

# From Sandie's Desk

## Freezing and Falls

Those of you who know me (even if we've only met on one occasion) know that being lost for words is not usually a problem for me. In fact, it is usually quite the opposite—knowing when to be quiet is a much bigger challenge! When I was trying to decide how to start this article I felt “stuck.” It wasn't that I didn't know what I wanted to write about, I just couldn't get started ... and then it came to me! The problem I was struggling with, “start hesitation,” is the very thing many of you have difficulty with on a regular basis! So now that I've taken the first step, let's hope no one interrupts me, or I'll have to start all over again!

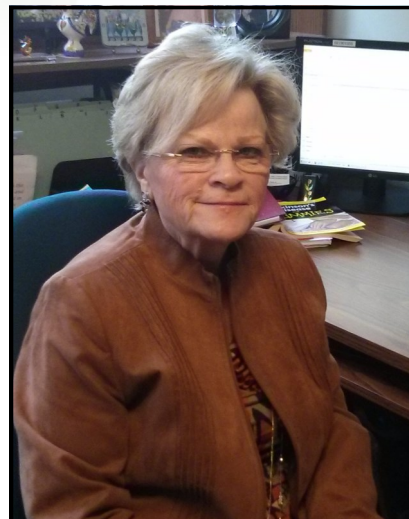
Normally, we don't have to think about the act of walking; our brain incorporates this activity into the task we are trying to achieve. For example, if you were off to the corner mailbox to post a card to a friend, your brain would go into autopilot: you would put on outdoor shoes, put on your coat, make sure you had your door key, and head out. Your brain would calculate the distance and speed as well as help you avoid the dips and cracks in the sidewalk, and you would be back at home before you knew it. When you have Parkinson's, the timing aspect of your walking may be affected so this sort of “normal activity” can become more difficult.

If you have noticed that you have difficulty taking the first step, this difficulty is caused by an interruption or slowing down of messages reaching the part of your brain that sequences your thoughts into action. “Start hesitation” is affected by feeling tired, anxious, or hurried, or if you are “wearing off” or coming to the end of a medication dose. Whatever the reason, initiation of gait (taking the first step) often affects only the first few steps, and then, once you are away, you can walk with ease.

Muscle weakness in the legs as well as problems with balance and walking in addition to “freezing” are the most common reasons for falls, so it is important to have some strategies for both preventing as well as overcoming a freezing episode.

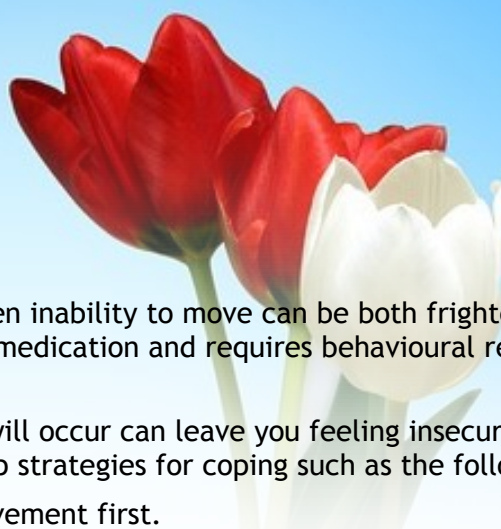
About 30% of people with Parkinson's experience a sudden feeling of being stuck in wet cement where they are frozen in one spot, unable to walk, and which no amount of willpower can overcome. Freezing can also occur when you are initiating movements like when you want to get out of a chair, so it can occur when you want to start moving or when you are already moving. The problem can occur at any time, and some people are more prone to freezing episodes than others. It is not possible to predict when freezing will occur, which—coupled with efforts of well-meaning companions to force you to move—may cause you to lose your balance and fall.

Freezing occurs more frequently when a person with Parkinson's approaches doorways and narrow hallways; is walking on a surface that suddenly changes; is walking in crowds; is confined in small spaces such as restroom stalls or elevators; is tired, or is in a stressful, unfamiliar situation.



### Sandie Jones

Sandie Jones trained as a registered nurse, specializing in psychiatry. In 1998, she joined Parkinson Canada, and is now an integral part of the Information & Referral team. In this role she has provided information on support, education, medical aspects, coping strategies, community services, and other information about Parkinson's disease and its management, not only to people living with Parkinson's disease and their families, but to professionals working with these people as well. This role has given her a comprehensive insight into the problems of people living with Parkinson's disease, as well as their carepartners.



Freezing is a temporary phenomenon but the sudden inability to move can be both frightening and frustrating. Freezing is not immediately responsive to medication and requires behavioural retraining to initiate movement.

Not being able to predict when freezing episodes will occur can leave you feeling insecure and afraid to do things on your own, so it is important to develop strategies for coping such as the following:

1. Visualize where you are going and plan your movement first.
2. If you feel yourself sticking to the ground, stop. Think about standing tall with your feet apart.
3. Try shifting your weight sideways from foot to foot. Rock from one foot to the other.
4. Try to take a step backwards or to the side. Once movement is initiated, try stepping forward again.
5. Step over a companion's foot placed in front of your foot, or step over a line on the ground. Shining a red-dot laser or a pocket flashlight in front of your foot can also help. Step toward the light.
6. Stick strips of coloured tape, a step length apart, in "hot spots" where you have difficulty at home, so you can step over the lines made by the tape.
7. Repeat "one, two," or say to yourself "left, right, left, right," as you come closer to the place where you stick so that you keep the rhythm of your steps. This type of counting can also help when you rise from a chair and have problems taking the first step after standing up. Use a marching rhythm to move—audio tapes and portable CD players are helpful.
8. Focus on something straight ahead, especially when going through a doorway or getting on an elevator.
9. When approaching a chair to sit down, concentrate on walking to the arm on the far side of the chair before turning to sit down.
10. Carepartners should resist the temptation to give many instructions. Keep it short and sweet. Do not push or pull!
11. Keep your living area free of clutter and obstacles.
12. Focus your full attention on moving around furniture.
13. Take your time; do not rush.
14. Minimize disruptions or interruptions when executing a movement.

Freezing can also affect your ability to speak spontaneously, particularly when answering a question or trying to enter into a conversation. Sadly, this difficulty causes people with Parkinson's to withdraw from socializing and—coupled with feeling insecure and afraid to go places on their own—can lead to isolation, loneliness, and depression. When you are about to speak, stop and think about what you want to say before actually initiating the sentence. If you are doing other things while trying to have a conversation, stop what you are doing and concentrate on what you are trying to say. Parkinson's is associated with slowness of movement and therefore it may seem odd that I have used the word "stop" several times throughout this article, but it is very important to stop, concentrate, and visualize if you are experiencing freezing.

After all, if your computer freezes, what do you do (after you swear at it, that is)? You stop it by turning it off and on again and rebooting it. It's exactly the same for you if you "freeze."

Originally published in LiveWire Spring 2009, and reviewed in Spring of 2015

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