

## Lori Schiff: On How Alexander Technique Can Enhance Learning and Performance Under Pressure

### Description

Alexander Technique has been around for over a century, and is taught in many schools and conservatories around the world, so it's very likely that you've heard a friend, teacher, or fellow musician mention it at some point or another.

But what is it, exactly? If you're like most, you might not be so sure.

Is it about breath control? Learning how to stand or play with good posture? Or maybe about injury prevention? Releasing tension? Does it involve stretching? Is it like yoga?

And is it something we can learn on our own? Or do we need a special teacher?

And how do I know if I need it anyway? Ack! So many questions!

Not to worry! Today we'll be talking to the perfect person to help us understand how musicians can benefit from learning Alexander Technique.

### Meet Lori Schiff

Lori Schiff is a full-time Alexander Technique teacher at The Juilliard School, where she has been on the faculty since 1991. However, she was also once a trumpet player, and completed her bachelors at Northwestern, and her masters at the Manhattan School of Music, before life led her down a slightly different path.

In this 42-min chat, we'll explore:

- What changed, playing-wise, when she began studying Alexander Technique (7:49)
- How the physical changes that result from Alexander training affect the mental experience of playing and performing too (8:40)
- Lori provides an example of something a violinist might express frustration about in performance (bow arm tension under pressure, shakes, etc.), and how Alexander Technique training could change this experience (9:51)
- The difference between telling yourself to "relax" and achieving a more "active" or selective kind of tension release via Alexander training (10:58)
- How greater physical awareness and control doesn't just have a positive impact on playing, but can also interrupt the stress response and reduce one's nerves and anxiety under pressure too (11:22)
- I ask Lori if she has any suggestions or tips on how to address tremors or (bow) shakes from the

Alexander perspective (12:39)

- How does one manage to become more aware of one's body, but avoid getting too hyper-focused on the minutiae of motor movements, in a way that could lead to "choking" under pressure? (16:19)
- Misconceptions about Alexander are pretty common. Is it about posture? Breathing? Relaxation? (Spoiler alert: not exactly – there's more of a mental component than you might think) (18:13)
- How do we know if we would benefit from Alexander Technique? What are some signs that we should look into it? (22:51)
- Are there any pre-requisites, in order to have a successful experience with Alexander Technique? Like, what role does age play? Experience? Any particular physical requirements or limitations? (24:00)
- Are private lessons really necessary? What about group classes? Do you need one-to-one contact in order to really learn and benefit, or can you get what you need from a book? (24:24)
- What should we be looking for in an Alexander teacher? (27:13)
- Is Skype a viable way to get Alexander lessons? (27:38)
- Are there any little things we can do in orchestra (or while sitting at computer, chopping onions for chili, etc.) that could help us? (29:31)
- Are there any Alexander Technique details that are specific to singers? (33:27)
- What is "constructive rest"? Lori describes how to do one of the few "exercises" that exist in Alexander Technique – an activity that she suggests could be particularly useful on the day of a performance or audition (34:51)
- Is there any synergy between Arnold Jacobs's teachings and Alexander Technique? (Lori studied with Jacobs). (38:57)
- How Alexander Technique helped Lori get "exponentially" more from her trumpet lessons (and how it could accelerate your learning as well) (40:59)

Subscribe to the weekly podcast via [iTunes](#)

[Read the Transcript](#)

**Noa:** So what I think is cool about your story is that you were a trumpet player for a long, long time growing up and then you went to Northwestern, you went to Manhattan School and then you got into Alexander Technique. I'm curious about how that happened, as in, were there injury or pain related issues that you ran into that kind of got you there or was it just kind of feeling like you reached a plateau and you're looking for other things to try to do to enhance your playing and that led to this?

**Lori:** Excellent question and framing. The story is that I grew up wanting to be a trumpet player and playing and I did go to Northwestern for undergraduate and I studied with a guy called Vince Cichowicz and then later went on to Manhattan School of Music where I studied with Phil Smith. While I was in undergraduate school there was an Alexander Technique class in the music school. It was given by a guy called John Henes who also, by just happy accident was a trumpet player as well, and he is still there teaching at Northwestern, Alexander Technique.

