

Picture: ROSIE HALLAM



CALMNESS AT HAND: Audrey with the device that has helped her feel more relaxed

I WOULD NOT BE WITHOUT MY HANDY ANXIETY BUSTER

IT IS HARD to see how clipping a small electrode to each ear could make you feel calmer, reduce depression or improve sleep. Yet advocates of microcurrent therapy claim that it can do all these things and more.

Among them is Audrey West, an 80-year-old from north London who suffers from agoraphobia, insomnia and anxiety.

"I used to have to take tranquillisers before I went on any long journey but the side effects are not pleasant and I would arrive feeling quite dozey," she says.

Today Audrey carries a small device called an Alpha-Stim whenever she travels. After attaching the device's electrodes to her ears, she almost immediately feels calmer. As a result she has been able to take foreign holidays and to sleep in unfamiliar hotel bedrooms.

"Since my husband died two years ago I found it difficult to go very far on my own but now I have almost given up tranquillisers and can travel and sleep wherever I want to. I carry the Alpha-Stim in my handbag. I would not be without it."

Microcurrent therapy uses minute amounts of electricity to mimic the body's own electrical impulses, so speeding up the healing process and inducing relaxation. The technology has been widely used for many years in the United States to treat a range of problems associated with pain but is less well-known in the UK.

One practitioner who has found the treatment helpful is Newcastle-based acupuncturist Feras Jerjis, who has used it to treat panic attacks and anxiety. "Even people in the middle of a strong panic attack can become calm and relaxed within minutes," he says.

"In my experience it works in 80 to 90 per cent of cases and does so incredibly fast. You can see people's breathing rate slow down and observe changes in the rapid eye movement that occurs in an anxiety attack. Patients look and feel more relaxed."

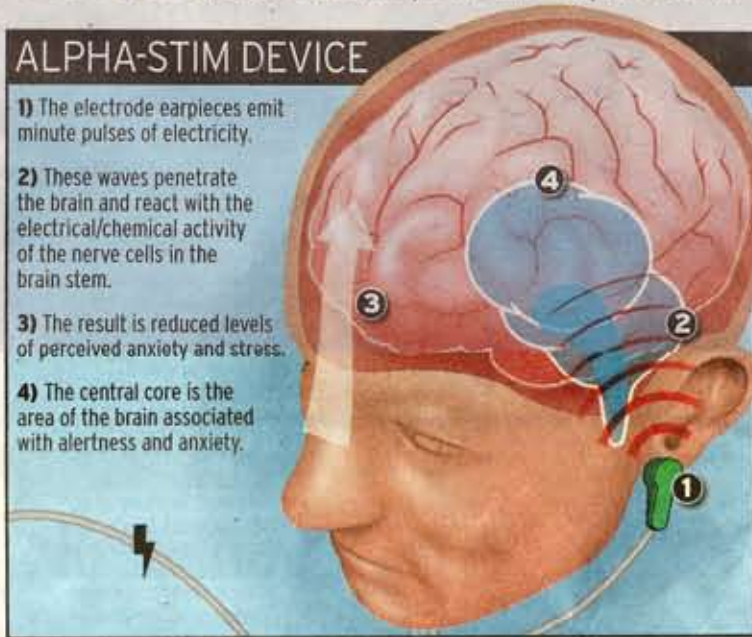
Feras has successfully used the device on people suffering from post-traumatic stress and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). "One of my patients was a musician with OCD who had to walk six times round the block before and after every concert. In America, where the blocks can be very large, this became quite a problem. Treatment with microcurrent therapy helped him manage his OCD so that it interfered less with his life."

Patients with anxiety are recommended to use the device for up to an hour a day for two or three weeks. "My clinical observation is that the effect is lasting and that after a while people need the machine less and less," he says. It is not

Audrey West suffered from agoraphobia and insomnia until a device that attaches to the earlobe and emits tiny electrical currents to the brain reduced her anxiety. BARBARA LANTIN reports on the portable Alpha-Stim

ALPHA-STIM DEVICE

- 1) The electrode earpieces emit minute pulses of electricity.
- 2) These waves penetrate the brain and react with the electrical/chemical activity of the nerve cells in the brain stem.
- 3) The result is reduced levels of perceived anxiety and stress.
- 4) The central core is the area of the brain associated with alertness and anxiety.



known exactly how the therapy works but it is thought that the tiny electrical currents generated by the Alpha-Stim change the electrical and chemical activity of nerve cells in the brainstem. Research studies show that microcurrent therapy – also called cranial electrotherapy stimulation (CES) – increases alpha brain waves that are associated with relaxation. There is some evidence that it can lower anxiety levels and improve sleep.

Clinical trials have shown that microcurrent therapy can reduce

'I have almost given up using tranquillisers'

muscle and back pain and relieve headaches. In an American study of men with spinal cord injury, researchers found that those who received treatment with Alpha-Stim reported bigger drops in their pain levels than those who had used a dummy machine.

The science is similar to that behind the Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulator or TENS machine, but the levels of current are much smaller. Users experience a tingling sensation in the ears, though other side effects are rare.

Osteopath Suzanne Pollock, from Sleaford in Lincolnshire, has used the Alpha-Stim device on patients with knee pain. "I

tried it alongside osteopathic treatment and I do think it speeded up my patients' recovery," she says. "It was more effective than ultrasound for knee pain."

WORK on the effect of microcurrent therapy on tissue repair by Professor Tim Watson, of the School of Health and Emergency Professions at the University of Hertfordshire, is showing promising results. "Small electrical currents flow through the body all the time and change when you get injured," he says. "That change in the internal electrical currents is part of the body's repair process. If the currents don't flow to the right place – in other words the battery is flat – you do not mend. Microcurrent therapy helps jump-start the body's cellular activity."

Early results of Professor Watson's research suggest that not only does it decrease pain, it also helps tissue repair in conditions such as tennis elbow. "Using very high resolution ultrasound scanning we can see some effect on the tissues from microcurrent therapy," he says. "I do not have evidence that it works in the same way with anxiety and depression but it sounds logical and plausible."

● For more information see www.themicrocurrentsite.co.uk or telephone 01952 670951.