

Beating up your body

Many people who enthusiastically frequent gyms today do more damage to their bodies than good, says an Alexander Technique expert. Glenda Daniels reports

There are too many people taking their bodies for a bash and patting themselves on the back for a job well done.

So says Alexander Technique teacher Noeline Levinson, who explains that people have no idea what damage they are doing to their bodies and how little benefit they are actually gaining by exercising incorrectly.

"Even people who employ personal trainers become injured because of the trainers' lack of knowledge. The trainers need to bring their training up to speed and catch up with the rest of the world in safety standards," says Levinson who has expanded her Alexander Technique (AT) practice into the gym scene.

AT is about aligning the head, neck and back correctly so that proper balance is maintained while sitting, walking, and exercising.

Before studying AT, Levinson was a dancing teacher.

She damaged her own back and became interested in AT. For eight years she has been practising AT, teaching the correct alignment and also accompanying her clients to the gym to show them how to exercise properly.

Now she has expanded her clientele to teach trainers as well as to lecture in colleges and to other sports management centres.

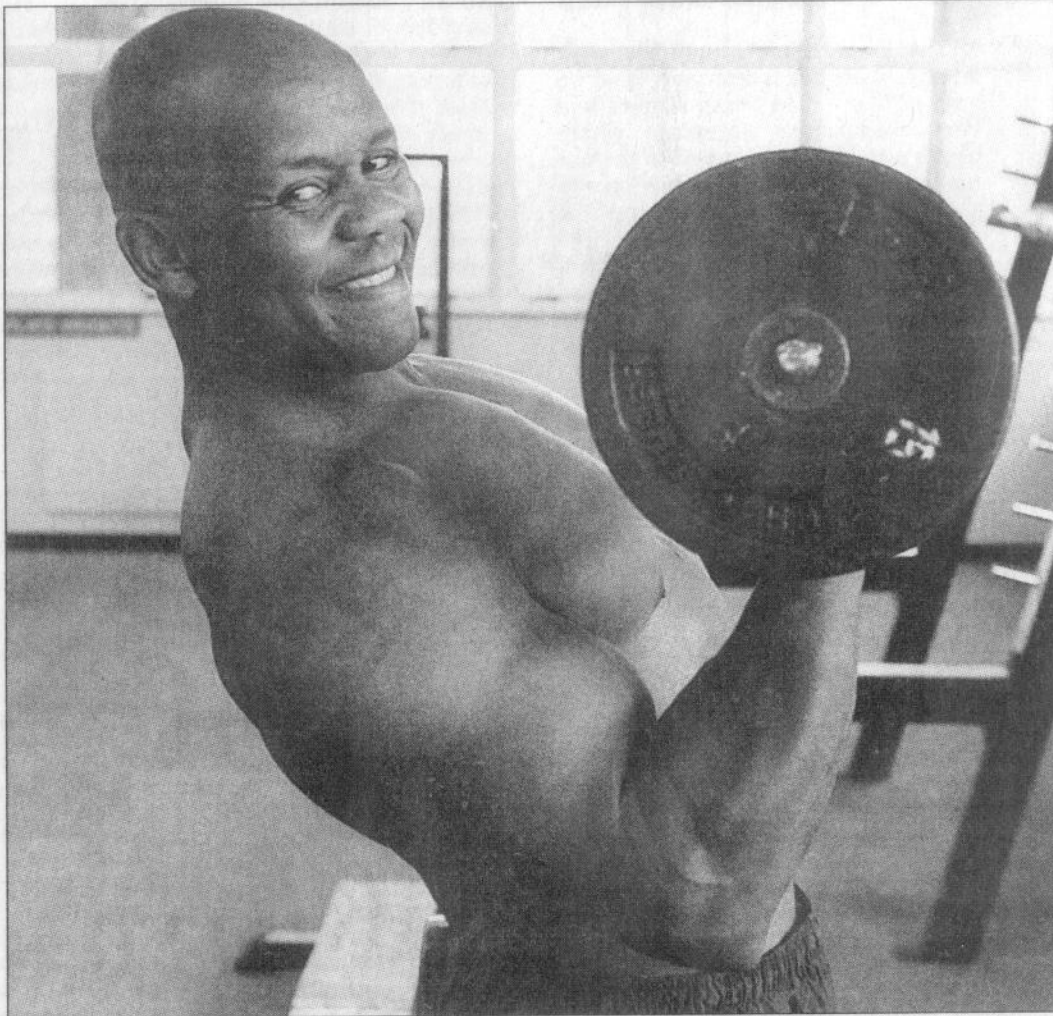
Levinson has just completed training the staff at the Sandton Health and Racquet Club and her training is endorsed by Rob Cowling of the Health and Racquet group.

"I am trying to create public awareness of safety in exercise, using correct technique and style, and also for the average person to demand a higher standard from the staff and trainers," she says.

The main problem with incorrect exercise, Levinson says, is that people use their backs and necks to gain momentum when they should be using the part of the body they wish to tone, for instance the stomach or the biceps.

People have got to isolate the right muscle to do their training so that no damage to other body parts results.

"Many of the back, knee



and ankle injuries can easily be avoided. Back and neck pain is not okay during and after training. Don't wait to be seriously injured before acting," she advises.

Doing the exercise too fast does not help, nor does using a too heavy weight.

People should be using lighter weights and doing their training much slower than they do, she points out.

Exercise exaggerates what you start off with, Levinson says.

So if you are standing and walking incorrectly, in other words if your body is badly aligned then you are more likely to exercise incorrectly, Levinson feels.

So what needs to happen is that you align correctly and then proceed to do the exercise with this awareness in mind. You then isolate the part of the body you need to train, and don't rock the rest of the body.

This applies to swimming, ball games, weight training,

aerobics and all other exercises, she says.

Levinson says that most trainers are receptive to change, but there are still many who are stuck in the same way of doing things. They are hard to convince that changing their approach will benefit their clients.

While her main focus is to train trainers, Levinson also gets called upon to check the routine of private clients; then she hands them over to their personal trainer.

"Often people put faith in their trainers and rely on them to give the correct techniques but it doesn't always work out this way.

"I feel it's important to protect people coming to the gym, so that they get the full benefit when they spend their hour there.

"It's pointless feeling really good for having spent an hour at the gym, while there has been little benefit, quite the reverse in fact, as there might

have been damage done to the back, among other parts of the body," Levinson says.

The most controversial exercises she points to are the squat, which is supposed to train the legs not the back; the bench curl which is meant to tone up the chest muscles and not exert the neck or arch the back. For this one you should have your knees bent and not leaning over the edge of the bench. Other exercises which are done incorrectly most of the time, she says, are the bicep curl and stomach exercises.

Lastly, before you exercise, it's very important to warm up. And not just for a minute or two but for a good 10 minutes in her opinion.

Stretching, Levinson adds, should also be done after exercising. The warming up period together with the cool down period before and after exercise help prevent injuries.

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