

Could this device beat insomnia?

By Stephanie Zinser



Finger on the pulse: The Alpha-Stim Stress Control System, launched this week, uses electric impulses to relax wearers and lull them off to sleep

A device the size of a personal stereo that is attached to the ear lobes could help banish insomnia and beat stress-related problems by altering the electromagnetic patterns of the brain.

The Alpha-Stim Stress Control System launched this week, consists of two electrodes that lead to a hand-held, battery-powered unit.

The electrodes send minute pulses of electricity across the brain, calming frenetic brain activity that can be seen in stressed, anxious or depressed people.

It aims to bring about more composed brain-wave activity, inducing clearer, calmer thinking, reducing anxiety and even imparting a sense of euphoric well-being to the wearer.

The idea that minute electrical currents may benefit health has been around for a long time, but few devices have managed to prove their efficacy.

The Alpha-Stim SCS uses cranial electrotherapy stimulation, which works by emitting electrical currents at similar frequencies to those found in the brain.

Emmanuel Sammut, 35, was one of the first Britons to test the £200 Alpha-Stim SCS.

He works long hours as an osteopath and senior lecturer at the British School of Osteopathy in London and is married with three young children.

He recently lost his father after a long illness which has had implications for his own well-being.

'I feel very stressed at the moment. Even though I've always had problems sleeping. It has been much worse recently. I was extremely close to my father and losing him has been terribly depressing.

'I find that my mind is full of "clutter". I'm fine when I go to bed – usually I am physically shattered, and I fall asleep quickly.

But then I wake up through the night. At one, two, three o'clock my mind is racing with all the things I have to do. By 4.15am I have usually had enough and I get up for the day.

'It leaves me exhausted. It bothers my wife, Nicky, too. No matter how quiet I am, I disturb her sleep when I wake up.

'The first time I used the Alpha-Stim I put it on a medium setting.

'It made me feel quite dizzy, which took me by surprise. Then I reduced it to level two; so I was barely aware of it, and found it so relaxing I started dozing off.

'After a 20-minute session it switches itself off, although you can extend the time to an hour if you need to.

'I tried the Alpha-Stim for a couple of days, using it once in the morning and once in the early evening. Both nights I slept from 11pm straight through till my alarm woke me at 5.45am.

'This hasn't happened in more than a year. Not only that, but I felt positively energised all day.

'As a health practitioner, I'm quite cynical about the use of therapeutic machinery, and I would not have believed this machine could make that big a difference.

'I would definitely be interested in trying it for longer because, during the limited trial I had, I felt great.'

Christopher Payne is managing director of LifeTools, the UK company marketing the Alpha-Stim SCS and the Alpha-Stim 100, a £300 model that incorporates pain relief.

He says: 'We have four main types of brain-wave activity. Beta waves make up our active, conscious activity. On an EEG they look like a series of jagged mountain peaks.

'Alpha waves appear when we are in a pleasant state of alert relaxation.

'Theta waves are often called the Zen or trance-like state. It is that dreamy wakefulness you experience just before you go to sleep. Lastly, delta waves mean you're asleep.

'If you look at the EEG of a stressed person, their brain shows all sorts of spiky patterns. But the Alpha-Stim SCS has a smoothing effect on the EEG, making it look much more like rolling hills.' Many people believe that the brain is in its optimal state when producing predominantly alpha waves.

Dr Peter Fenwick, a consultant neuropsychiatrist at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, is unsure about the theory. 'There is a nugget of truth in it – you can get alpha waves by being relaxed, but just because the brain is showing alpha activity doesn't necessarily mean that the person is relaxed.

'The EEGs of people with catastrophic brain stem injuries also show a lot of alpha activity.

'This is a very murky area, and comes down to controlled clinical data. It's all fairly contentious and not thoroughly investigated, even though the science behind it may be genuine.'

But Christopher Payne is keen to prove the device works. 'We can point to many studies that show CES is safe and effective in increasing the alpha activity of the brain.

'I am very keen to approach any organisation in the UK interested in doing controlled, double-blind studies to scientifically prove that the Alpha-Stim SCS is effective.'