

IN BALANCE AND IN MOTION

By Jan McGilliard

What we all want, of course, is to be *in balance* while we're *in motion*. And too often, we are not. Truth be told, fall-related injuries are among the most common, disabling, and expensive health conditions reported (and unreported), accounting for ten percent of emergency room visits and six percent of hospitalizations. At the least a fall is disturbing, painful, embarrassing, and awkward; at most, a fall can be deadly. Physical factors include loss of bone density and muscle mass, lack of exercise, visual, hearing, or vestibular loss, use of medication and alcohol, sudden loss of blood pressure, diseases affecting bones and nerves, arthritis, diabetes, or neuropathy.

If shoes could talk...they would scream STOP! THINK! Let's face it. We all need the shoe police from time to time to remind us to make smart choices about shoes. Mary, a retired physician, loved beautiful clothes and matching shoes, and church was a good place to wear them. As she prepared to serve communion one Sunday, I noticed she was about to descend the two steps (no railing) in skimpy, slip-on heels. She was an accident waiting to happen, and the last thing on *my* mind was communion. Later, I told her if I ever saw those shoes on her feet again, I would personally remove them. We had a good laugh, but she knew I was concerned. One of her friends wasn't so lucky. Descending those same steps, Jane fell as she carried left-over communion elements back to the church kitchen following worship. She broke her tailbone and two ribs. Eventually, attractive railings were installed on pulpit and lectern sides of the nave, and there have been no further incidents.

At church and at home, it is important to assess our spaces room by room, and in transitional areas like stairways, hallways, and garages. Cut the clutter, ban the booby traps (area rugs, uneven, wet, or icy terrain, poorly lit areas), and bring on the banisters, grab bars, lights, and reflective strips. Nine months ago, a pastor friend failed to switch on a stairway light before descending with her arms full of resources, and she suffered a bad fall. Fortunately, she didn't break a bone, but she has endured much pain in the healing process and pain that continues nearly a year later. In a moment of inattention, coupled with the force of gravity, we stumble, fumble, and tumble.

There is much we can do to prevent falling, which happens in all ages and stages of life. As we age, there may be more factors at play. Offering a free balance class at church is a great way to raise awareness, improve core strength, coordination, and balance, to encourage physical activity with minimal equipment and maximum enjoyment.

Following are components of my balance class:

- Breathing...is very important, since few of us breathe deeply enough. Getting enough oxygen to brain and body improves all our activities, and it serves to reduce anxiety and blood pressure. Breathing exercises lead to more intentional living and movement.
- Warm-ups...help us to prepare for the workout and to be reminded of good posture.
- Stretches/Flexibility...allow us to move more freely.
- Sitting exercises...allow us to practice movements of balance and coordination prior to standing on our feet. Folding chairs are fine.

- Standing exercises...change the dynamic, adding body weight to the equation.
- Vestibular exercises...involve the brain and peripheral vision, essential to balance and coordination.
- Reaction challenges...help us practice sudden movements we might encounter in daily life.
- Strengthening...both upper and lower body is essential in carrying out activities of daily living.
- Cool down...to bring us back to a slower pace.
- Prayer...to send people off with a sense of care and purpose.

Some class tips:

- A liability waiver should be signed by participants to protect the church
- Keep a record of attendance
- Provide water and break times
- Provide handouts that are related to balance and fall prevention
- Give homework to encourage practice during the week
- Correlate exercises with everyday activities, giving practical examples
- Time the class for your target audience
- Ask if there are questions or concerns...and follow up
- Encourage participants to promote the class among their friends

Equipment:

Folding chairs; soft, small balls; therabands (available in several strengths).

Go to the pro:

Most likely, if you are leading a balance class, you have learned much of what you know through group exercise classes (aerobic, yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi), professional videos, physical therapists, or professional trainers. I like to offer a class that uses a head to toe and mind/body/spirit approach, and every professional I've consulted has been encouraging and helpful. It is important to assess the participants and to tailor the class to their needs and abilities. If an exercise is too difficult for someone, redirect his/her activity to something achievable. Some instructors simply use a professional video to lead the class.

Helpful resources:

When searching for a good video, be sure to read the reviews!

- Administration on Aging: www.aoa.dhhs.gov
- Aging Network Services: www.agingnets.com
- AARP: www.aarp.org
- Home Modification Resource Center: www.homemods.org
- Mayo clinic: www.mayoclinic.com/health/balance
- NCOA: www.nih.gov/nia
- National Osteoporosis Foundation: www.nof.org
- U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission: www.cpsc.gov
- Power Music: www.powermusic.com
- National Safety Council: www.nsc.org

- *Functional Fitness for Older Adults*, Patricia A. Brill, 2004
- *Exercise: A Guide from the NIA*
- *Exercise & Physical Activity*, NIA, 1/2009
- *Safe on Your Feet, Fall Prevention Workout DVD*, Cindy Lozacek, 2005
- *Dizzy: What You need to Know about Managing & Treating Balance Disorders*, Watson, MD, 2004
- AHA/ACSM Health/Fitness Facility Preparation Screening Questionnaire
- *Stretching for 50+*, Dr. Karl Knopf, 2004.
- SPRI Products, Inc. for equipment: www.spri.com. 800-222-7774.

Walking Programs:

Walk to Bethlehem/Jerusalem is an excellent twelve-week walking program that promotes exercise in your congregation. Participants (collectively) walk the distance (in 12 weeks) between your location and Bethlehem or Jerusalem, depending on the time of year. Promote the use of pedometers (often possible to order them in bulk at a discounted price or through a promotion). Promote the event, provide one or two orientation opportunities, create a bulletin board with a map, and periodically make a progress report. At a specified time each week, miles are reported, and names of individuals meeting their weekly goals are put into a drawing for a door prize (prizes are not necessary, but are good encouragement). Most can be done by e-mail and phone...and there is a weekly devotional shared with everyone. If individuals want to add miles to those they walk, count 1 mile for each 20 minutes of aerobic activity. It is also nice to use a similar structure and alternative devotional materials, as suggested below.

Resources:

- <http://www.stjohnprovidence.org/walktojerusalem/>
- <http://walking.about.com/od/measure/a/stepequivalents.htm>
- Surprises Around the Bend: 50 adventurous walkers, by Richard A. Hasler
- Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino, by Joyce Rupp

Hold group walks from time to time/socialize. Have a celebration at the end of the program. Fitness *can* be fun, and these programs encourage folks to be *In Balance and In Motion* together as the Body of Christ.

Jan McGilliard is Executive Director of ElderConnections, which provides consulting services, leader development, educational workshops, keynote presentations, and retreats on issues of aging and spirituality. She has a long history with POAMN, serving on the Executive Committee in various roles. Jan also served as the acting campus minister for the Cooper House Presbyterian Campus Ministry at Virginia Tech.

Jan holds the M.S. degree in Family and Child Development with emphasis on Adult Development and Aging, and the Certificate for Gerontology from Virginia Tech. She has certification as an Intergenerational Specialist from the University of Pittsburgh, and is a certified Lay Preacher. Jan is married to Mike McGilliard, Professor Emeritus of Dairy Science at Virginia Tech. They have two grown children and two grandchildren.