



**A Christian introduction to alternative medicine**

# Introduction



The Evangelical Alliance has produced *Handle with Care: A Christian Introduction to Alternative Medicine* in response to many questions we have received about non-orthodox medicine.

This resource does not provide black-and-white answers. Informed evangelicals can be found passionately for and vehemently against some alternative therapies. Instead, we aim simply to set out the facts from a Christian viewpoint about alternative medicine in general, to outline some popular therapies, and to point the interested reader towards further sources of research.

Alternative or complementary medicine continues to grow apace. The Institute for Complementary Medicine lists nearly 80 of the main disciplines. But however many column inches are devoted to alternative therapies, many trained therapists and medically qualified practitioners - including Britain's first professor of complementary medicine - would disown many claims made for alternative therapies, and are calling for rigorous research in their own fields.

It must be said that there are alternative therapies which are incompatible with Christianity. Indiscriminate use of some therapies may leave a person vulnerable to spiritual, emotional or physical harm. I suggest you use this resource prayerfully as a launching point, and follow it up with your own research.

**Rev Paul Harris, Evangelical Alliance UK**



## Getting to Grips with Alternative Medicine

This section explains some of the terms and principles of alternative medicine. This section is probably the most important, as it puts specific therapies in context, and gives some guiding points for further research.

### Definitions

*Alternative* is used to mean when a therapy is used as a strict alternative to orthodox medicine, and *complementary* may be used to describe a therapy used in conjunction with orthodox medicine. Both terms, plus *holistic* (which describes an approach taking the whole person - body, mind and spirit - into account) are frequently used interchangeably.

Most therapies fall into one of three categories:

- **External:** includes massage and manipulation (eg acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology, osteopathy).
- **Internal:** involves ingesting medicines (eg herbalism, homoeopathy).
- **Psychic:** either psychological in origin, or using the paranormal (eg hypnotherapy, astral projection, transcendental meditation).

The Institute for Complementary Medicine distinguishes between *practitioners* and *therapists* for the purpose of inclusion on its register of practitioners.

The Institute defines *practitioners* as those able to make holistic diagnoses (not the same as a GP's symptom-based diagnosis) leading to a course of treatment. (NB: In the case of a serious or life-threatening illness, the practitioner should present the patient with the choices available, including orthodox medical treatment.) A *therapist* works under the direction of a practitioner. However, these terms are often used interchangeably throughout complementary medicine and in the media.

Most alternative therapies see health and emotional problems as a result primarily of an imbalance or depletion of the body's energy (be that physical, emotional or spiritual). The aim of the therapy is to restore that energy balance. Because alternative medicine adherents take a holistic approach, the expectation is often that as well as relief of symptoms, clients can hope for a healthier and happier lifestyle.

### **Ask the right questions**

Dr Robina Coker (*Alternative Medicine*, Monarch) suggests the following questions as a starting point for investigating a therapy:

- Do the claims for this therapy fit the facts?
- Is there a rational scientific basis for the therapy?
- Is the methodology or the principle the effective element?
- Does the therapy involve the occult?
- What is the therapist's world view?

The last two questions must be asked of individual practitioners, as the way many therapies are used is often determined by the individual. As well as asking therapists about their qualifications, no reputable practitioners should mind you taking a holistic approach by asking them if they have any spiritual objectives or practices in their work, and what their spiritual outlook is.

Perhaps it would also be useful to consider why we rarely apply the same scrutiny to orthodox medicine and its practitioners, despite its origins in ancient Greek pantheism.

### **Testing, testing!**

For all the claims made about the effectiveness of complementary therapies, few rest on independent and consistent clinical trials.

'If we are to progress in this area, we must not allow any bypassing of rigorous research,' writes Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at Exeter University, in *The Independent* (2 June 1998). 'We need to fill in the substantial gaps in our present knowledge. The very minimum would be to make sure that the benefits of a given complementary treatment outweigh the risks.'

