

Processing Feelings Using the Alpha-Stim® Stress Control System

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The Alpha-Stim Stress Control System (Electromedical Products International, Inc., Mineral Wells, Texas, www.alpha-stim.com) is a cranial electrotherapy stimulator (CES) device approved by the Food and Drug Administration to treat anxiety, depression and insomnia by, or on the order of a licensed health care professional. It is the subject of over 50 scientific publications, which is more than most drugs. It has been used to assist people withdrawing from drugs (1-3), help children and adults with attention deficit disorder (4,5), and improve the ability to obtain restorative sleep, feelings of well being and the quality of life ratings of people suffering from the severe pain of fibromyalgia (6,7). A comparison of CES with antidepressant drugs shows it to be far more cost-effective and three times more effective than the average selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), yet devoid of any significant side effects (8).

While the experimental data clearly proves the efficacy of this technology, as a psychologist I have found the literature to be lacking an experiential discussion about using CES to process feelings, a crucial component of successful psychotherapy. Accordingly, I have prepared a paper for my own patients and others who would like an understanding of how an Alpha-Stim device might help them process feelings, a subject not covered by any CES publication to date, despite the fact that CES is used by several hundred therapists in their daily practice. Following is a copy of what I give to my patients, when they take an Alpha-Stim SCS device to use at home.

Getting Started on the Alpha-Stim Stress Control System

Now that you have your stress control device, here are some guiding ideas. Please review this information, so that you can receive the most benefit. The questions and answers come from hundreds of hours of clinical observations of how people respond to this particular device, and from consultations with Dr. Daniel L. Kirsch of Mineral Wells, Texas, the neuroscientist who designed the technology.

What does Alpha-Stim do?

It provides a slight energy boost to your central nervous system (CNS), and that helps it do its many jobs a little better. One of its jobs is processing pain. Another is processing feelings. Your CNS is already constantly at work doing those two jobs, so every time that you use the Alpha-Stim SCS it helps you to process pain, and it helps you to process feelings at an unconscious level.

“Unconscious” here refers to non-verbal processing of feelings. You will probably not be able to talk about what is happening to your feelings as they begin to emerge during an Alpha-Stim treatment. Putting words to the emerging feelings is sometimes possible within a few minutes, and that helps process the emerging feelings quite a bit. *Unconscious* processing of your feelings is the good and the bad news all at the same time. Alpha-Stim treatments help you cope, particularly with *daily feelings*, which is the good news. It also gets behind your defenses to where the *deep feelings* are kept, which can be bad news if you do not process those feelings in some other way, like consciously talking about them. Do not be surprised if you uncover deep feelings using the SCS. *This is a tool* to help you process feelings, which will need to be dealt with sooner or later. I believe that Alpha-Stim treatments *process daily feelings* and *make initial contact with deep feelings*, which can boost them into consciousness for further processing. If headaches or bodily symptoms come up during the treatments, they very likely are attached to the emerging deep feelings. Do not stop the Alpha-Stim treatments if you get a headache or some other bodily reaction. It is preferable to *talk* about the emerging feelings and to keep your Alpha-Stim plan intact.

“Processing pain” refers to syndromes like fibromyalgia, persistent muscle tension and other kinds of chronic, pain-related conditions. As a psychologist I am not trained in medicine, so it is not within my domain to speak of medical matters. Nonetheless, it seems germane for me to report what I have observed when people use the SCS. I have seen it help people with bodily pain, pretty dramatically, so I can say that it is *one* approach to pain management. Please note that there are two other Alpha-Stim devices, the Alpha-Stim 100 and the Alpha-Stim Personal Pain Manager, that are designed for pain management. They have electrodes that target specific pain

sites. The 100 and the SCS have electrodes that clip to the ear lobes, and that is how they help the CNS, but the SCS does not have an attachment for targeting particular pain sites.

Interestingly, the Aug. 22, 2005 edition of *The Los Angeles Times* featured an article on the latest thinking about fibromyalgia. On the front page of the "Health" section, this article strongly suggested that the emerging, appropriate approach to treating fibromyalgia is to recognize that it is a "pain-processing disorder – arising in the brain and spinal cord [*i.e.*, the CNS] – that disrupts the ways the body perceives and communicates pain." I believe that the Alpha-Stim SCS helps with fibromyalgia because it enables the CNS to process pain more effectively. For further questions about treating fibromyalgia and chronic pain conditions, call the Alpha-Stim manufacturer at (800) 367-7246 or log on to www.alpha-stim.com.

