



# Muscling in on lingering pain

RUTH O'CONNOR

Somatic Movement Education relieves pain by teaching people how to ease the stress caused by muscular tension

**H**AVING STRUGGLED with back pain for years I am constantly seeking a treatment that can alleviate it and help prevent its recurrence. Somatic Movement Education (SME) intrigued me. Based on neuro-muscular retraining, the technique was developed by Thomas Hanna in California and is available in Ireland through Tanya Fitzpatrick and Lisa Peterson of Align.

I have never been in an accident nor do I suffer from any chronic ailment. My pain, like that of many others, comes from bad posture and not enough exercise. And this is the lazy nub of my point – if it's possible to achieve better posture, less pain and to look taller with some hands-on work and a mere 15 minutes of exercise a day, I'm on it.

According to Tanya Fitzpatrick, SME is an effective way to achieve long-lasting, sustainable relief from pain brought on by injury, stress and bad posture. The hands-on method and exercise help clients regain control of their muscles, re-training the brain to recognise when the body is in a relaxed or natural state and when it is in a stressed or contracted state.

Fitzpatrick is a yoga teacher and Somatic Movement educator. She has trained and worked with world-renowned yoga teacher Donna Farhi. "Somatics trains your brain to change your

body. By using awareness and specifically designed movements, we teach you how to sense and recognise muscular tension and contraction patterns in your body that you are no longer aware of, because they have become habituated over time. With SME you learn how to release these habitual patterns of tension," says Fitzpatrick.

During our sessions Fitzpatrick is friendly and efficient and, while the therapy can be seen as holistic, there is none of the hocus-pocus sometimes associated with "alternative" therapies. Indeed, she is keen to stress that this is a therapy very much grounded in science.

"Somatics is not an 'alternative' or 'complementary' approach to health – it is an up-to-date science based on neuro-muscular re-patterning, applied in a straightforward, transparent way."

Fitzpatrick says that many of her clients don't know what is causing the pain and put it down to what she calls "the myth of ageing". "This habituated state of forgetfulness whereby we forget how to relax our muscles is called sensory motor amnesia," says Fitzpatrick.

"Since it occurs within the central nervous system, we are not aware of it and begin to think we are getting older and this is not strictly true. We just have forgotten how to relax our muscles. The good news is it can be avoided. You can unlearn what has been learned and you can remember what has been forgotten."

Over the course of three private sessions, Fitzpatrick assesses my stance when sitting and standing. I lie on the therapist's table while she gently rotates my legs freeing them up in the pelvis. She identifies me disconcertingly as a "tail tucker", meaning my pelvis is rotated forwards causing the curve of my spine to be higher than it should be. We do some tilt and arch exercises, so I can recognise the correct and incorrect means of holding my spine.

Fitzpatrick also works on my stiff shoulders – a common problem area, particularly for office workers. Using gentle manipulation and encouraging me to rotate my shoulders gently, my

arms and shoulders go back into a relaxed state and lie further back on the table than before. By the end of the second session my back, shoulders and head are in a stressless, restful position.

Later I feel a new awareness of my body and its position. I am more aware when I catch myself slumping in my chair or when standing and utilise Fitzpatrick's tips to correct my stance.

The noticeable change after the sessions is not in being totally pain free but in discovering a new kind of body awareness, not in some abstract way, rather in noticing how I am standing in a less than optimal way and realising what I can do to correct that.

Another striking difference is that I appear taller and slimmer – the result of holding the correct stance, working my core tummy muscles and standing properly upright with shoulders back.

Session three involves some breath

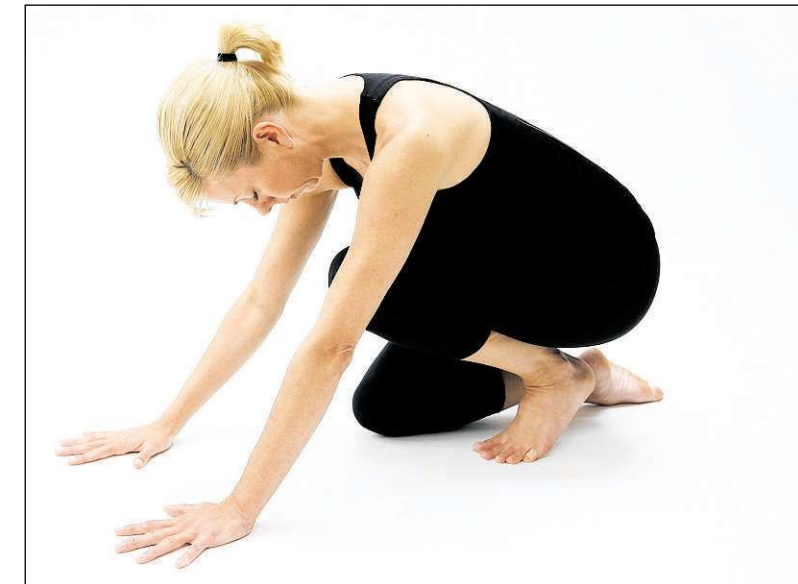
work to alleviate stress. Fitzpatrick explains that I am breathing only within my chest (thoracic breathing), resulting in the shallow breathing which can "trick" the body into believing it is under stress.

She tells me to breathe with my diaphragm taking deep regular breaths, all the while becoming conscious of how the lungs, chest cavity, diaphragm, stomach, ribs and even shoulders are moving. I am amazed at the depth of the breaths I can take and at a new conscious awareness of my breathing.

By the end of the third session my shoulders, back and pelvis are relaxed and flattened, perfectly positioned on the table and at rest. When I stand up I feel more planted, like my feet are truly bearing the weight of my body properly for the first time in a very long time. It sounds like a cliché, but I actually feel more grounded.