**Lori:** He gave a demonstration to the school or music of kind of a lecture dem of Alexander Technique. And I was, as you phrased, at a plateau. There were no issues of pain or anything like that, no physical problems that I had any sense of, by I had been practicing a lot and I had a phenomenal teacher and I just

felt kind of stuck. This demonstration, John had us work with three different instrumentalists. One was a trumpet player, one played a snare drum and one played violin. He had them all play something very simple, a scale, a drum-roll, and he worked with them a little bit hands-on. At the time I didn't know what that was but he looked like he was guiding them or shaping them as they stood and played. He didn't say a word about playing technique or anything like that.

**Lori:** The before and after on each person was kind of astonishing. Each person sounded clearer and more focused and more fluid and it kind of seemed magical but clearly it was not. Seeing that fast improving, really in a matter of minutes, on these people, I just thought, well I should try that. So I did and I didn't tell anyone except my trumpet teacher who I checked in with and said I wanted to try this. He was quite familiar with the work, Mr. Cichowicz had invited John to do the class, and was very supportive. So I took private lessons with John for months and in the beginning, from the very first lesson, something felt right. I really didn't know what was going on, he works a little bit hands-on, guiding me, sitting, standing. I brought my trumpet, I played a little bit and my playing got steadily better. I got a little more free, I was calmer internally, and I discovered a few things, like I started sleeping better but I didn't know that I wasn't sleeping well before. So there were a lot of little things along the way that just improved. And I knew from the first lesson with John, that there was something very right about the sensations that I had and the internal balance and I wanted to do what he was doing. I wanted to teach.

**Lori:** But I didn't know what that was and then I carried on taking lessons for a while, when there was an opportunity to enroll in the class, we were in a trimester system there. I took his class and then I stayed out in Chicago for a year after undergrad school and continued with Alexander lessons and also studying of the trumpet with Arnold Jacobs. And the whole thing led me back to the east, to graduate school. And when I got to New York, after a few months I found myself rather tense and all of that. When you arrive here that happens. I found an Alexander teacher, just by referrals, and I started lessons here and it just turned out, again, happy accident that that particular woman was the director of a teacher training course.

**Lori:** And I didn't even understand anything about that. I just was taking lessons to get better at trumpet and it was working. And so at some point this woman mentioned something about working on this training course and I said, "Oh, I'm interested in that. How do you do it?" And so she invited me to come down and observe a class at the training course and the system for applying, you don't really audition like a music school but you have lessons with different teachers involved and they can really assess if you understand the work at some level, if you know what it is. And having had more than 30 lessons, which was the minimum requirement to get in. I was able to start that and I was able to do it in conjunction with finishing the degree at Manhattan. So I was at Manhattan school in the mornings doing orchestra lessons and stuff and then the afternoons I was in the training course until I finished Manhattan school and then the actual teacher training course for Alexander's three years and it's minimum 1,600 hours of training for a qualified teacher.

**Lori:** So I was in that for three years finishing that out and the whole time, still playing and still thinking I would be playing trumpet and teaching Alexander together. It seemed that could happen, my teacher had been doing it. It did go that way for a while but very organically things started to change. The phone was ringing a little bit more for Alexander and then I wasn't practicing quite enough and I was only of modest talent so I've always felt I had to work hard and at some point, and it did take about, close to six years to

stop playing, to stop. I put down the horn finally and just said, "I'm focused on Alexander."

**Lori:** By that time I was teaching here at Juilliard and elsewhere so that's the story.

**Noa:** Cool, there are a couple things I wanted to go back to, if that's okay. I know that you said something, I'm gonna mis-quote you but something felt right, the changes that you made, physically. Was it related to breathing, was it located anywhere or was it more just kind of an overall?

**Lori:** I guess overall but, yeah, located in our whole system. Breathing was calmer, a little less tense in the neck and shoulders and back which make sure that your breathing is calmer. I was more able to be present. When people describe themselves as tense or I've had people tell me, "I am so not cut out to be a singer or this or that because I'm so tense." They're describing sensation of themselves from the inside out and it's not just a shoulder or a leg or something like that. It's really how your energy is out of balance. And so when you learn to regulate your energy, you're balancing tension. The result is a calmer more even sensation, just internally, walking around. When that's happening you're less distracted, there's less mental noise and it's a byproduct of being attentive to how you use yourself.

