

# Is your daily commute driving you to despair?



Many of us spend quite long periods in our cars each day. All too often this contributes to back, neck or shoulder pain and stress. Researcher and

Alexander Technique teacher **Julia Woodman** continues this series of articles with some practical steps that you can take to make your daily commute a bit easier.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JULIA WOODMAN

SEATS – from chairs and sofas to car seats – tend to be designed more for how they look than for fitting in with human anatomy and function. In the design of car seats, safety is rightly a big concern as everything possible needs to be done to give maximum protection in the event of an accident. However, I would suggest that car manufacturers could do a lot more to design seats that do not have a detrimental effect on our long-term health.

Most car seats tend to tip the driver/passenger into a c-shaped slump, which puts pressure on the spine, joints and internal organs. Instead, car seat designers could help encourage a more upright position, as shown in the contrasting images below.

So, what can we do to improve our existing car seats? Here are some suggestions to try out:

- Most cars allow some adjustments to be made to the height and position of the driver's seat and steering wheel, so do explore all the options to find out what causes you the least strain.

- Use a foam block or wedge to make the seat as flat and as level as possible to allow yourself to balance on your sitting bones (see below).

- If the chair back is sloping backwards, bring it more vertical. If necessary use a foam block, wedge or cushion to help you stay more upright with a firm support behind you.

- Try a small cushion at shoulder blade level (use elastic to attach it to the seat back).

## How are you sitting?

It's worth spending some time trying out the tips above. In my car, I now sit on a foam block that makes the seat level rather than bucket-shaped, and I have a foam wedge behind me as well as a small cushion at shoulder level – all of this allows me to sit upright, balanced on my sitting bones and without the headrest poking into me.

However, even the best equipment in the world may not be enough to prevent backache. The most important factor is yourself and your "human ergonomics". This is where the Alexander Technique can be so helpful. An Alexander teacher can enable you to discover how to drive with less effort and stress, sitting easily in balance, holding the steering wheel with less tension – and "rising above" the antics of fellow road users.

If you're trying to sit up straight or hold yourself upright

then you're not on the right track. Good posture – like that seen in most toddlers – is effortless. It takes time, and Alexander work, to wake up the deep postural muscles that are the hallmark of a "strong back", but a good start is to develop an awareness of your sitting bones and the support from underneath.

So, find a reasonably firm chair to sit on and slide your hands under your bottom from each side so that you're briefly sitting on your hands. Can you feel the bony parts of yourself that you're sitting on? These are our sitting bones, the rocker-shaped bottom of the pelvis. Now you've found them, take your hands away and try gently shifting yourself forwards or backwards to get a sense of how to balance on them, allowing your weight to drop straight down through the chair.

## How are you seeing?

Modern lifestyles, particularly the widespread use of mobile technology, are having the effect of narrowing our attention and visual field. Our vision is becoming more like a spotlight that focuses only on the specific object that our attention is currently on. This way of seeing can become a habit, one which is not helpful when driving! A safe driver is aware of everything around the current focal point, so that while looking at the road ahead, they will still immediately see movement at the periphery of their vision, such as if the door of a parked car they're about to pass begins to open.

If your visual field seems quite narrow or two-dimensional and you're



Skeleton driver balanced on its sitting bones and close-up of the back of the pelvis and lower spine, showing the sitting bones in contact with the supporting surface below

interested in improving it, begin by spending a few minutes each day, perhaps when out on a walk, gazing at something and noticing the shapes and colours of what's around it (these won't be in focus). Initially, don't experiment with this when driving in case it distracts you. Developing more natural, "panoramic" (more three-dimensional) vision can take time and practice but it will pay dividends in whatever you're doing.

## How are you thinking?

No doubt, you'll be familiar with the stress of trying to get to an appointment in time and being delayed by traffic. And as we all know, stress usually makes back pain worse. The Alexander Technique helps us to shift our attention on to prioritising "looking after ourselves" (keeping our poise) rather than

over-focusing on the goal of getting there on time. Another unwelcome aspect of driving is other drivers behaving selfishly or aggressively.

The next time another driver does something that annoys you, see if you can take a second and, rather than reacting unthinkingly, continue to keep your awareness of the road ahead and notice the support of the seat coming up through your sitting bones and the distance up to the crown of your head. Then slowly and gently exhale through your lips, as if you were blowing a small feather away. Repeat a couple of times, noticing the in-breath automatically coming in through the nose and the continuous cycle of breath with no holding.

So do explore these ideas and see if you can discover a way of driving for a happier back.

**The Alexander Technique is a taught self-care approach which offers people of any age or ability a way to improve their health and wellbeing. It can be applied in all situations in everyday life and can lead to better balance, co-ordination and freedom of movement and confidence**

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Sitting slumped or more supported