



Lying on Books

Christine Inserra

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Lying on books is a traditional **Alexander Technique** “self care” tool. It is one of the safest and easiest ways to “erase” tension of the day and decompress one’s spine. All that is required is a firm surface such as the floor covered with a rug or yoga mat and a stack of small paperback books. (If one cannot get up and down from the floor easily a massage table, dining room table or even firm futon can be used.)

What are the benefits?

- 1) **Core muscles** that work to hold us up all day are given a rest.
- 2) The spine, when horizontal, is given a chance to **get out of the compressive force of gravity**. Moisture that is usually compressed out of the soft center of inter- vertebral discs is given a chance to reabsorb back into the discs. One is often slightly taller after lying on books.
- 3) A **mild traction** force gently lengthens the spine and muscles, thus **reducing compression** on bulging discs or nerves.
- 4) The weight of one’s head on the books helps create a **CV4 cranial release**. This decompresses the bones at back of the skull and allows the 4th ventricle in the brainstem to circulate fluid more freely.
- 5) Tight neck and back **muscles relax** often reducing back, neck and headache pain.
- 6) Rounded upper back and shoulders (thoracic kyphosis) are reversed and reduced in size. This usually **reduces fatigue and pain between the shoulder blades**.
- 7) One can experience **renewed energy** after only 5-20 minutes on the books!

You might ask, wouldn’t just taking a nap in bed or on the sofa do the same?

Well to some degree the rest obtained in a reclining position is of considerable benefit no matter where it is done. However the procedure of lying on books adds other key elements of benefit:

- 1) The firmness of the floor and the books under one’s head provide decompression and traction to a higher degree than one would experience if lying on the bed with a soft pillow.
- 2) The fact that your knees are up adds traction to the low back. The correct book height adds traction to the spine and neck in the opposite direction.
- 3) The firmness of the books helps induce the CV4 cranial release.

How Often? Daily or even every other day is helpful on a maintenance basis. It may be done many times a day if it gives you relief. Following sustained activity using your back, neck, arms or legs, it is particularly effective. **Can it be done too much?** Probably, yet there is a time and a place for everything if it is helpful. I’ve had some patients report doing in every hour to get through a very bad day. I do not advise being on the books for more than 20 minutes, yet if it is the only position of relief, then you must make that determination. **What happens if you fall asleep on the books?** I’ve done it but feel that it can over stretch the pelvis of individuals who are very flexible so do not advise it.

Precautions: Discontinue if any back or neck pain develops or worsens. Do not get down onto the floor if you have any concern about getting back up safely or getting up without increasing pain (consider using books on firm bed). Do not attempt this procedure if there is any chance of a fracture, instability or hypermobility.

How to do it.

Perform on a carpeted floor or padded firm surface from **5-20 minutes as tolerated.**

1) Place a **stack of paperback books on the floor** where you think your head will rest. Start with a 1 ½ inch stack.

Sit tall on the floor with your knees bent, feet flat and your weight on your sitting bones (rather than on the back of your buttocks)

Place your **hands behind** you, fingers pointing backwards. Square yourself by rocking side to side.

2) Slowly lay yourself straight **back on your elbows**, then spread your elbows out sideways as you lie all the way down.

3) You may need to **adjust the location of the books** so they rest only under your head, not on your neck.

4) **Feet** should be placed with edges of the heels in line with edge of hips. If feet are too close the knees will fall out. If too far out, the knees will fall in. Strive for **even pressure on the soles** of your feet.

5) **Knees** should be at an easy bend. Knees should point slightly away from each other. If you are tired it is better to let knees fall together than hold them too far apart.

6) **Hands** should rest on your abdomen.

7) **The correct book height** will bring your head up just slightly above the level of your spine for a mild stretch. Starting with no books, most people will feel their chin is tipped up, forehead tipped back and neck arched. Add one book of about ¼" under your head and get a sense of whether you "like no books or one". Keep adding one more book at a time till you get to the point that you feel the height is creating a tightness in your throat and/or that your neck is just stretched too much. Then remove one book and see if that is comfortable but gives a mild stretch.

People tend to average from ¼" to 1 ½". There is no right height to strive for. It has to do with the depth of one's chest, flexibility of one's spine and overall size.

As you lie on the books your spine will lengthen and you are likely to notice that there is no slack left in your neck. You may also feel an increased pressure on the back of your head.

Take ¼" book out at this point.

Note that the correct height of the books **may vary** up to ¼" depending on the firmness of the surface you lie on and the particular tightness of your neck on a given day.

8) **Get up** first by rolling onto your side and then get up in the easiest way you can. Avoid bolting upright with a sit up.



Too Low:
Chin higher than forehead, neck arched.



Too High:
Forehead too high, Neck too stretched.



Just Right:
Forehead slightly higher than chin, neck mildly stretched.