What do you mean by an "Alpha-Stim treatment"?

It takes at least 20 minutes using the SCS to get the "effect". An hour or longer will give you a better chance. When people use it for less than 20 minutes they can sometimes feel a little bit worse. It is better to stay hooked up to this energy-booster long enough to process the feelings that begin to emerge during an "Alpha-Stim treatment". Here is the effect you are looking for: *Clear thinking and increased energy*. That does not happen every time. In some cases it may take a few weeks of daily treatments. Nonetheless, that is what you are seeking, over the few weeks that it usually takes to gain the maximum effect, which is cumulative. You may have a good effect the very first time that you use it, and it may last for a few minutes or hours. But in order to make the good effect last longer you will need to keep on with daily treatments for a few weeks. You can strengthen the good effect by continuing the treatment for a few minutes after you reach the initial effect. Alpha-Stim treatments do not need to make you spend time away from your daily routine. You can use it while you do paperwork, computer work, watching TV or reading the newspaper. It seems best if you can create a positive atmosphere, like listening to great music or using it while you are in the middle of an enjoyable activity. You can even stick the device in your pocket while you take a walk or while you are doing mundane chores.

Do we know what happens at the brain level during Alpha-Stim treatments?

Alpha-Stim treatments appear to strengthen your brain's joy pathways. Resolution of painful, conflicted feelings is a common result. A pilot study demonstrated that just one 20-minute treatment increased Alpha brain waves and decreased Delta and Theta brain waves (9). What does that mean? *It makes you less anxious and more alert at the brain level.*

People often end up in joy at the end of a therapy session with the SCS going all the while, even if deep feelings are uncovered during a long session. One person said that afterwards that she felt "as though she had just had a massage." That was a very good outcome. She dealt with some deep feelings in the session, and her whole body felt better. It seems to get people to and eventually get them through painful feelings, and leads them to joy. This does not automatically happen right away, particularly if a trauma with a lot of bodily pain emerges. What I am emphasizing here is very basic: *Alpha treatments steadily process feelings, so continuing to process the stuck ones eventually allows your brain to return to joy*. Whenever negative feelings "take over", you will not be able to feel joy. But when those feelings subside, your brain automatically returns to joy. That is why it is worth the effort to keep fine-tuning your protocol until you get the right effect. And that is why it is worth the effort to push through a difficult set of feelings during therapy – after resolution is reached *people return to joy right away* and leave in a much-improved set of feelings.

Working on a difficult set of feelings is like climbing a mountain that is partially hidden by clouds. Alpha-Stim can lead you to the mountain and help as you begin to climb it. While you are still ascending it, you may find that the mountain is much bigger than you expected. Do not quickly turn back. Alpha-Stim is like equipment that can help on any mountain, even those that are more difficult than you could tell beforehand. Mountain climbing and processing feelings always bring unforeseen challenges, so keep the right equipment nearby. If the mountain surprisingly presents you with dangerous territory, it may be a good idea to enlist some help. It is always good to be part of a team. Try to keep in mind that you will soon be heading down the other side of the mountain, and that will make it worth the extra effort.

What signs suggest that Alpha-Stim is needed?

When your feelings do not get resolved using the customary methods, Alpha-Stim may be the right tool. Difficulties maintaining focus on deep feelings during therapy, or leaving therapy in an unsettled state may point

to unresolved feelings. Fear that remains unrelieved over time also points to unresolved feelings. These are a few common signs that indicate Alpha-Stim could help.

“Ups and downs” in daily feelings can come from too much stress. Because Alpha-Stim helps with these kinds of feelings, Alpha-Stim treatments can be beneficial for people who have a high stress life. But you do not have to be in treatment in order to benefit from Alpha-Stim. Some spouses and friends of my patients have given me unsolicited positive reports after they have profited from using Alpha-Stim as well, apart from therapy.

What about using Alpha-Stim during therapy sessions?