**Noa:** You didn't use the word ease but it makes me think of ease, just those moments when things work and we're not even quite sure why sometimes. Did you find that that translated or transferred into pressure situations or on stage with you as well because you had that in the practice room?

**Lori:** Absolutely and ease is exactly the word. A sensation of ease is quite beneficial. And yes, it totally translated into performance.

**Noa:** Consciously, you had to? Or it just naturally kind of found its way?

**Lori:** I think both. Consciously, what you learn in the course of Alexander lessons is what Alexander referred to as conscious control of yourself. You learn to inhibit or prevent reactions that get in your way. So for example, real common stuff. Let's say I'm working with a violinist and they say their shoulders get kind of tight or maybe on their bow arm they can feel themselves getting tense, particularly in performance where their hand shakes, something like that. If you are present in yourself you can inhibit the ... I'll call it surge of energy that gets in the way. Your energy goes on high, which is great for performance. You should not be relaxing, you wanna have energy, you just wanna balance it out. So if there's a little too much energy in the neck and shoulders you really can regulate that. Your brain is actually regulating it anyway, it's just a matter of how. So the volume has gone up or the volume goes down, you can very much be in charge of that.

**Lori:** And the way you learn in Alexander is kinesthetic. So the teachers teach hands-on. When I have my hands on someone's neck or shoulders, it's to help them sense the levels of energy going through and when they give themselves a direction, they can feel it change. So people can tell themselves to relax or let go, that's very common, this is not solo to Alexander Technique but it's rather specific in Alexander in that when you're releasing tension you're allowing yourself to use what you need. It's different than relaxing and lying on the couch. You're allowing the wrong energy to get out of the way so that you can use the right stuff. When you don't have the sensation that people associate with being nervous, you then don't

get a signal that you're nervous. So we often will ask in the world of performance psychology and such, "Well, what are the sensations that you have when you're nervous or something on stage, when you're excited?" Heartbeat goes up, breathing changes, gets shallow, shoulders get tense, neck gets tense, those are very common responses and really normal.

**Lori:** Imagine if that response didn't happen, if you didn't have the sensation of stiffness in your shoulder, you're not getting a signal to your brain that you're nervous or that it's a problem. So if you can start to diminish that, it's amazing, and then you can be more present in performance.

**Noa:** Because you're not as distracted by all the physical things that are going on that aren't helpful or that seem disruptive.

**Lori:** Correct, you're literally not distracted by that voice inside that says, "Uh, oh! Oh, no! This is trouble." You're in yourself and present. And so I'm gonna be careful to say that being present is not to distract. It's just that you're focused in the right place and therefore there isn't a distraction.

**Noa:** You mentioned shaky bow, which I think is something that's happened for every string player probably and soft snare drum for percussion, and people often ask about that. From the Alexander perspective, are there tips that you could offer for shaky bow to try to address that?

**Lori:** In the abstract it's a little bit of a challenge but think of it, it's a result of something and you could ... perhaps it's those nervous messages or question marks on our head. That's one level of it. How do you mitigate that? Being in a good balance in yourself, a quiet balance. Among those things, when you allow yourself to sense contact with things that are solid around you, first and foremost the ground. It's actually a conscious opening of your mind to say, "Yeah, I can sense the ground. My feet are quiet on the ground." You may begin to feel then that your legs and back start to release tension and you get the sensation that people refer to as grounded or centered. Once that's there your system is calming so often the shaky bow or, as you mentioned, really significantly for quiet percussion playing or quiet anything it's that there's a tentativeness like walking on thin ice that takes away from playing with authority.

**Lori:** When you are present in yourself and you're constantly releasing your tension outward instead of pulling in and away from the strings or the drum head or something like that, you mitigate that shakiness. It takes practice. This is not something that you think, "Oh yeah, today's the day of the audition, I need to work on that." Or "Oh, I remember we were in Noa's class and talked about that or Alexander class. I'm gonna try that now." This is a daily practice. It's a way of being and that becomes your default.