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## DOES IT WORK? CAN ARGAN OIL PREVENT HEART DISEASE?

DÓNAL O'MATHÚNA

### BACKGROUND

A recent traveller to Morocco encountered argan oil products with claims of great medicinal value. The oil is primarily used in cooking and cosmetics, but is starting to be advertised as a new miracle treatment. The oil is a staple food for the native Amazigh people who live where the argan tree grows. The "Amazigh diet" is an adaptation of the plant-based Mediterranean diet where olive oil is replaced by argan oil.

The argan tree is native to Morocco and grows in semi-desert soils, helping to prevent soil erosion. The tree has proven difficult to grow in other regions, making supplies of the oil limited and expensive. The Amazigh people also use the tree for firewood, which, along with damage from goats, has led to it becoming endangered.

Unesco is working to conserve the trees by encouraging their planting along the edge of the Sahara Desert and developing fair-trade argan oil production.

The oil is usually cold-pressed from the nuts which minimises chemical changes (and classifies it as a virgin oil). The composition of the oil changes when it is processed in other ways, or when the trees are grown in other regions. This makes high-quality argan oil one of the most expensive oils available.

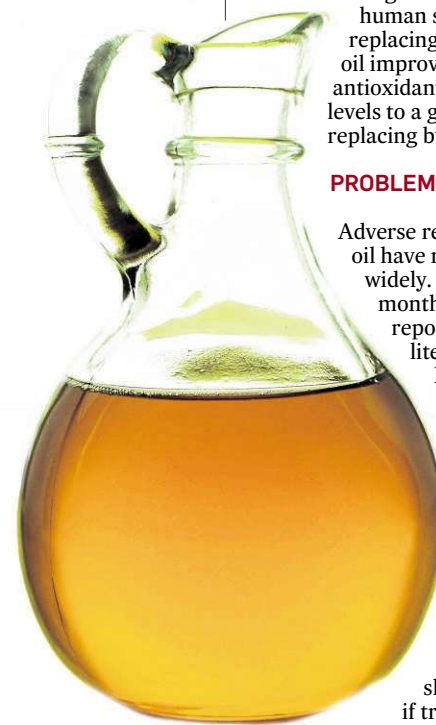
For the Amazigh, argan oil is the main source of lipids. They use it medicinally to prevent heart disease and treat rheumatic pain. As an ointment, it was used to prevent scar formation and treat skin infections. Cosmetically, it is now said to prevent wrinkles and evidence of ageing.

### EVIDENCE FROM STUDIES

Argan oil is composed primarily of unsaturated fatty acids along with several antioxidants and small amounts of other compounds rarely found in plant oils. The antioxidants are mostly of the vitamin E type. The combined presence of these components could help reduce cholesterol levels and the risk of heart disease. However, very little research has been conducted on these claims. In the last few years, preliminary animal research has provided some support

for these benefits. In humans, an observational study was conducted where people replaced their dietary butter with either virgin argan oil or virgin olive oil. People's lipid and cholesterol levels improved in both groups, but to a greater extent with argan. In the only other human study located, replacing butter with argan oil improved people's antioxidant and vitamin E levels to a greater extent than replacing butter with olive oil.

**PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS**  
Adverse reactions to argan oil have not been reported widely. However, a few months ago a case was reported in the medical literature of a Moroccan man with a serious allergic reaction to argan oil. The cause appears to have been a protein similar to one involved in peanut and sesame seed allergies. Anyone with these allergies should be cautious if trying argan oil.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts have been made to determine whether argan oil has more health benefits than olive oil, especially given the large difference in their prices. The oils contain many of the same compounds, but in different proportions. Compared to olive oil, argan oil has two to three times as much vitamin E which is mostly the form called gamma-tocopherol. This is believed to reduce the risk of some diseases better than the form in olive oil.

This component may also be important in cosmetic uses as gamma-tocopherol can reduce skin inflammation. However, many other compounds are present in small amounts in argan oil and their activities remain to be understood.

Moroccan researchers who conducted studies on argan oil recently commented that the "Amazigh diet" should not be seen as a solution to heart disease or obesity. They did recommend adding argan oil to a balanced diet. Whether or not this is viable will probably depend on how much people are willing to pay for their vegetable oils.

Dónal O'Mathúna has a PhD in pharmacy, researching herbal remedies, and an MA in bioethics, and is a senior lecturer in the School of Nursing, Dublin City University

Lisa Peterson and Tanya Fitzpatrick demonstrate Somatic Movement techniques.



## THAT'S THE WHY

WHY DO WE GET BRAIN FREEZE?

Brain freeze. No, I'm not talking about suddenly drawing a mental blank when you look at an exam paper or when you are asked an important question at a meeting.

Instead, this is the short-lived but often intense pain in your head that some people get when they chow down too enthusiastically on a cold food or ice-laden drink.

Also known as "ice-cream headache", the pain sets in quickly but fortunately burns out rapidly, rarely lasting more than 10-20 seconds.

A 2003 study of more than 8,000 adolescents in Taiwan found that about 40 per cent experienced this reaction.

But why does it happen? The most widely touted theory associates the pain with constriction of blood vessels in the area.

An editorial in the *British Medical Journal* some years ago noted that the phenomenon can be avoided if you don't put cold food in contact with the back of the palate.

It concluded, no doubt to the relief of many, especially those in hot climes, that "ice cream abstinence is not indicated".

The editorial also prompted a slew of responses over the years, with many writers offering advice on how to alleviate the pain.

They included tips to press your tongue or the pad of your thumb to the roof of your mouth.

Or maybe you have already figured out your own way of dealing with brain freeze.

– CLAIRE O'CONNELL

