

Semi-supine: the subtle art of lying down

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Lying down is something we all do. We do it each night when we sleep; some of us do it on a beach or as a yoga practise. Those who practise the Alexander Technique however, do it for different reasons; they do it to refresh their spine.

The Alexander Technique is a gentle but positive approach to human balance that teaches people to enhance their breathing, co-ordination and movement. This allows them to become more aware of their own patterns of muscular pulls and tensions, which may be adding to back pain, stress, tiredness or poor posture.

The Alexander Technique is an individual hands-on process and one procedure that is taught in lessons is semi-supine, the subtle art of lying down.

This is done lying on your back, with your knees bent so that your feet are flat on the floor, or the teacher's table if you are having a lesson.

Your head is raised on a small pile of books so that your neck is suspended between the books and your upper back.

Your elbows are bent so that your hands can lie quietly on your abdomen.

In a lesson, a teacher will gently work on you while you are in this position. They will take your head and neck; they may work on your arms and shoulders, and your legs and feet. They may lift your limbs and gently encourage you to release holding patterns you didn't know were there. Whilst doing these things, the teacher will be encouraging you to think about your self and your body in a new way and to become aware of your own habit patterns in relation to movement and rest. It is subtle and powerful work. At first it is not easy to understand why such apparently simple activities can have such a beneficial effect, but gradually you realise that it isn't so simple after all, and what you thought was just about movement or relaxation is actually more complex, and is about your reactions, both mental and physical and that what you are really learning is different ways of responding to the stimuli of life.

Lying on your back in this way encourages the muscles of the back to co-ordinate differently and deeply held tensions to start to let go. It isn't so much a relaxation, as a reorganisation of muscles and mind, which should leave you feeling alert and calm at the same time.

Your spine is designed as a spring and the curves help to absorb movement shock as you walk around and to protect your delicate spinal cord, the highway of information from brain to body. The spine consists of the bony vertebrae (joints) and the softer squishy discs in-between. Everyone knows about discs, especially if they give trouble!

Discs aid the springy effect of the spine and act as spacers between the vertebrae. Because we have so many joints in our spine, we are very flexible and can bend and twist and more or less move how we want to. The discs are subject to pressure, and as we go through our day our own body weight pushes down on to the discs, aided and abetted by gravity. The discs are squashed in such a way that some of their fluid content is squeezed out into surrounding body tissues and we end the day shorter than when we started. Fortunately the discs have an osmotic ability to reabsorb fluids

when the pressure on them is taken off. One way of relieving this pressure is lying down and going to sleep-that is why we are measurably taller in the mornings-as much as an inch in some cases!

As we get older our discs get stiffer and loose some of their ability to re-hydrate. This is one reason why older people appear to shrink.

Lying down in semi-supine not only helps the spine to plump up its cushions again, it also helps you learn not to add to gravity's action by using your whole body with excessive tension so that you are squeezing yourself!

The regular practice of semi-supine can teach you a great deal about yourself. You have to learn to lie still so that you can learn how you move about.

To practice this skill and to understand more about your own balance, an audio CD, *The Magic of Gravity*, has been developed which explains semi-supine, gives lots of information to ponder on and talks you through the practicalities of lying down in this way.

This CD contains an illustrated leaflet guiding you through the procedures, an introduction to the Alexander Technique, followed by four separate talks that can be used separately or in combination with each other. It contains material developed by an experienced practitioner over many years. It is suitable for both beginners and those who have a greater understanding of the Alexander Technique. It is a practical study aid that can be used repeatedly, as more is revealed the more you listen. It is the first professionally produced product of its kind and has been widely praised by those who have used it.

The Magic of Gravity is £19.95 plus p&p and is available from High Energy, 113 Holland Road , Hove , East Sussex BN3 1JP www.high-energy.org.uk or Tel: 01273 236035