**Noa:** Right. Well, I like that your answer suggests there's no instant fix or silver bullet and that's something that has to be practiced and it's a variety of things that all together kind of help you deal with that particular issue because I think, even for me, I'm always hopeful that there's some life-hack or performance-hack of some kind that's just gonna flip a switch and things are better. But with things like shakiness, often there just isn't, unfortunately. It's like intonation, you can't just solve intonation overnight.

**Lori:** You don't just solve it but because there's been how some history of that being a challenge or a matter of interest or concern or however you wanna put it, and where there's a history it takes a little while

to shift those sensations and those default places. It took time to get the one, it takes time to get the other.

**Noa:** You talked about this presence and being more aware of what's happening in the moment but in a productive way. I know that with the research on choking, if we're too aware about the minutia of the motor movements involved in executing a skill, that can, in a performance setting anyway, be a little bit disruptive. How does it transition from the right kind ... that balance between being aware in the right sort of way, because that is important in performance, but then not being too aware in too many different ... do you know what I mean? How do you-

**Lori:** Yes, I do, and it comes up in discussion in the Alexander lessons and classes. Sometimes in performance and in sports performance or any high level of performance, if you, as you said, now if you get stuck on minutia and you get hyper focused. It is something that happens. And if you're hyper focused on one little thing you're disconnected from the whole of yourself. And the thing with Alexander, as you are learning it, you're learning through a very holistic approach.

**Lori:** If someone comes in an Alexander lesson and they say, "I'm having this problem with my wrist when I play piano or percussion." That wrist is connected to the entire person and so where you can have a tension on a certain area, it's sort of like you're on stage and the stage is lit up and there's just a little extra spotlight on an area and you learn to have that and balance it out. This is mind-body juggling so that you actually don't have to get hyper-focused like that. I couldn't agree more that if you get stuck on the minutia you lose track of the rest of you. It's as if, "Oh my gosh, my bow is shaking, my wrist is not stable, my hand is tight," And you forget that you have a head and shoulders and a back and legs and you forget that there's a world around you and it's only that. That's very much ... you can control that for sure but it takes a bit of practice to constantly have a holistic sense.

**Noa:** It sounds like there's some development of attention control as well, then, in the practice of Alexander.

**Lori:** Absolutely, absolutely, that might be a pretty good definition of the work. There are misconceptions about the work, what it is. Oh, it's about posture or breathing or some specific thing like that. Or it's like yoga or exercises but actually it's behavioral and, in fact, behavioral meaning learning attention skills and attention to yourself internally and externally and constantly balancing that.

**Lori:** As human beings we react to everything, the world around us, noise, internal fear, anything. We're constantly reacting and this is a ... with Alexander you're learning in a very slow, very quiet way to understand how you as an individual react to something and how you can kind of put yourself on pause and then control that reaction. So this is a whole study of attention and behavior, and it leads into another misconception which is, the sensation that you get then is relaxed. And so people think, "Oh, it's a relaxation technique." Or, I mean, I have actually heard here at school people recommend the class to colleagues because they say, "Oh yeah, it's really relaxing, it's like a massage, you go every week." Which kind of turns me a little bit inside out but I understand it's a description of a sensation. This, in fact, is very much dealing with attention and behavior, one's own.

**Noa:** Is there a better phrase that you would like people to use in describing it?

**Lori:** How do you mean?

**Noa:** Instead of massage or relaxed, is there another word that kinda captures the sensation?

**Lori:** Yeah, it's learning to be conscious of yourself and thus being conscious you can be much more in balance. And I would think balance might be more interesting.

**Noa:** I like balance.

**Lori:** Balanced energy, standing on two feet instead of one, when you can, is a little more balanced. It's a little easier because you've got two feet to stand on instead of one.

