

How does the Anat Baniel Method Work?

At its core, the Anat Baniel Method (ABM) is about learning and is based in neuroscience, anatomy and principles of mechanical engineering applied to the human body. It is a practical application of neuroplasticity – the ability of the brain to “rewire” itself by forming new neural pathways.

Although the theory behind the work is complex and multifaceted this article will provide the reader with a basic understanding of how the method works by addressing the following points:

- Full Body Participation
- Habitual contractions
- Differentiation
- How is the method applied?

Full Body Participation

When someone performs any given action all of their body is involved whether they realize it or not. Any individual muscle fiber either helps with the action or hinders it. The muscle fiber may help by contracting when appropriate or relaxing when appropriate. Likewise a muscle fiber that contracts or relaxes at the wrong time hinders the action.

For example, when you are hammering in a nail, does it really help to stick your tongue out and bite on it? You might argue that it improves your concentration but it actually hinders you and makes the action more difficult to perform. As you bite on your tongue you contract muscles in your tongue, face, neck and probably shoulder. If all of these areas are locked up, then your arm has to do more in order to supply the force and accuracy needed to drive the nail in. If you do not bite your tongue, your neck and facial muscles can stay relaxed and your shoulder muscles are available to contribute to the task of driving in the nail.

You can probably think of other examples of this kind of unnecessary holding and you may also recognize that you are holding other muscles even if you do not know that you are doing so. The Anat Baniel Method teaches you to become aware of this type of holding and to utilize your whole self when performing any given action.

Habitual contractions

During our lives we acquire a number of habits. Habits can be related to how we speak, how we act and how we react. They may be habits of movement, thought, thinking or emotion. Generally habitual behavior is a good thing because it means that we don't have to reinvent the wheel every time we wish to perform an everyday task or respond to a threatening situation. However, not all habits are good habits.

Most people can easily come up with a list of bad habits but probably the most common type of bad habit is one that almost everyone is unaware of. This is the habit of contracting or relaxing muscles inappropriately. A very common example is that of keeping the abdominal muscles contracted all of the time. We wish to appear slim or have “six pack abs” and gradually over the course of time we contract the muscles more and more until we don’t even know that we are contracting them. This may be a habit picked up in childhood and carried on through the rest of our lives.

In the case of chronically contracted abdominal muscles the restriction in movement caused by the rigid abdomen reduces the availability for movement in the back and can lead to back pain or soreness. The restriction in movement can lead to areas that do move having to overcompensate, and it can also have another effect. As the abdominal muscles contract the upper body is pulled forward and without compensating for this pull the person would fall over. In order to compensate the lower back muscles must be contracted to keep the person upright. The result is a tug of war between the front muscles and the back muscles where both tend to become chronically contracted.

So, habitual contraction reduces movement, causes rigidity and leads to other areas overworking. Another cost is that of the energy expended. Chemical energy (glycogen) is used to contract the muscle fiber and a part of the brain is occupied with instructing the muscle to contract.

When a habitual contraction is released, more chemical energy and more processing ability in the brain become available. Consequently, you have more energy available for both movement and mental activity.

Differentiation

Either because of habitual muscular contraction or simply because someone has never learned a more refined movement to begin with, it is common to move in an undifferentiated fashion. Think about sitting in a chair, perhaps in front of your computer. Now imagine that there is something beside you on the floor that you want to pick up, maybe you’ve dropped your pen. Many people, when they bend to the side, bend mostly at the waist with little movement in the area between the top of the shoulder and the bottom of the ribs. In other words they side bend in an undifferentiated way.

This doesn’t really matter in the case of picking up a pen because it is an isolated event but if this action was performed repeatedly it is likely that back pain would soon appear. Think of activities like assembling parts on a conveyor belt or working at a keyboard for extended periods. Undifferentiated movement is the major factor causing repetitive stress injuries such as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

In a person with a well differentiated movement in side bending, the ribs on the reaching side would come together, the ribs on the other side would separate,

and the shoulder blade would slide down over the ribs. The neck would stay loose and be available without prior adjustment if the person needed to look more carefully to find the pen.

Awareness In Movement

As a recipient of the work learns to move better, become more differentiated, and eliminate habitual contractions, he or she also becomes increasingly aware of how they move. Someone may notice how their back twists as they reach to answer the phone, or how the weight shifts onto one foot as they reach overhead.

This may be interesting in itself, but the real benefit is that this awareness provides an early warning system against future trouble. If performing an action in a particular way will lead to pain the aware person will notice the pain early and have the ability to adjust how he is moving so that the pain does not “set in” and become an issue.

How Is The Method Applied?

A common reaction from people when they first hear about the method is that they are attracted by the benefits it offers but they think that it will be difficult and overly complicated to learn to move in new ways. In fact, the reverse is true. One of the underpinnings of the work is that it should always be easy and comfortable because if it is not the brain will not spontaneously adopt the new movement patterns that are presented.

When teaching a group, the practitioner guides the students through a structured series of movements that place increasing demand on the nervous system work out how to respond while always making sure the body remains comfortable. Some lessons are given to students sitting in chairs, while others are given while the students are lying on the floor or standing.

When teaching individuals, the practitioner uses his hands as well as his words to guide the student. Through the use of hands, the practitioner is able to gauge the student’s response and modify the movements accordingly.