



Semi-supine practice guide

Lie on your back on a firm surface, in a quiet space.
Have knees up, head on a few books, arms on your torso.
Without reacting, notice sensations which arise.
Refrain from holding or imposing a shape.
Form conscious intentions for improving quality.

What is Semi-Supine?

Semi-supine, also known as 'active rest,' 'constructive rest,' or 'lying on the floor with your head on books,' is a learning tool and ongoing part of practising Alexander Technique. Semi-supine gives a framework for positive movement towards ease and comfort.



Taking time out

Alexander Technique is designed to be applied in activity throughout the day. It is also useful to take a break from activity and dedicate some time to cultivating Alexander Technique skills.

Because there is minimal demand on the body, lying down is a useful position in which to develop the skills of constructive thinking that one might later use in upright and energetic activity.

Semi-supine provides a context for releasing tensions and promoting awareness. It gives the body a chance to recalibrate symmetry and level of resting muscle tone.

Set-up: Support for the practice

Find a quiet and warm space to lie on your back, with your head on a few paperback books. Leave your knees up, with feet flat on the floor. Keep knees and feet a comfortable width apart. This position itself often brings relief to sufferers of back pain and neck pain.

Having knees raised relieves the muscular pull of the legs on the pelvis. When the pelvis is able to rest and be freed for movement, the lower back can release into the support below.

Books

The books under the head provide a firm surface and allow for adjustments in height. The appropriate number of books may change from day to day, or during a session. The optimum height is one which cultivates an easeful connection of the head to the whole torso. Experiment with higher or lower book heights and notice how your whole body responds to directions.

As a starting point, the number of books you could fit behind your head when standing back to a wall is a rough guide for height. You can then refine.

If the jaw is compressing the throat, the books may be too high. If the head feels tilted back, or you feel tightening at the back of the neck, the books may be too low. If in doubt, err on the high side.

A firm surface

A firm surface is essential so the body has a clear sensation of support. When the body has this information, it can recognise and release un-needed muscle tension more effectively. A firm surface also enables us to perceive and use support.

Mattresses are too soft to give a positive sense of support. A carpeted floor might suit well, so long as it is not so hard as to be uncomfortable.

Customisation

The benefits of semi-supine arise from being in a supported position while applying constructive thinking. Some students may need to make adjustments to accommodate personal idiosyncrasies, but bear in mind that the traditional form has evolved because of its effectiveness.

If knees won't stay balanced without tightening in the legs, a belt around the knees, a heavy blanket over the top, or a bolster under lower legs might be appropriate. A towel rolled up and inserted under the neck can relieve neck pain, and a towel or small pillow under elbows can help ease shoulder discomfort.

Duration

Ten minutes a day is a reasonable starting point. Whilst the semi-supine position itself is restorative, the Alexander Technique context for lying down emphasises constructive thinking. The appropriate duration will be determined by how long one is attentive to the process.

It does take some time for the brain to realise it doesn't need to be pushing the body about, so longer sessions may also be beneficial. However, any duration is effective if engaged with wholeheartedly - even just two minutes.

When to practise

Semi-supine is very useful for breaking up long hours at a computer or instrument. Some students use semi-supine to relieve work tension when they return home. Practice first thing in the morning relieves aches with which we might have awoken with, and gets us going for the day. Practising before bed is an excellent preparation for sleep and may help in retraining poor sleep habits.

Semi-supine practice helps integrate change initiated in a lesson or treatment. It reinforces learning and builds on skills worked on during lessons, creating a clear context for continuing the work independently.

After semi-supine, students typically feel more coordinated and have better clarity of thought. This makes their next task more productive and increases the accessibility of Alexander Technique during that task. Lying down before heavy physical work, a stressful meeting, or a sporting contest or artistic performance, can help one to engage effectively.

In cases of intense pain, stress or tension, a semi-supine session may be restorative and return one to an easeful state. Any time you feel you are losing control is a good time to practise.

Alternating between semi-supine and a skill practice such as playing a musical instrument, provides an invaluable insight into our capacity for ease, and habits which might interfere with this.

Frequency

Although it's not practical for everyone, a commitment to practice every day has great merit. Even a couple of minutes will help maintain some momentum. If you are time-pressured, or distracted during practice time, use your smart phone or a timer so you can attend unconditionally.

Keep your eyes open

We are training a skill to be applied in activity, so it follows that practising with eyes open is constructive. We also want to stay alert while lying and not associate semi-supine time with napping. Having eyes open helps maintain awareness of our external environment, while simultaneously being attuned to internal sensations. If it becomes a struggle and keeping your eyes open becomes counter productive, then try again after a short rest.

What to do while you lie

At home, you can give to yourself the kind of instructions the teacher has given you during a lesson. Movements which might accompany verbal guidance in a lesson are redundant in home practice. You can allow spontaneous movements which arise, and reposition yourself to accommodate changes as needed, but refrain from holding or imposing a shape.

Trying to read, use electronic devices or watch TV will undermine the practice.

Constructive thinking will generally fall within categories of *observation*, *inhibition* and *direction*. Some suggestions to get you started are below.

Observation

Notice:

- Where you have contact with the floor,
- The quality of that contact,
- What is moving, what is not,
- What is available to move, what is not,
- Your visual and aural environment you are in,
- Sensations of pressure, heat, texture and air movement,
- What kind of thoughts arise (just notice, and move on),
- Any changes which arise.

Inhibition

As you observe, allow the body's natural response to observation but refrain from impulsive physical reactions or judgements of what you notice. This discipline creates the opportunity to choose a response consciously. Alexander Technique proposes that we are best served to attend to our observations indirectly, by using *directions*.

Directions

Direction in Alexander Technique is an intention which doesn't have volitional action. To fulfil this criterion, the instructions you give yourself might use passive verbs and invite a qualitative change rather than a positional change. We create directions to address our observations or whatever else may be relevant at the time.

Some starting ideas might be:

- Invite freedom in the neck,
- Form the intention for a three-dimensional expansion through the torso,
- Ask for lengthening of the spine, replete with its curves,
- Allow shoulders to find a neutral relationship with the torso,
- Request that the head cooperate with where gravity is taking it,
- Soften the points of contact with the floor,
- Let all the ribs move, in all directions, for easeful breath,
- Be available for movement.

You don't need to remember this list. You don't need to include any of the above. It's just a starting point. Conduct your own experiments to find what thinking is most constructive for you. Discuss this with your teacher so you can refine the practice together.

Refining

If you feel nothing during the practice, don't let this be a discouragement. Usually there is a tangible difference after a session. If not, some more refinement may be needed. If the lying-down practice is not comfortable, consider the manner in which you are approaching it and revise accordingly, or discuss it with your teacher.

The more you practise, the more your sensitivity improves and the more skilled your directing becomes. Semi-supine provides students with the chance to access independently the absence of pain, sensations of lightness or flow which are associated with Alexander Technique. The more you practise, the more the effects linger and provide a baseline of ongoing ease in activity.