**Noa:** Right. Are there other misconceptions that kind of are pet peeves perhaps of yours?

**Lori:** They just happen and I raise an eyebrow. The posture issue is an interesting one. People think, oh yes, I need to improve posture and Alexander will do that or it's sort of like exercises to teach how to stand up or sit up straight. Which, that's a whole world of misconceptions. In fact, it's about the use of yourself, which is much broader. Posture seems kind of limiting. We move, we sit, stand, walk, play instruments, run, swim, do all these things. So if you're learning to sort of constantly regulate your energy and your awareness of yourself, that's not posture, that's use of yourself, which, by the way, results in much better posture and I get it, that people say that, I totally get it. But it's really much more interesting than that.

**Noa:** Posture does sound kind of static, at least in my head.

**Lori:** Very static. Every now and then it just ... socially I'll be out with friends or something and I'm introduced as, "This is Lori, she's an Alexander teacher." And the responses I get range from, "What's that?" Which is perfectly fine, to, "Oh, it's like yoga, I know that." I'm like, "No, I've actually never taken a yoga class, so I would say no." It's like, "Oh, it's that breathing thing." Well, yes, breathing improves and, yes, we pay a lot of attention to it and we'll spend some specific class time here on that but breathing is an organic part of life. So anything you do that improves the use of yourself will improve your breathing. And if you wanna improve breathing, you must improve the use of yourself. You can't just take it as a separate topic. So there's quite a few things, and as people are ... if I'm in a restaurant or a bar situation or something like that or a party, the other reaction is something to do with, "Oh yes, it's about posture and stand up straight." And then the person looks very uncomfortable trying to stand up straight. All I can do is say, "Well, something like that."

**Noa:** Are there any signs or ways of knowing if Alexander Technique, other than curiosity which of course is perfectly useful as a motivator too. But are there any other indications that maybe we should look into Alexander?

**Lori:** Sure, and curiosity is absolutely a wonderful one. "What is that? My friend told me about it. I wanna try that." For performers you're feeling ... and I would include people that do public speaking in that group.

For performers, if you're finding that you have stage fright issues or that kind of thing, you're trying various ways to deal with it, try the Alexander Technique. You're having chronic aches and pains, let's say you're a pianist and you've had some injury issues over the years and you've had PT, you've had doctors, you've had this and that and have had some relief, but it keeps coming back, for sure check out the Alexander Technique. If you have discomfort which may or may not be the same as pain but perhaps you just feel uncomfortable in social situations and you wanna find an easier way to be, try the Alexander Technique.

**Lori:** It's really good for anyone who comes with an open mind. There's no physical requirement. I'm asked sometimes, "Well, is so-and-so too young?" I have students that are in their 80s. "Am I too old?" Absolutely not. If you have an open mind and a functioning nervous system and you're interesting, for sure, try lessons. I do recommend whenever possible that private lessons are definitely the way to go. You should be getting very clear hands-on contact from a teacher. Group classes, the larger the group the less opportunity and the less personal time because teachers will address people individually. Group classes are a great introduction. You can start to see what it's about. If the teacher ever asks for a volunteer to do something in a group class or if you're an introduction lecture, you happen to be seeing, raise your hand, get under that person's hands so that you can actually feel what they're talking about. Imagine if you read a book about singing and there's all this information about how it should feel when you sing and how breathing should feel. If you don't have that sensation, how do you know if you're even on track?

**Lori:** I think Alexander Technique, you can learn about it and get the principles and ideas from reading books or seeing, perhaps, a video or something. But it's the one-to-one, in the moment contact where you really learn. Because you will learn from yourself from the inside out.

**Noa:** It sounds like having a teacher, then, is really essential.

**Lori:** It's pretty essential to get anywhere with it. People will learn, depending on the student, like anything else, will get something out of books. And I do recommend a few, particularly for the musician audience there's a terrific one called the Alexander Technique For Musicians, which is wildly sexy title. But it says it and it's very practical. It certainly serves as an underpinning if you're taking lessons or you have done and you want some reminders, fantastic. And it will give you a sense of what to expect.

**Lori:** There's another one that's really a good, broad view, well stated about Alexander Technique and the education involved, which is called body learning. It's been around for 40, 50 years now and it's been republished many times by Michael Gelb. But I would certainly look at those. Alexander himself wrote four books. They are a heavy read. One called The Use of the Self he explains how he came about all of this as an actor losing his voice and exploring how to get his voice back consistently. That one is a very good one if you're interested in a nice slow read. It's not necessarily for the beach.

