

Awareness Through Movement® Online

with Sarah Silk

Guidelines and Information

An adaptation of David Zemach-Bersin's *Keys for Success*

Here we are, doing Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons online on Zoom. Who knew? I never imagined I would be teaching this way. As a theater actor, I love in-person live experiences. But now that we're here, I'm embracing the change and observing silver linings (like, for example, you're muted, so vocalize, yawn, burp, and expel all the gas you want!). Normally, we'd meet in a room, chat for a bit, see each other in 3D, and so forth, but since that's not the case, I'm including these guidelines for doing ATM to facilitate creating a positive experience for you.

ATM is not an exercise or sport, and so it is best to not approach it as such. It is a learning method and philosophy for sensing oneself in functional movement for the purpose of improving one's self-direction, self-actualization, function, health, and mood. The things you normally think to do in exercise (such as watching the teacher, moving at their pace, or using a lot of effort), do not apply here. Welcome to a lifelong process of learning a skill that I believe will give you deep, fulfilling, lasting, and limitless rewards. In the realm of healthy functioning, I like to think of ATM as akin to that old Chinese proverb; I'm not giving you a fish, I'm teaching you how to fish (... or however you might say that, but you know what I'm talking about, right?).

Since ATM is not exercise, it does not work via your muscles - it works via your brain! Your functions, your nervous system, your perception ... the many complex interrelated parts of you, this is where ATM works to create amazing benefits. Therefore, it is not the movements themselves that create improvement, it is your *awareness* of the movements that creates improvement. In ATM, I will guide you to pay attention to the quality of the movement and the way you interact with yourself, so that you can experience these benefits. Below are some guidelines to get you started. You do not need to remember them. I will repeat them many times during class.

➤ **Move Slowly**

Move even slower than you think you can. In ATM, you really can't move too slowly. You can move too fast, however. When you move slowly, you create the ability to sense and feel *how* you're doing the movements *as* you do the movements. The amount of sensory input will be low enough that you can distinguish fine differences and discover an

easier less effortful coordination. Slow movements also help you to shift into a parasympathetic nervous system (relaxation mode), and this is essential to the ATM learning process. There are occasions in class in which I direct you to make fast movements, but generally speaking, when you move fast, you tend to reinforce your old habits and ways of doing things instead of learning new and improved ways.

➤ **Make Small Movements**

For each movement you do, try to do it in a range of motion that is truly easy and comfortable. Not what you could do, or wish you could do, or think you should do, or what other students do, but just what's truly simple, smooth, and *easy* for you. There's no stretching or straining in this range of motion. Therefore, the movement range might be very small – possibly inches, mm's, or even imperceptible on Zoom. If there's no range of motion that is truly comfortable for you, then simply initiate the movement or imagine the movement. All the same parts of the brain will light up and muscles will engage *as if* you were doing the movement, and so you'll still receive the benefits of the class.

➤ **Reduce Any Unnecessary Efforts**

Try to use *the least amount of effort possible* to do the movement. You will find places where you use extraneous muscles or efforts that you don't need to do the movement. Whenever you become aware of these places, see if you can let them go. Less is more.

➤ **Pause between Movements**

After completion of the movement, wait a moment (or two or...) before you begin again. That way you won't repeat the movement mechanically, as in your everyday life. Instead, each movement will have your fresh attention, and you'll be better able to focus on the *quality* of the movement. Quality over quantity. Each movement will have its own potential to be different, better, smoother, simpler, or more enjoyable than the last. You'll also be better able to distinguish between rest and moving, and therefore further reduce any unnecessary efforts.

➤ **Rest Whenever You Feel Like It**

Rest is an important part of the ATM learning process. I will provide specific moments in class to rest, but you can stop and rest whenever you want, at any time. At any one moment in class, students may be resting and not doing the movements. In fact, if I see a bunch of students resting, I'll know I've continued a variation for too long (it's quite the opposite of bootcamp!). A rest provides an opportunity to check in with yourself and

observe any changes in sensation overall. It also allows you to rest your attention and efforts. Please rest whenever you feel any fatigue. You may only need a few seconds of rest to feel ready to move again. However, if you continually wait to rest, you're more likely to get tired, use unnecessary efforts, and move from a place of trying to do more, rather than a place of curiosity, calm, and attention.

