increased freedom of expression and changes in sexuality. At the moment, there seems little information available on this topic.

### No Story, No Change?

One participant at our workshop at the Congress in Chicago (which was titled 'Watch Out for Thunderbolts'), shared that she has never had a strong emotional experience or release related to the AT, and that sometimes she fears her Alexander Technique experience is less significant compared to those with big dramas and fireworks.

We don't believe this is the case. Many people learn and practice the Alexander Technique without ever experiencing earth moving changes. In our survey many reported having had small changes over a long period of time leading to a major psychological shift over time.

One person in our interviews told us how he went from always preferring plain colours to picking up a flower pattern tea cup during his AT teacher training. Sometimes, maybe more often than we realise, major shifts in personality come gradually without big thunderbolt events and stories.

### End notes

1 'This human capability is a spring of natural resilience (Bradford, 2002): an ever-present and ever-readiness to wake up and release a self-limitation whenever we become present and ready to do so.' (Kenneth Bratfold G, 2007)

2 AmSAT, ATI, AUSTAT, DFLAT, APTA, ISTAT , NeVLAT, ATTNZ, NFLAT,SASTAT,STAT, SBAT/APSTAr

3 The invitation was sent via twelve professional societies. Many teachers are members of multiple societies – an international society like ATI or STAT, for example, in addition to a national society. We have tried to incorporate this fact in our estimate of the number of invitations sent.

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Ellen O. Bierhorst, Ph.D. has been a holistically-oriented psychologist in private practice in Cincinnati since 1973. She trained as an Alexander Technique teacher with Vivien and Neil Schapera, graduating in 2009. Today she divides her time equally between psychotherapy clients and Alexander Technique students.

Ellen and Maria met at the 2015 Alexander Congress in Limerick, where they discovered a mutual fascination with the psychological power of the AT, which they determined to research, despite being on opposite sides of the Atlantic.