**Lori:** But yeah, you do want to be one-to-one with the teacher. Teachers should be certified, that you work with. There's a certifying body called the ... in America it's called The American Society for the Alexander Technique. In Europe and in Great Britain, The Society for the Alexander Technique, look for that. If you're looking at websites for information about teachers, both those organizations have websites that have information. Skype teaching, I'm pretty much not in favor of for Alexander Technique. I think that it's

not quite fair to the student. In fact, I've been asked to do that and the only time I would consider it is if it's somebody that I've worked with extensively, like a couple of years, was calling to say, "I'm having some issue. Can we try this?" I would consider it. But otherwise, I actually won't do it because I just don't believe it's fair to the student.

**Noa:** The reason being they don't get the feedback that they need in the moment?

**Lori:** Correct. And they don't get their own kinesthetic feedback in the way that you will from a teacher who can say, "Yeah, here's how we can get a better balance with you." If you're mentally telling yourself, release your legs, you're coordinating your neck, back, shoulders. The teacher facilitates that and it's through many years of training. Again, why you want a certified, qualified teacher. Even here at Juilliard there's many faculty members who have had a lot of lessons and they can totally share information that they've learned and it's incredibly helpful to their students and they'll recommend, go find an Alexander teacher. I can help someone perhaps feel more in balance and more at ease playing their violin or their tuba or something, but I am by no means a violin teacher or a tuba teacher so it's a similar relationship.

**Noa:** Are there things that we can do, sitting in orchestra for hours a day or that we should be aware of, even sitting at our computer desk or chopping vegetables in the kitchen, are there a few things that we could be aware of that would be helpful?

**Lori:** Yeah, and the question, again, terrific in that you covered all those areas because this is about how you use yourself in life. So if you sit in orchestra for hours in the day or chop the vegetables, all those things, sit at the computer, yeah you might just pause. Let's say you're sitting at a computer keyboard, as you are, and you pause and just say, "Well, what am I doing with myself?" Really pause, don't try to fix anything, it's observing. Where's my head? Well, it's bent down toward the keyboard. Is that necessary? My shoulders are kind of hunched forward. I wonder if that's necessary for typing or holding the trombone. I'm sitting in the orchestra and I've got 104 bars rest because it's Mozart and I'm playing trumpet.

**Lori:** So instead of spacing out, maybe I can pay attention to how I'm sitting. Am I upright? Am I leaned forward? Am I squashing my head into my neck and shoulders? It's a first level of observing oneself without trying to change anything, to really get clear. And if you're tending to be in sort of a closed, compressed configuration, let's see what you can do to get more open, literally more physically open without strain, just come upright a little bit. If you're hunched down you know your spine is pulled down and bent forward, well, you're doing that so why not try something else. If you're holding your violin in rehearsal and the conductor is talking to the flute section, you can release your neck and shoulders while you're holding the violin and they're talking to some other section.

**Lori:** It's just a matter of being mindful about that, very mindful in action. So definitely observe yourself quietly. Aim for being more open as opposed to closed, more open and spread out as opposed to compressed in yourself. You're sitting in a chair, maybe it doesn't quite fit you. Find a way to get your feet on the ground, find a way to get more upright, things like that.

**Noa:** I like that question, “is it necessary.” Is that a classic Alexander question? Because it’s not judgemental, it’s not good or bad, but “is it necessary” functionally for what it is ... Is that a-

**Lori:** I think you would find a lot of Alexander teachers using that kind of language and I certainly do. And the work is really non judgmental. It’s a lot of questions and I think that that’s particularly helpful, really for everyone but performers who tend to judge themselves a lot and be judged by others quite a bit, there’s information. Your body is designed ... one, you’re designed to feel good. Your body’s designed to give you information when you don’t feel good, aches, pains, discomfort, ill health, it’s telling you something’s out of balance. So you pay attention to the signals, you don’t beat yourself up. You pay attention to the signals as information. So in the first weeks of class here, one of the things I begin to encourage everyone is to just simply ask themselves what they’re doing. This or that, something’s tense and you’re tensing it so maybe don’t. But it’s completely non-judgmental. If you’re a little stiff and tight you’re not a bad person, you’re just stiffening and tightening.