Ernst follows up this article with a short list of complementary therapies effective for certain conditions, as proven by clinical trials. He then gives a list, four times longer, of therapies shown by the same trials to be ineffective or unproven for certain conditions, for which they are often believed effective.

## **The placebo effect**

Around 30 to 40 per cent of all patients respond to placebos ('dummy' medication of an inert substance) very well, while another third do not experience any improvement at all. It is more than coincidence that about the same percentage of patients - one third - show excellent results with the application of acupuncture, homoeopathy, herbal remedies and other unconventional treatments.

## **Bedside manner**

Many complementary therapists will take at least an hour for a client's initial visit, and will take a full holistic case history (ie considering the client as a whole person - body, mind and spirit). This allows time for the client to talk about anything that is troubling them. In comparison, GPs have an average of six minutes with each patient. Being given time is frequently mentioned as important by those who have found complementary therapies helpful.

## **Don't rely on hearsay**

Peter may have found aromatherapy helpful, but Paul may not. Try to find out objective facts. 'Testimonials or anecdotes, as produced so often by those who promote complementary medicine, are a significant step backwards in our endeavour to approach the truth,' writes Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at Exeter University.

You need to be satisfied on two points:

- Does it work?
- Is it safe?

## **Qualifications**

It is illegal to practise in the UK as a chiropractor or osteopath without fulfilling statutory obligations (by early 2000 for osteopaths). Apart from that, anyone can practise complementary therapies if he or she wishes, without any qualifications. If you want to consult a complementary practitioner or therapist, check his or her qualifications first.

## **New Age**

Christians' concern about complementary therapies is frequently rooted in a perceived association with New Age belief and practice. Some therapies are clearly rooted in the paranormal, occult, or religion other than Christianity (eg crystal therapy, transcendental meditation) and would therefore seem an obvious no-go area for Christians.

However, other therapies are strongly advocated by evangelical Christian practitioners, who believe the therapy is God-given and should not be dismissed because it is also of interest to New Age adherents.

## **The bottom line**

Fees vary widely according to practitioner and region. Some therapies are available on the NHS, notably homoeopathy. But the rules on this are changing, so ask your GP.



# Acupuncture

**Related therapies:** other branches of traditional Chinese medicine, including acupressure, herbalism, moxabustion, t'ai chi, buqi, feng shui

## Origins

Acupuncture was used to prevent and treat disease in ancient China, where it was believed that two opposing life forces - yin and yang - circulated round the body in 12 special channels (meridians). Practitioners believed that an imbalance in these energies caused illness.

## The therapy

Acupuncture can be used in three main ways:

- as a preventative
- to relieve symptoms
- as an anaesthetic

Acupuncture involves stimulating 365 principal points around the body with needles or sometimes with a laser, heat or electricity. Usually the patient lies or sits down. The needles may be inserted and removed instantly or left in for up to 30 minutes under supervision.

Two schools of acupuncture exist: traditional Chinese and Western.

Traditional Chinese acupuncturists do not use conventional diagnostic techniques but a four-fold Chinese system of asking, looking, smelling and touching, as well as testing up to 28 pulses in the body. Typically this kind of acupuncture will be practised by non-medical but qualified practitioners.

Most medical acupuncturists practise Western or 'scientific' acupuncture using conventional diagnoses, often with electro-acupuncture (ie with electricity). They would largely reject the yin/yang concept but focus on acupuncture's pain-inhibiting properties. In China, surgery is frequently performed using acupuncture instead of anaesthetic: around 20 per cent of surgery can be performed like this, and four out of five such operations need no extra pain relief from drugs.

## World view

Originates from a Taoist view of the world. Meridian system may originally have an occult basis. World view varies with individual practitioner. See *questions*.

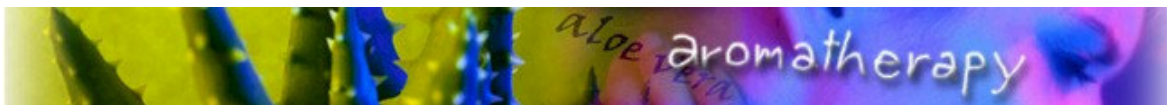
## Critics say...