If it improves the therapy process, use it. *I'm seeing better processing of feelings using Alpha-Stim during therapy sessions.* It is a seemingly subtle, yet powerful feeling tool. Good feeling work often results if people get 20 minutes or more Alpha-Stim time just before a therapy session. When deep feelings are worked on, it is often a good idea to use the Alpha-Stim beforehand, during therapy and for another hour afterward. That can produce a better sense of resolution. For phone sessions, it seems good to use before-during-and-after Alpha-Stim treatments as well.

Is there a specific Alpha-Stim treatment protocol for me?

Not exactly, but here are some ideas that will help you fine-tune your treatments. When strong feelings come up they will need to be worked on, so do not give up and discontinue your plan. *Please try out a few variations in your treatment protocol, so that you will be able to find what suits you best.* Try different lengths of treatments, different numbers of treatments per day, different power levels, and what times of the day work best for you, so that you can develop a good daily rhythm. You will get in touch with your feelings, and that always gives you an open door for progress. You should probably avoid using Alpha-Stim treatments before bedtime, since they may keep you awake. This being said, some people find that SCS treatments help them fall asleep, at least during times of high stress. Others say that it helps them to put the SCS unit on the very minute they awaken, and then they go back to sleep for another hour.

Is it better to use Alpha-Stim whenever a problem comes up or to develop a plan?

Try to develop some consistency in your body's daily rhythm. A plan will probably help. Eat at the same times each day, exercise at the same times, take your meds at the same times each day, and use Alpha-Stim treatments at the same times. You can add extra treatments in cases where you need it to calm you down. Most of the time Alpha-Stim treatments hold anxiety in place, which helps your daily rhythm. Two hours or more daily seem to help with high stress. Do not change your meds. Alpha treatments will not interfere with meds.

What about addictions or the need to use extreme coping methods?

People can easily get to a “stuck” place. “I really need a cigarette”, or ice cream or some other addiction, is a daily struggle for many people. Most people can calm down by using an Alpha-Stim treatment from somewhere between 20 and 60 minutes, or even longer, whenever they get to their stuck place – anxiety, depression, craving or whatever the troubling experience may be. Alpha-Stim treatments can replace desperate, less desirable, coping measures, like eating problems, taking extra meds or self-harm.

I have found that Alpha-Stim can be ineffective with addictions because it is not immediate enough. An addict is looking for a “right now” solution, but Alpha-Stim seems to be ineffective for the first 20 minutes or more. It is best to stay on track, so my advice is to keep the Alpha-Stim attached until you get “the effect”, even if it takes much longer than 20 minutes. It does take that kind of discipline to win.

Do you have any tips for me?

I have found that when folks begin Alpha-Stim treatments they often keep the same mindset that they use when they take meds – “I'll take just as little as possible, and stop taking it as soon as I can.” While that is often a suitable approach for meds, it will take a completely different mindset to get the best results from Alpha-Stim. Since no damage comes from too much Alpha-Stim treatment or from treatment that lasts too many months, a suitable mindset would be something like this. “I'll see how much Alpha-Stim time is right for me, rather than how little.” It is better to take a “full dose” of Alpha-Stim rather than trying to take as little as possible. Experiment with different “doses” to find out how much it takes to give you the optimal effect, and as long as it is helping you there is no reason to stop.

Use Alpha-Stim in a flexible way, but use it regularly. Combine it with calming music or with spiritual time in order to maximize the effect. *Use it regularly for about 3 weeks, and see if it helps you gain strength and keep your emotional balance.* Try starting the day with at least 20 minutes or even 60 minutes. Adding another treatment in the afternoon can be helpful. *You can also use it during spells of strong fears, anxiety or depression.* After you have gotten the effect that you are looking for, you can thin treatments out to every other day, by using it for fewer minutes or by lowering the strength of the current indicator. Here is a rule of thumb: Keep using it until it helps you and as long as it helps you. As therapy progresses, Alpha-Stim treatments will continue to be appropriate because they help process the feelings that continue to emerge.

Here is how you can approach recurring problems – target particular behaviors that interrupt your day, like these.

- If you get anxious just before your spouse comes home from work, it may be a good idea to boost your calmness with 20 minutes of Alpha-Stim treatment. In fact, anything that makes you anxious – an activity, a person or even a time of day can be targeted.
- If you cannot rid yourself of a craving, like sugar, nicotine or alcohol, replace it with Alpha-Stim treatments. We may soon find that, taken together with proven treatment approaches, Alpha-Stim may facilitate weight loss and drug addiction recovery, and may even help with alcoholism. The key seems to be replacing the unwanted craving with an Alpha-Stim treatment, to supply the hoped-for CNS energy boost that usually comes from sugar or drugs, including nicotine, caffeine or other substances.