**Noa:** And this goes back a little bit to the question of orchestra players or sitting at the computer. Are there specific tips that are useful for singers or is it a lot, though each instrument might have its own particular things, is a lot of it kind of generalized to everyone?

**Lori:** Both. There’s certainly things particular to patterns that you see with people that play different instruments. Playing viola or violin involves a bit of a turn or twist in you so there’s physical patterns that are a little bit specific there. But the consciousness for singers as well, it’s about being present in yourself. Singers have ... they are their instrument so it’s almost more important that they’re able to be very present in themselves. You can’t put the body away for the rest of the day so paying attention, really throughout the day helps you as a singer as much as anyone else. But yes, we deal in specifics according to need. So with the singers there might be more of a focus on aspects of their use. There might be more of a focus on breathing than for the violinist because the breath generates the sound. But it’s really for everybody equally.

**Noa:** I have to thank Court for this question but what is constructive rest?

**Lori:** Ah, it is a thing you can do. Constructive rest is ... we have very few things that you might call an exercise in the Alexander world. Alexander was not a fan of mindless exercise, so patterns that you just do 10 of and then you think, I’m good to go. Constructive rest, you’re lying on your back on a firm surface, a carpeted floor, a yoga mat like that, and you have some books, something firm to put under your head and you will have your knees bent, feet on the ground, knees bent. That’s the position. You lie wide awake, the mind is working and the body is at rest, so constructively resting. 10, 15 minutes, kind of scanning yourself as you lie there. Again, no judgment, just okay, I’m lying down, what am I doing? Well, my hands are actually a little tight. My lower back’s not quite touching the ground, which is simple information, there’s not a requirement that you should have your whole back on the ground or something like that.

**Lori:** But what you may find is that there’s tensions in you that you’re just holding a bit and you can tell yourself to release, without wiggling, changing, stretching, anything. It’s really quite ... it’s largely still and

working mentally through yourself to release tensions, building towards an openness. And because you're getting feedback from the ground, if you release some tension, you start to feel more grounded again. You feel more in touch with the ground. So you use it, in fact, I use the ground as a context for where I am. And if I don't have a full sense of contact then something is pulling me away.

**Lori:** So it's essentially 15 minutes of lying down at rest being in touch with yourself. Eyes open, you're hearing sounds around you, you could have music playing but somebody once said, "Well, can I read and do constructive?" I said, no, because you're focusing on you and you're developing that presence. I highly recommend it for one daily, it's such a daily mind/body mediation. It's a terrific practice break. It's terrific after travel, maybe you're flying out for an audition and you got all uncomfortable on a plane because, doesn't that happen? And you're carrying all your stuff and ... lie down, reorganize your body. Gravity's a big help with that.

**Lori:** If you're doing it as a daily practice it works wonders to do about 15 minutes of constructive rest on the day of a performance or audition. You learn to sort of mind/body focus and center and for those that are working with breathing, terrific context to be working with breath. So thank you for the question.

**Noa:** I get the sense that this should be done, not on your bed?

**Lori:** No. Not that it's totally exclusive but one, even a firm mattress is a bit soft for it, because you sink in, like you do on a couch or something. You probably wouldn't practice your instrument on a soft cushy couch because your body doesn't know where it is. Also, as you start to release tension and ease, your body/mind connection says, "Ah, I know what this is." And you fall asleep. I highly recommend sleep. I think it's wonderful. It's different, so not on a mattress.

**Noa:** Okay, way at the beginning today you mentioned having studied with Arnold Jacobs. I'm not a huge Arnold Jacobs expert or anything. I've watched some videos, I've read a little bit. But any synergy there with some of the things that he was fond of talking about and Alexander and your experience?