- Claims that traditional acupuncture can help a huge range of conditions, including weight loss and giving up smoking, are at best unsubstantiated and at worst false. Reliable trials have shown acupuncture has little or no benefit when used to help weight loss or to give up smoking.
- Occasional serious side-effects can be experienced, including puncturing of a lung or vital organ, or infection transmitted through non-sterile equipment (NB: many practitioners use disposable needles).

## Supporters say...

Trials show acupuncture can be effective for low back pain (when not caused by a specific disease), dental pain, and nausea/vomiting.

Acupuncture is routinely used as dental pain relief in the East, and this is acceptable to many Eastern Christians



# Aromatherapy

## Origins

First used in ancient civilisations, including Egypt, Greece and possibly China. Revived in the 1930s when a French chemist stuck his badly burned hand into a container of pure lavender oil, and was amazed at how fast the wound healed. The current practice of aromatherapy has grown in popularity in the UK since the early 1980s.

## The therapy

An aromatherapist uses essential oils from aromatic plants in a number of ways, to treat a variety of complaints. The oils are always diluted and will be blended according to the patient's problem. As well as using massage, the therapist may recommend inhalation (via steam), compresses, baths and vaporisation. Aromatherapists are divided over using essential oils as internal medication.

The patient is believed to benefit both from the aroma of the oils, which is claimed to stimulate the brain, glands and the lungs, and from absorption through the skin. Specific properties are assigned to each essence.

Length of treatment varies, but about an hour is usual. The therapist takes a wide-ranging case history, which covers medical history, sleep patterns, diet, emotional well-being and any specific conditions. The fee usually includes oils to use at home and the therapist may recommend subsequent visits.

Some therapists may include elements from other alternative therapies. These could involve spiritual elements which are not Christian in origin, eg dowsing (use of a pendulum over the oils), the chakras (which originates from tantric yoga), and the laying on of hands for spiritual healing. Find out exactly what techniques the therapist uses if you are considering aromatherapy (and any other therapy).

Aromatherapy is largely used as a preventative and restorative treatment:

'Aromatherapy is a valuable preventative therapy which, by keeping a client well balanced emotionally and physically, reduces the chances of serious illness occurring,' according to qualified aromatherapist Gill Martin in her book *Aromatherapy* (part of the *Optima Alternative Health* series).

Putting aromatherapy on a product's label does not mean the product must contain any essential oils. Likewise, a beauty therapist at a salon is entitled to offer aromatherapy, but does not have to be a qualified aromatherapist to do so. If you are concerned, ask about the therapist's qualifications.

Qualified aromatherapists warn the public about using essential oils, which can be bought over the counter in the UK, without understanding the potential dangers. However, essential oils, if used properly, are suitable for use at home for bathing, inhaling with steam, and massage.

### **World view**

Varies with individual practitioner. See above and *questions*.

### **Critics say...**

- At best it is just an aid to relaxation.
- Very little rigorous research has been carried out to substantiate claims.
- Essential oils can be dangerous if used wrongly.

### **Supporters say...**

- Aromatherapy is using the healing powers of God-given natural oils.
- By using natural substances, the body is not subjected to the toxins and resulting side effects that can result from using synthetic drugs.



## **Homoeopathy**

### **Origins**

Classical homoeopathy was founded in the 18th century by a German physician, Samuel Hahnemann. He tried out different substances on families and volunteers known as 'provers', and compiled his research as the *Organon of Medicine*, still used by homoeopaths today.

### **The therapy**

The key principles of classical homoeopathy are:

- like cures like.
- the more diluted a homoeopathic remedy, the more effective it is.
- detailed consultation is vital to gain a holistic picture of the patient.

A homoeopath treats the patient's symptoms with a substance which homoeopaths believe produces similar symptoms to those experienced by the patient.