Here is another tip. When deep feelings are worked on in therapy there needs to be a lot of nurture and support available. Do not neglect to pursue lots of positives and please create some extra time for fun and frolic while the deep work is underway. Neglecting this, you may find yourself being “short” with people you love, and find that your coping skills are not as effective as usual. That may happen when Alpha-Stim treatments get behind your conscious defenses, so it will help you to add some extra support while the feeling processing is still underway.

A Few Thoughts about the Future

Despite the anecdotal nature of my observations, it would seem feasible to carry out more purely scientific studies about the effectiveness of Alpha-Stim. It will take funding, no doubt, but my observations suggest that such studies should be carried out. I hope that this section will provide some ideas for designing experiments and studies, and will be a challenge for therapists to find out in their clinical practice, to what extent Alpha-Stim can be beneficial for their patients.

If other therapists get the same results that I am getting, it will not be very long before Alpha-Stim becomes as widely used as meds are today. That will be quite a change, and it will have some far-reaching consequences. For one, the role of meds would have to be fully re-examined. Here is the question begging to be answered: *Which conditions/symptoms are helped by boosting the CNS with Alpha-Stim, and which do better with meds?* As we uncover the answer to that question we will discover the correct course of treatment for many of our patients, particularly those who are not able to process deep feelings, so let us give our best effort in providing an answer.

Another far-reaching consequence is the necessity of dealing directly with feelings that come up during sessions which use Alpha-Stim. Those sessions tend to bring unconscious feelings into conscious awareness, and that requires therapists to concentrate on dealing with those feelings as they emerge. We may need to spend some extra therapy time, in those cases, and may need to be more flexible than usual in supplying follow-up phone calls. Do not be surprised if patients using the SCS device during treatment sometimes feel exhausted following a session, and need to take some extra Alpha-Stim time in the waiting room before they are ready to drive home.

Treatment for eating disorders and drug addictions are multi-million dollar industries. After all, the quality of people’s life is at stake when they have problems in the areas of eating or addictions, so they are very eager to make progress. If Alpha-Stim can cut recovery time and cost, we need to find that out.

Other possible contributions from Alpha-Stim would include creating guidelines for home-based treatment of anxiety, depression and insomnia. This technology may reduce treatment time, and make it feasible for therapists to help more people by including Alpha-Stim treatments at home.

Many people will benefit if professionals from disciplines like psychology, psychiatry, neurology, pain-management, nutrition and biofeedback can combine their results using Alpha-Stim, and find out together how to use this technology more effectively. I cannot exactly see the future, but it seems to me that if millions of people can benefit from Alpha-Stim, *they* will soon discover that it can help them, and *they* will start using Alpha-Stim. Therapists may need to learn how this technology works fairly soon, or they will not be able to answer their patients' questions about whether to purchase an Alpha-Stim device. It remains for professionals and therapists to determine – in scientific and in clinical settings – *how to help people use Alpha-Stim in therapy and apart from therapy.*

A Closing Note

I have been a little hesitant to release this paper until my observations cover a whole year. The results have been almost too good to be true. Or perhaps, I thought, there may be a placebo effect, or it even may be that my patients want me to feel good about my “discoveries”, and are telling me what I want to hear. I have now passed the 1-year mark, and I believe, more than ever, that the results are reliable. People keep on using the Alpha-Stim units without me mentioning it. They bring it along to treatment, week after week, they make it a part of their daily routine, and it has become a useful part of their lives. Some even let me know that they have found out just how much it helps because they left it home for a weekend away or during vacation. They reported that it was really missed, and they felt relieved to get it back into their routines. *“Seemingly subtle but powerful” sums it up.*

I believe that it is unethical for therapists not to try using the Alpha-Stim SCS in their caseloads. If therapists know that something may help their patients and yet refuse to try it, that is unethical. These are not simply “initial findings” – we have over 50 scientific studies that support these clinical observations. After continuing treatment with about 30 people in therapy for a year, I believe that my initial findings are supported by what my patients report.

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