**Lori:** I think there is. I also ... I know, I studied with him for about a half a year and I know his book, *Song in the Wind* and his teachings. I could see where some people would question, "Are they actually connected." Mr. Jacobs, in fact, talked quite a lot about you should be so in the sound and the music and having an incredibly clear sense of what you want that you shouldn't be thinking about your body and such, and I get that. If you are someone who's tension responses are interfering with the production of that sound that you want, then I think you wanna find out more about yourself and I think that he actually was all about being present and using a body really well. He just talked about it in different terms.

**Lori:** Maybe for the audience who isn't familiar with him, he was a tuba player in the Chicago symphony for many, many years and taught all kinds of winds and brass players and other instrumentalists because he was such a fine musician and educator. He talked quite a lot about breath and there's quite a lot in his studio, there were machines for breathing and he had a lot of little air bags and things to work with and so people often associate a lot of that with him, which was true. But when I had lessons with him it was much more about clarity of mind and as a student and the type of person I am, I could never achieve that if I hadn't done a lot of Alexander work that helped me be more at ease in my whole system in order to be

clearer in mind the way he suggested and to take on what he was talking about in terms of the science of breath and anatomy.

**Lori:** I would add to that something about working with the teachers, the instrumentalists and singers and other performers have. We go to study with amazing people and often as a conservatory student or high school student, that lesson is really important every week. For me it was the whole reason I was in school was to go to that one lesson. So there's a lot of pressure. And sometimes these are luminous figures in the field. So there's a bit of sort of nervous energy about it. I found that after Alexander lessons or while I was taking them, my learning from my teacher improved exponentially. Because I was more at ease in myself and I actually listened to what he was saying.

**Lori:** Here's something that might be familiar to people. You're in the lesson, you're playing something, something happens along the way, you mess up or something and the teacher stops and starts to talk about how to produce the sound better or something like that. And in your mind you're already thinking, "Yeah, I know what he's saying. I know." And you're not actually listening anymore to what they're saying. And in fact, you've just about resumed playing before they even finish speaking. So, in fact, you really didn't take in what they said. With Alexander you can learn to pause and really listen, and when you do you may find out that those teachers have a lot to say. And when you listen and you take in, you don't have to react immediately. And if you listen and take in what they say, then you think in yourself, "Ah, well here's how I do it." And then you take on playing the phrase again or whatever it is, having thought through it, heard it in your head again.

**Lori:** Actually, you're gonna learn a heck of a lot faster. Being a little more balanced in your body and a little more conscious of the ease you can have and do have will let you learn infinitely better.

**Noa:** That might be a good place to wrap up. Thank you, Lori, for taking the time to chat.

**Lori:** Thank you.

## Notes

[1] I allude to the research on "choking," and how focusing too much on mechanics can paradoxically lead to more screwups (16:19).

- You can read more about what causes choking [here](#), or better yet,
- Watch cognitive scientist (and Barnard College president) Sian Beilock's [2017 TED talk](#) on choking.
- Beilock has also written a book on the research in this area, called...[\*Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To\*](#).

[2] Lori shares a couple book recommendations – great either as a refresher of concepts, or a supplement to lessons (25:41):

- [\*The Alexander Technique for Musicians\*](#), by Judith Kleinman and Peter Buckoke
- [\*Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique\*](#), by Michael Gelb

- [The Use of the Self](#), by F.M. Alexander (written by Alexander himself, but Lori notes that it's rather dense reading)

[3] I referenced Lori's time studying with Chicago Symphony tuba player Arnold Jacobs, who was a renowned brass pedagogue (38:57). I find the mental aspect of Jacobs's teaching to be really interesting, as it's consistent with much of the research on choking and optimizing performance that has been done in the last couple decades. And totally relevant to non-brass players too. For more on Jacobs's ideas and philosophy, check out David Brubek's excellent 5-part series:

- [The Pedagogy of Arnold Jacobs](#)

## Additional resources

Want to learn more about Alexander Technique, or how to get training in Alexander Technique?

- [Lori's website](#) has additional book recommendations and links
- And her [contact information is here](#)

Wondering if there's a certified Alexander Technique teacher near you? Here are a couple ways to search, via two accrediting organizations in the US:

- [Find a certified Alexander Technique teacher](#) via American Society for the Alexander Technique
- [Find a certified Alexander Technique teacher](#) via Alexander Technique International

### Date Created

January 2019