A concentrated 'mother tincture' of the essential ingredient is systematically diluted with water, and subjected to 'succussion' (shaking) which 'potentises' the substance. A '6c' potency is commonly used for first aid, and accounts for most over-the-counter sales. This strength is equivalent to filling Wembley Stadium to the roof with water and adding one drop of tincture (Source: AD Bambridge, *Homoeopathy: Results Beyond Reason*, 1992).

Homoeopathy is not the same as herbalism or herbal medicine. Many homoeopathic treatments do not have a botanical origin.

## World view

Dr Andrew Fergusson, former head of the Christian Medical Fellowship, writes: 'It is said that there is [no world view behind the therapy]. But the mystical "energy" and "vital-force" concepts smack of Hinduism. Hahnemann was a freemason, a mesmeriser and a deist rather than a Christian. Christian homoeopaths admit these facts about their founder but are not concerned... It must be remembered that by the medical standards of his day, he was an enlightened and humane practitioner, in the physical sense. Whether his own religious beliefs should concern present-day practitioners is a matter for individual decision' (Source: Pacemaker, October 1987).

## Critics say...

- There is insufficient scientific evidence to back up the claims of homoeopathy and its remedies.
- Hahnemann, homoeopathy's founder, was at best an unconventional physician, and at worst guilty at times of fraudulent practice. In his book *Homoeopathy: What Are We Swallowing*, Steven Ransom convincingly argues that much of Hahnemann's work - including experiments that are foundational to modern homoeopathy - was seriously flawed.
- Some homoeopathic practice which involves using a pendulum (in preparing homoeopathic substances) may have occult links.
- The patient responds positively to the in-depth homoeopathic consultation, and this accounts for an increased sense of well-being.

## Supporters say...

- 'Clinical trials are crucial to the future of homoeopathy to ensure its acceptance by the health professions but also by the commissioning authorities, the people who purchase NHS health care' (Source: Dr Peter Fisher, consultant physician, Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital, in *The Times*, 5 July 1995).
- Homoeopathy has been part of the NHS since 1948, with five specialist NHS hospitals around the UK. Members of the Faculty of Homoeopathy are also fully trained medical doctors.
- If Christians dismiss homoeopathy on grounds of its murky origins, they should at least be as rigorous in their evaluation of orthodox medicine and its origins in ancient Greek religion.
- Homoeopathic medicine has been taught at Medical Service Ministries (formerly the London Missionary School of Medicine) for nearly a century, training hundreds of missionaries going overseas. Famous Christian practitioners included Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones.
- According to the British Homoeopathic Association, use of pendulums is not part of Hahnemannian homoeopathy but are used by practitioners of radionics and radiesthesia, which are listed in *The Alternative Health Guide* under 'paranormal therapies'. These practitioners may prescribe homoeopathic medicines but this does not make them homoeopaths.





## Pressure Therapies

Chiropractic  
Osteopathy  
Reflexology  
Massage

**Related therapies:** rolfing, shiatsu, pulsing, manual lymph drainage (MLD), Hellerwork, applied kinesiology

### Chiropractic

#### Origins

Developed in the 19th century in Iowa, USA, by Daniel Palmer, a self-taught 'magnetic healer'. He believed that an 'Innate Intelligence' flows through the nervous system, which can be obstructed by a misalignment of the vertebral column. Disease throughout the body could be linked with such obstructions, he claimed. Since then, chiropractic has developed along many branches, although spinal adjustment remains the primary approach for most practitioners.

#### The therapy

Joint manipulation, usually concentrating on the spine, although the manipulations can be applied to any muscle or joint. Popular for lower back pain, slipped discs and sports injuries. As well as asking questions about the patient's health and conducting a physical examination, the chiropractor may take X-rays.

With osteopathy, chiropractic is recognised as a major form of manipulative therapy. The two therapies use different techniques to achieve a similar result, and their differences are largely historical.

#### World view

Varies with practitioner. See *questions*.

### Osteopathy

#### Origins

Founded by an American doctor at the end of the 19th century. He based his ideas on the body's self-healing mechanisms, which he believed were released when the body's structure was properly aligned.

