

Revolutionising Horse Riding with The Alexander Technique

How to improve your posture, performance and restore your natural grace in movement

James Power was just eight-years-old when he began horse riding. But his interest in this pursuit went further and became a lifelong mission to encourage others to overcome their worst fears.

Two years previously, James had suffered a stroke. A devastating diagnosis at any age, it was especially tough for a child. A long period of intensive physio was necessary, and James had to learn how to walk again. In addition, a painful muscle condition called dystonia meant that James struggled with movement and posture.

"Horse riding helped me to re-balance after the stroke," says James. "I found that horse riding was a really useful way to neutralise some of the issues I had with my legs, but it became more about overcoming a huge fear of falling off the horse at speed."

Following a break from horse riding in adulthood, James has returned to the sport. Like his initial interest in equestrian matters, the source of his renewed passion is unusual.

Now aged 42 and living in Knutsford, James is a qualified Alexander Technique teacher. James describes the technique as a "user manual for your body and mind", adding



that it's an effective way to "improve your posture and performance, and a powerful method to restore natural grace in movement".

Alexander Technique teachers gently use their hands to help people to improve their co-ordination and let go of unnecessary tension. For example, if people have hunched shoulders, stiff necks and compressed backs, they are far more likely to experience tension, reduce their performance skills, tire themselves out, and injure themselves.

James says: "When I started to learn the Alexander Technique, I became much more aware of the really strong connection between rider and horse. Riding horses built up my ability to stay calm while moving at great speed, and this gave the horse far greater confidence and

trust in me. Once I learned the technique I felt free - the fear of falling was there in the background but I used it to my advantage. Horses are sensitive and perceptive creatures and when you work closely with them you can see this intelligence come through."

After his stroke, James had to relearn how to move and stay balanced. As a child running was something he struggled with, but he could work on his own balance and co-ordination while on a horse. Today, when he works with people who are learning the basics, and experienced riders, he sees how they understand the Alexander Technique very quickly when they apply it through horse riding.

"A great deal of my work involves helping a student to notice unnecessary tension and find ways to do less, and move efficiently. With horses, this is so important, as the rider will often stiffen and tense up when they want the horse to go faster. This sends a conflicting message to the horse."

"And, if the rider is not balanced and is putting more weight to one side, the horse will notice, so postural problems and a lack of balance in the rider really do show up in how the horse moves."

Back and neck problems are common in horse riders. With James's help, Alexander Technique students can learn how to get the same - and better - results from a horse while sitting with a freer neck and a back that is lengthening and widening as they are moving, not hunching and pulling down. Most often, this leads to an improvement or a complete resolution of the back and neck problems.

When it comes to the benefits of the Alexander Technique to horse riding, James has a useful analogy.



"There's an interesting film with Robert Redford called The Horse Whisperer. The basic premise of that is, for years, there was this idea that you needed to break a horse in order to get them to comply. It was a very tough, some might say brutal process of breaking the horse. Then there is a different way where the rider masters themselves first - they stay back, and they stay calm. You stop doing the wrong thing, and the right thing does itself. And that's

a good definition of the Alexander Technique." James has been thrilled to witness "dramatic changes" with movement and posture while working with riders at a leading equestrian centre in the heart of Cheshire called Higher Farm Riding school.

"It is a beautiful place to learn to ride, and they have a holistic approach to teaching. There riding school is outstanding and there is a school where children can access the curriculum and learn while being outside and surrounded by animals and nature."

Like many horse lovers, James admires their majesty and natural dignity. He believes that people often forget that humans have those same qualities in abundance, but the stresses of modern life and hours spent staring at computers means that the connection with ourselves and who we are is lost.

"In every Alexander lesson, a teacher is working with the whole self, body and mind, teaching people how to pause, building their awareness of habits and tensions that get in the way. After lessons, you can often see how a rider is poised and ready for action." ■

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