

## THOUGHTS ON SCOLIOSIS AND PAIN

Hello fellow people with scoliosis-

My name is Dana Caspersen. As I write this, in 2008, I am 44 years old and have been working for 20 years as a principal dancer with the Frankfurt Ballet and The Forsythe Company in Germany. When I was 14, I went into a Milwaukee brace with two 50 degree curves and a lot of pain. I wore the brace for four years and my curves went down to the upper thirties. In the intervening years, my curves have increased again and now seem to be stable back at 50 degrees, where they started.

In the years following the brace, when my curves had reduced, I continued to have substantial and constant pain. As I'm sure many of you understand, I had a strong, permanent spasm on one side of my lumbar that made it impossible to sit comfortably for more than a few minutes and basically always hurt, to varying degrees. My upper back and neck were prone to frequent and severe attacks of spasm and pain. I tried many different kinds of therapy and physical training. I went to the chiropractor 1-2x per week and that would give me relief in the short term, but nothing I did would alleviate the cause of the pain.

About 18 years ago I started studying the Alexander Technique. This is a technique for becoming aware of the habitual ways in which we use our bodies and learning to inhibit those habitual reactions that, although they feel natural because we are used to them, are actually causing pain. Now, in spite of a serious spondylolysis and two 50-degree curves, I live for the most part pain-free. When I do experience pain, I know how to decrease and eventually eliminate it.

The interesting thing that I've discovered about scoliosis through the Alexander Technique is that the pain that I used to experience is not an inevitable result of having a curved spine. It is the result of the muscles reacting to those curves. The curves will not go away and the signal that the curves tend to send the muscles, which is "Panic! Spasm!" will not go away, BUT, the pain can, because I can change my response to it, through training.

The way this works is that you learn how to recognize those signals and then how to stop reacting to them in the habitual, harmful ways. You learn, in a very practical manner, how to give your body directions with your thoughts so that it can function in a more integrated manner. The panic and fear I used to feel about my back subsided as I realized that the pain was under my control, that I know how to deal with it and eventually eliminate it. One of the most important things for me is knowing that although the tendency to spasm will always return because of the mechanics of my spine, I don't have to be afraid of it returning. In fact, each time it does return I become more knowledgeable about what I need to do in order for it to go away again.

The physical extremes of my profession were what pushed me initially into investigating the nature of my pain. If I hadn't found a way to control it, it would have been difficult to continue working in this field. But what I've learned has improved all aspects of my life immeasurably. I want to encourage you to become knowledgeable about your bodies and to know that you don't have to feel doomed to pain just because you have scoliosis. Don't let anyone in the medical establishment convince you that that is the case, because it's not true.

I would encourage you to find a teacher of the Alexander technique, try a few out until you find one you that feel comfortable with. The money you spend on this now will save you a fortune in pain relief therapy bills later. This kind of learning is a long and ongoing process. It takes a lot of work and time to change ingrained habits, but once you get started it's a pleasure, because the pain eventually stops. I wish I had known about these possibilities when I was fourteen, because although the Alexander Technique doesn't cure scoliosis, I could have saved myself many years of pain and hundreds of doctor appointments! I encourage you to become curious about your backs; it's worth it-

Best wishes-

Dana Caspersen