## **The therapy**

Manipulative techniques on the whole body, including gentle repeated movements and sharp thrusts, are used to realign the skeletal structure. Massage may also be part of the therapy. A detailed case history will be taken along with a physical examination. Cranial osteopathy is becoming increasingly popular, particularly for children. This involves gentle manipulation of the skull and other parts of the body, alleged to help the flow of the fluid around the brain and spinal cord.

## **World view**

Varies with practitioner. See *questions*.

## **Reflexology**

### **Origins**

Reflexology can be traced back to the native tribes of North America and other ancient cultures. Current system developed in the 20th century by an American doctor. Now one of the most popular therapies in the UK, with over 6,000 practitioners.

### **The therapy**

Ten 'energy lines' are believed to run longitudinally through the body, five to each foot, linking all body organs along these lines. Controlled pressure is applied with the thumbs or fingers to 'reflex points' on the feet (occasionally the hands). Put simply, practitioners believe this stimulates the body to achieve its own equilibrium and good health.

### **World view**

Varies with practitioner. See *questions*.

### **Critics say...**

'A scientific rationale for reflexology simply does not exist. Reflexology is popular, usually perceived as relaxing and, as a therapy, carries few risks... there is as yet no truly convincing evidence that it is specifically effective for any medical conditions' (Source: Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at the University of Exeter, as reported in *The Independent*, 1 December 1998).

### **Supporters say...**

Perceived as relaxing. No adverse effects are on record. Recommended as an adjunct to conventional therapy.

## **Massage**

### **Origins**

Used by ancient civilisations. Considered important by Hippocrates, father of orthodox medicine. Swedish massage principles formulated in the late 19th century by a Swedish gymnast.

## The therapy

There are many specialised massage techniques available. The most common is based on the five basic strokes of Swedish massage. Physical manipulation, using a variety of types of touch (eg kneading, drumming). All parts of the body can be massaged. Included in Royal College of Nursing training courses.

## World view

Varies with practitioner. See *questions*.



# Meditation Exercises

Yoga

Alexander Technique

## Yoga

### Origins

Yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline, springing from Indian philosophy and religion, including Hinduism. Its goal is to free the practitioner from distractions and achieve a perfect oneness with the 'Universal Spirit'. There are eight stages of classical yoga, which use different bodily expressions to reach a spiritual goal. Modern yoga systems have been developed which blend some of the classical elements, and may have a greater 'body' emphasis. Western devotees may take on additional philosophical elements such as diet, moral and mental training.

### The therapy

Concentrates on three main areas to achieve control over body and mind. These are:

- using physical postures to master the body.
- breathing techniques to control respiration.
- improving concentration through mental techniques.

Frequently used in the West as a relaxation and exercise technique, with meditation. The exercises may be taught in a class and practised at home.

### World view

Hindu, although often secularised by Western practitioners.

## Alexander Technique

### Origins

The system was devised by Frederick Alexander, an Australian actor, who struggled with voice problems. He found these were caused by tension affecting his posture, and

he built up a corrective system that he taught in the UK and USA. Alexander included a philosophical element in his technique, and believed that lack of happiness is due to the negative effects of poor posture on the 'psycho-physical self'. He taught that 'considering before performing an action' is a way to health, rather than being part of a vicious circle of performance-achievement-performance.

### **The therapy**

The technique teaches how to relieve built-up muscle tension by adjusting balance and posture. Breathing and co-ordination are part of the technique. The pupil learns how to make everyday movements in a way that puts least stress and strain on the body. This can then go on to positively affect the person's emotional and mental well-being, practitioners claim.

A lesson may last between 30 minutes and an hour, and the teacher will move the client's head, limbs and body into various positions to detect unnecessary muscular tension. The client will then learn how to release this tension and will be encouraged to use the technique any time tension arises.

Alexander Technique is very popular with performing artists, and is included in the curriculum of many music and drama schools.

### **World view**

Varies with practitioner. See *questions*.

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