

Realistic Improvement in Parkinson's through Exercise

This article is aimed at PwP who either do not exercise or don't do enough! For those fitter amongst us who do go to the gym etc., I am not trying to teach my granny to suck eggs – you will have greater knowledge than I of the components of Exercise.

I have been diagnosed for 11 years and have found that Exercise has played a major part in my current active status and it is my mission to highlight this to those PwP who have not experienced the benefits of Exercise

Exercise is, I believe, the most important activity that PwP can do to improve their Parkinson's symptoms and their quality of life! The drugs we must take are, unfortunately, necessary but on their own they do not make us feel "alive" - Exercise is one of the ways we can break out of the grip that "the beast" by our own actions. I believe that with Exercise, one can even delay the progress of the condition

There have been many studies into exercise and whilst not all prove the case in the scientific sense, there is unanimous support from PwP on the benefits of undergoing physical activity. I know one PwP who, through undertaking regular intense exercise, has been able to reduce their medication by 50%! I have found that after a session of intense exercise, I feel so good that I can occasionally go an hour or more beyond my drugs time without being aware. I have found that apart from my strength, my flexibility has developed as has my Positive attitude – I am unsure which actually came first! I have said that I am fairly active and I can still tackle major lifting in the garden.

Now, not all PwP can do exercise to that extent but ALL PwP can do some exercise - I met an elderly lady PwP in a wheel chair at a meeting where the use of Thera bands was being demonstrated and, bless her, she was at least able and willing to have the band attached to the arm of her wheelchair and pull it upwards

No matter what exercise you do consistently, you will, I am sure, get the “feel good” factor and by sticking at it you will undoubtedly feel even better as you improve your technique / performance - it is a challenge for all PwP but I promise the benefits can be real

In fact I have read of a study that concluded that low intensity exercise performed for 50 minutes three times a week was the most beneficial in terms of helping PwP improve their mobility. Exercise may, in fact, delay disability and help to preserve their independence

Turning to the exercises of which, the range is vast. There are many that can be done in a chair such as stretching - one I do is facial squeezing and stretching to loosen my Parkinson's mask (and help my speech) and this is very effective - but be careful doing it in a car because a driver in front of me once thought I was shouting at him to hurry up! You can stretch /manipulate your hands, arms, legs and feet in the chair to loosen them up and you can use expanders to strengthen your grip– it is just a case of getting into a routine and feeling the benefits! A Thera band is very useful here and can be used to exercise arms, legs and trunks

There are also chair exercises to music such as the Ronnie Gardiner Rhythm Method (RGRM) which are great fun to do and targets the brain during the exercises to improve co-ordination as well as movement.

Swimming is another exercise that most PwP can try. For those who cannot keep afloat anymore, or whose face dips under the water, there are classes available where float devices are on hand to keep you from going under (so you don't need to be able to swim – and expert therapists / trainers on hand to look after you

For those more able there are stretching and posture classes (also the RGRM) which are more strenuous and are a great help to both posture and flexibility

Other forms of exercise include Yoga, Pilates, Aqua Aerobics, Tai-Chi and Dancing - there is nothing quite like a Tango!

The Wii-Fit is an excellent way of exercising at home or in a class. You can do a whole range of exercises which are also great fun. One that I particularly like is Floating down a river in a Bubble – it sounds daft but it is excellent for your

balance as you have to lean forward to keep the bubble moving and lean to the left and right to keep from bumping into the sides and bursting the bubble!

Balancing does not increase blood flow but the number of synapses that are 'firing' increase substantially (synapses are the gaps between neurons and nerves which are bridged by a signal when the neuron is communicating with another neuron) as a result of having to concentrate harder to avoid bursting the bubble

The more intense forms of Exercise can be broken down into Resistance, Cardio and Flexibility and you can do a variety of things to achieve these goals.

Resistance, using equipment including free weights - in the gym, garden (I saw branches for chopping up for logs) or at home (weights or a Thera band or my favourites, press-ups triceps dips and abs crunches) to strengthen arms, legs, abs etc. Doing weight training which incorporates balance (such as using dumb bells) has, I believe, a greater effect on the brain. Remember though that in Parkinson's, the muscles that weaken quickly are your back, buttock and knee straightening muscles, so you need to work hard on keeping these strong.

For all Resistance training, technique is so important that it is always wise to consult a trainer before attempting. This is where classes are so key, you are training with others (PwP or not) and you get the social aspects of a class and you get the natural encouragement to progress from exercising with others

Cardio is very important to keep heart and lungs strong, and to reduce your likelihood of getting heart disease and diabetes. Examples comprise Cycling, Walking (not to be under-rated), Running which significantly increases blood vessel density and blood flow to the brain (Treadmills are excellent as they provide hand supports for balance), Swimming and gym equipment like the rowing machine and the cross trainer – which also have a resistance factor built in – are excellent (although I must confess to not liking the cross trainer – just a personal thing)

The prolonged effort required for cardio results in more blood fuelling both the muscles and the brain and the more intense the effort the greater the blood fuelling

Flexibility can be addressed through Stretching and Posture classes and various pieces of gym equipment

You can start off with less resistance / weight and begin with a set number of repetitions which you can then either increase – or increase the resistance or both!

I am lucky to live near Sheffield where every 8 weeks our Neuro Physiotherapist Bhanu runs Circuit Training classes (alternated with Aqua-aerobics) which are as demanding as the gym (the more you put into the exercise, the more you get out of it) and exercises all parts of your body but it has the (significant) added benefit of sociability.

I felt some time ago that I wanted to “up” my game a bit to address my feet dexterity with falls happening more often. I went with my partner’s daughter to see her getting boxing training and realised this was for me!

Mick, my trainer, has me doing all sorts of leg and feet work as part of the boxing training which involved running backwards, skipping from side to side, forwards / backwards and doing two footed hops – to front, sides and behind. The Net result is that, although I will never make a boxer (you don’t win medals starting at 69 but you do win physical benefits!), I can move my feet sufficiently fast so that if I trip in the garden, I can regain my balance and not fall.

I am also benefitting generally from the intensity of the training from the dynamic stretching to the strength training.

I now have my one to ones with Mick twice weekly.

The Next Steps – As I said at the start, my mission is to encourage every PwP to seek out the benefits of Exercise and the improvement that Exercise brings to our Parkinson’s so with Mick’s help I came up with R.I.P.E. I don’t know what the final format will be but the vision that I share with Bhanu is to hold a database of all exercises that have benefitted PwP, all classes that are available across the UK and to encourage local PwP branches and members to fund raise for classes to be supported – as something we PwP can do for ourselves. Every PwP will be able, either, to access the Database or hear about it from presentations Bhanu and I have in our plans – Yorkshire and Humberside being our starting area

Bob Raeburn – updated June 2014

