

CCAMP Corner



By **Sheree Loftus Fader**, M.S.N., R.N.C., Parkinson Support Groups Coordinator, National Parkinson Foundation Center of Excellence at Beth Israel Medical Center, New York, New York, and **Molly B. Johnson**, Alexander Technique Teacher, Ph.D. candidate in Neuroscience and

Behavior, University of Massachusetts - Amherst

This article is part of an occasional series on “Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Parkinson’s.”

What is the Alexander Technique?

The Alexander Technique is a method for learning to change habits in thinking and movement. It teaches people how to be more in control of the use of themselves in activity. The Alexander Technique improves their ability to respond appropriately to a wide range of stimuli, such as walking on an unstable surface or anxiety about performance. Individuals learn to control reactions on a more conscious level and to set priorities about what to direct their attention to in themselves and the environment.

What are the benefits of the Alexander Technique?

Alexander lessons can improve overall coordination, balance, and posture. It is often used by athletes, musicians, and actors to decrease tension and anxiety, to improve breathing and vocal quality, and to enhance the ability to make creative and technical choices during performance. It is commonly used by individuals with back pain, repetitive strain injuries, and other chronic conditions that may be related to inappropriate behavioral responses to everyday demands.

Why might Alexander lessons be helpful for individuals with Parkinson disease?

The Alexander Technique can balance the distribution of tone in the body, decreasing symptomatic rigidity. It can improve motor performance during movement initiation, aid balance and coordination, and increase overall mobility. Research has shown a significant improvement in movement and less depression following 24 lessons, and again at a six-month follow-up.

How is the Alexander Technique Taught?

During a lesson, participants are guided through simple movements such as sitting, standing, and walking. Teachers provide manual and verbal feedback aimed at changing subtle aspects of psychomotor control, especially during movement initiation. People are taught how to bring about these changes in themselves, and to inhibit the strong impulse to revert back to old postural habits.

Is it a set of exercises individuals can do on their own?

It is not a set of exercises. It is a skill they can use in all of their activities. During a course of lessons, participants learn tools to continue to implement the Alexander Technique, and to make changes in themselves on their own.

How does someone start studying the Alexander Technique?

The Alexander Technique is usually taught privately, in weekly 45-minute lessons, but group classes are available in some locations as well. It is recommended that individuals take 20 lessons in order to gain enough knowledge to continue making progress on their own. Teachers may be located through the American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT) at www.alexandertech.org.

What are the qualifications of an Alexander teacher?

Teachers are certified through AmSAT and are required to complete a three-year, 1,600-hour training in an approved training program with no greater than a 5:1 teacher to student ratio.

Are there any contraindications?

Private lessons could be cost-prohibitive. Alexander teachers do not consider themselves therapists, and so are not covered by insurance. There are no adverse effects of studying the Alexander Technique. The touch used by teachers during guidance is very light and noninvasive. Alexander teachers typically adapt the course of a lesson to the limitations and needs of each participant. ▲