➤ **Try to Adopt a Child-Like Curiosity and Carelessness**

When learning new things, babies and young kids have the benefit of not knowing the so-called right, wrong, good, or bad way of doing it. They don't have the self-consciousness that comes with age or with having a fixed goal or rigid expectation. See if you can adopt this non-judgmental attitude by not doing your best, not trying too hard, not knowing what's going to happen, not being so concerned with answers, and not needing a certain outcome. With this attitude, you'll free yourself to better observe and discover what you're actually doing, rather than what you think you should be doing. And, as Moshe Feldenkrais would say, you cannot do what you want, until you know what it is you are already doing.

➤ **Comfort is Key**

Do you know what true comfort feels like? This class gives you the opportunity to discover that, starting with simple things. In everyday life, you may be used to ignoring pain and discomfort - and likely for very good reasons. But in ATM, please don't ignore pain and discomfort. Aim to be as comfortable as possible. When you feel pain, discomfort, strain, or even stretching, find ways to release that. You can change your towel supports, add more cushion, go slower, or do less. Within this comfortable sphere, your sensory input will be small enough to observe fine details and changes. Your nervous system will feel safe to facilitate improvements in your organization. You'll develop your ability to differentiate between different kinds of sensations. You'll learn to take better care of yourself. You'll move from a place of confidence and clarity.

➤ **Use Your Felt Senses**

I use language to teach ATM and lead you through an experience, but the experience is more complicated than words can express. Your own personal felt sense of yourself in movement includes complex intersecting layers of things like orientation in space, sense of weight, felt touch, sight, instincts, emotions, imagination, visualization, temperature, memory... let yourself experiment with nonverbal ways of interacting with yourself in movement. Trust that you have other ways of knowing yourself and your experience. We

humans are built with a bunch of stuff that simply can't be put into words.

➤ **Be Your Own Leader**

You know better than anyone what you're feeling, and therefore, what you need. One of the reasons I love ATM so much is I believe it empowers students to be more independent in their self-care and self-direction. That can start with things in class like choosing your own pace instead of following mine, entertaining your own answers to questions before asking me, or adapting a direction to suit your needs. For example, I may direct the class to start a movement on your right side, but your right side aches. Don't fight it - adjust the direction to suit you and start the movements on your left side. Every time I say right, just think left. I will sometimes make this offer in class and give directions so everyone can start on their preferred (easy) side, but you may do so at any time. Develop a trust in yourself to discover your needs, and make choices that are good for you, even if it goes against the norm or what I say. You'll develop a relationship with yourself that works better for you - or that *is* more you.

➤ **Beginnings and Endings**

All classes begin and end with some sort of body scan. The scan will allow you to develop your kinesthetic ability to sense yourself in space. But it will also allow you to detect changes in sensation between the beginning and end of the lesson. This is important, because your brain understands things by detecting differences. The scan is not for you to judge, evaluate, or correct yourself, but to improve your ability to sense and feel what is and what is different than before. At the end of class, if you feel quite different, please transition out of class slowly. Let the changes percolate, digest... Maybe take a slow walk. Or a nap. Don't go straight into looking at a device. Taking time to sense how you feel after class will increase the benefits of the class and make them last longer. Rushing back to your normal state will simply reinforce older (and likely much stronger) habits sooner.

➤ **Learning takes time, but it goes faster if you practice**

Learning happens in a series of approximations. Meaning, it doesn't all happen at once. It starts with a few small improvements that add up to major improvement over time. As with any learning process, the more consistently you do ATM, the greater and faster the rewards. Repeat a few movements in bed before you go to sleep or when you wake up. Buy audio lessons online. Come to as many classes as you can... It's like learning to play an instrument, the more you practice, the faster you'll improve.