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The Stress Annihilator

By Kate Nowak

Holidays have you stressed? Are you at the point where if you hear one more Christmas carol you'll deck somebody's hall and their french hen, too? Well, don't worry. You're not alone. According to recent polls, nearly half the population finds the holiday period too stressful to be enjoyed, so obviously Scrooge isn't the only one having nightmares this time of year.

So what's the solution? Well, for some it's a device about the size of a cell phone with two little electrodes that when attached to the earlobes zap the brain with minute pulses of electricity. This electrical current calms the frenetic brain activity common in stressed, anxious and depressed people. The result is that after a 20-minute "zap," the user emerges from the experience alert, energized and totally free of stress.

The device is called the Alpha-Stim. It's manufactured by a Mineral Wells-based company, Electromedical Products International, and has been used by over eight million to help handle stress and curb pain through a technological process called Cranial Electrotherapy Stimulation (CES).

Local businessman Richard Ball has been using the Alpha-Stim for several years to deal with both pain and stress, and to handle high blood pressure, as well.

"Through the years, I developed high blood pressure," Ball said, "and the doctor told me to start using Alpha-Stim when I get up in the morning. That's when most people's blood pressure is the highest. It doesn't take long to start bringing it down to normal again with the Alpha-Stim."

Ball said he's also had to deal for years with shoulder pain resulting from a 30-year-old injury.

"The best way to describe it," he said, "is I felt like I had a hard knot in my upper spine that wouldn't go away. Part of it was from the injury and then I think part of it was because of stress. I started using the Alpha-Stim and the knot disappeared. It's really good for dealing with any kind of stress."

Ball's wife, Connie, believes the Alpha-Stim to be good for dealing with just about any kind of ailment. She said she has routinely used it for pain management and has seen it work well for the treatment of many other maladies, too.

"The effects of it are incredible," she said. "I'm always recommending it. Just recently our granddaughter sprained her ankle. We brought out the Alpha-Stim and it immediately took the pain away and helped the injury heal much faster, too."

Sending an electrical current to the brain may sound a bit radical by today's standards, but the technique has been around for thousands of years. Aristotle and Plato used electric eels to cure all manner of ills, from the common headache to gout. In the 1800s, dentists were having astonishing successes using electrical devices for pain control. That success might have continued, had not a burgeoning pharmaceutical industry with the financial wherewithal to do it squelched the use of bioelectrical treatments. But though the pharmaceutical industry won the first round, they did not necessarily win the war. Research continued.

Just after the turn of the last century, two French doctors began experimenting with low-intensity electrical stimulation. Their method became known as "electrosleep" because it was thought to induce sleep. By the 1950's Soviet researchers were having dramatic results using electrical stimulation for the control of anxiety.

Alpha-Stim's inventor, neurobiologist Dr. Daniel L. Kirsch, has been a leader in the field of electromedicine since 1972. A Fellow of the American Institute of Stress, he served as clinical director of the Center for Pain and Stress-Related Disorders at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York and at the Sports Medicine Group in Santa Monica, California before he and his wife Tracey relocated to Mineral Wells in 1994. He frequently lectures to physicians around the world on pain and stress management and is considered a foremost authority.

Kirsch claims his interest in electromedicine came from a very eclectic background. Having started out in college as a philosophy major, he was especially interested, he says, in Oriental philosophy.

"That led to an interest in acupuncture which I thought was very interesting because it was actually a practical application of philosophy," Kirsch explained. "Eventually I realized that when the Chinese talk about yin and yang they are talking about positive and negative and that chi energy is really a form of electricity or bio-electricity."

Expanding his studies to include all of the various systems of healthcare, Kirsch discovered that systems like acupuncture, chiropractic, naturopathy and Auruveydic medicine are all revolved around biophysics, Western medicine is the exception. It alone is drug-based.

"In the latter half of the 20th century we have changed the entire world through our knowledge of physics, with the exception of therapeutic medicine," Kirsch explained. "Even in grade school we learn that the compounds that make up drugs or other chemicals can be broken down into other molecules, elements, atoms and subatomic particles. What we're working with is electrons which are subatomic particles. The problem is nobody has ever seen an electron and so it's a little more elusive concept."

Unfortunately, perhaps because of that elusiveness, many physicians have steered away from the concept of bio-electrical medicine and still rely heavily on chemical drug treatments and invasive surgeries. Kirsch maintains, however, a lot more can be done to improve health by easing the body into healing itself.

"Here in the United States we have a war on disease," Kirsch said. "We have a war on AIDS, a war on cancer, a war on heart disease. We don't need to attack the body, we need to realize that our diseases are part of us and that the greatest doctor is the body and sometimes we just need to gently show it the way towards normal function or homeostasis".

In that same light, Kirsch believes prescribing drugs for the treatment of stress and depression is also an attack, often producing harsh side effects that must then be treated, whereas using the Alpha-Stim to gently ease the body into an alpha state is much more beneficial to the body. This causes the production and release of endorphins (natural compounds that have a pain-relieving effect similar to morphine) and it produces no debilitating side effects but, instead, leaves the body relaxed and alert.

It's a theory that's gaining ground. Kirsch said at a recent American Psychiatric Association convention, Electromedical Products International set up a booth to demonstrate the Alpha-Stim.

"We were the busiest booth there," Kirsch said. "It's the first time we've ever had people standing up to use the Alpha-Stim but there were so many doctors crowding around our booth wanting a demonstration, there was no place to seat them."

The booth was so popular among convention-goers, Kirsch added, that a representative of one of the major pharmaceutical companies with a booth three times the size of Electromedical's came over to see what was being given away. The company was giving away nothing, however, except a chance to experience the Alpha-Stim at work. Since the convention, Kirsch said, they've had contact from many of the doctors present, all eager to know more about the therapy.

Kirsch is always glad to see doctors interested in learning more about Alpha-Stim. Though the product is sold over the counter everywhere else in the world, in the United States, because of Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations, it can only be sold through prescription. Kirsch is trying to have that law changed.

He has already spent several years and several hundred thousands of dollars in legal fees battling the FDA with little success, but Kirsch said he recently decided to take up the battle again after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center.

Having seen tremendous success in the use of Alpha-Stim to help ease the stress-related effects of the Gulf War in Kuwait in 1992, Kirsch was eager to get the product to New York to help victims of that attack. But because of the prescription need, even though he was ready to donate as many Alpha Stims as necessary, the offer became so wrapped up in red tape, Kirsch finally gave up trying. Now, with renewed zeal brought on by the experience, he has redirected his energies toward once more pressuring the FDA into lifting the restrictions. He said he hopes to have it done within the next six months. If he is successful, the Alpha-Stim could soon be available over-the-counter in the United States just as it is in other countries.

Until that time, however, anyone interested in acquiring an Alpha-Stim can ask his or her family physician for a prescription. There are actually two different models available; one for treating stress, anxiety, insomnia and depression, and the other, Kirsch says, for treating the whole body. Along with the earlobe electrodes, the second model comes with probes that can be placed in various locations for the management of pain and other problems. The cost is initially a hefty one, ranging from about \$750 down to \$500, but in the long run it is far less costly than even a moderately priced prescription drug that must be taken over a long period of time. Some insurance companies will pick up at least a portion of the tab. Reconditioned models are also available at a slightly lower rate. For those who would like to try out the Alpha-Stim before committing to the purchase, units can also be rented for about \$150 per month.

One thing is certain. In a society where a joyous celebration is cause for half the population to be stressed, there's no denying Alpha-Stim has found it's niche.