

BALANCE: AVOIDING FALLS

My good holistic friend, Dr. Don Rapp, who teaches juggling and balance at Chautauqua Institute (www.ciweb.org) in New York State each summer stresses the importance of balance in every area of our lives. He frequently emphasizes “Virtus Stat in Medio”, Latin for Virtue Stands in the Middle Way!

As we get older we know from reading and personal experience that falling down becomes an increasingly common experience. About one third of the elder population over the age of 65 falls each year, and the risk of falls increases proportionately with age. At 80 years, over half of seniors fall annually. Last weekend as my wife and I were walking hand in hand toward President Andrew Jackson’s home, The Hermitage, in Nashville, Tennessee, my wife tripped on the curb and bruised her knee, hip and palm of her hand; and this was a fairly gentle fall! With falling, we never know the time or the place that it will happen.

I’ve had peripheral neuropathy for 20 years so I’m always at great risk for falling because I can’t feel my feet very much. A few years ago, the place where I go for healthcare, Walter Reed Army National Military Medical Center offered a preventive, multi-disciplinary evaluation program to ascertain one’s ability to balance well. They had incredible space age, digitalized measurement machines in a collaborative effort (Audiology, Physical Therapy, Ophthalmology and a few more). I thought I was being screened to become an astronaut.

I had to chuckle when they told me what I should do on a daily basis to strengthen my ability to balance and avoid falling. The exercises seemed so simple and basic after having undergone such intensive and extensive testing and evaluation from all those sophisticated machines. So here are a few of the exercises I now do on a daily basis to keep a better connection with the earth.

Upon awakening in the morning, before getting out of bed, flex your toes down and up thirty times. As a bonus, you could also flex your fingers to keep them limber and hopefully ward off arthritic pain. The purpose of the toe flex is to help you grip the surface you’re treading. I’ve noticed that people in shower clogs or sandals are automatically gripping the earth with their toes. Toe flex strengthens the muscles.

While still lying in bed, rotate your ankles until they feel loose. My ankles, toes, and feet feel pretty much frozen upon awakening. Even though you probably don’t have peripheral neuropathy, exercising your toes and ankles will help in making firm contact with the ground.

The next step is to stand in one place while rocking back and forth from one foot to the other. You begin by placing one foot forward so your heel is just a bit ahead of the toes of your back foot. You then rock back and forth twenty times with all your weight on one or the other foot. Initially this can be quite difficult to do. I suggest looking at yourself in a full length mirror while doing it and position yourself next to a cabinet or a stable object as you’ll most likely have a tendency to fall off balance. By doing this each morning you will strengthen your muscles and gain confidence in walking.

With this next exercise it’s vitally important to watch your self-talk so as to avoid saying, “I can’t do that!” If you say that to yourself or other people it will certainly be true. On the other hand, when you tell yourself you’re doing a little better each day, it will also happen. Standing on one leg certainly is a fierce challenge to your balancing abilities. Begin by standing close to a wall or a solid object so you have a surface to steady yourself. Initially,

you may not be able to stand on one leg or you may only be able to do it for a second or two. Tenacity is required for this one. The ultimate goal (which may never be reached) is to stand on one leg with your eyes closed. Instead, in addition to standing on one leg, I recommend the following, less challenging exercise. Stand on two legs with your eyes closed. This sounds simple enough but keep in mind that balance results from integrating sensory input from our muscles, eyes, and ears. When we close our visual sensory input, standing on two legs becomes more difficult. This will help you to shower with your eyes closed.

My final suggestion is to practice heel-toe walking like you're taking a sobriety test. Again, watch your self-talk. You may find this very challenging in the beginning but with daily practice you'll become more and more skilled.

You know the three most important issues in real estate are "Location, Location, Location!" In mental health and in all types of balance, the big three are "Awareness, Awareness, Awareness!" To achieve living in awareness I recommend doing some type of meditation daily. We fall down when we don't stay aware of what we're doing. When we walk, we must give 100% attention to the walking.

We have five levels in our home so we have lots of stairs to navigate each day. We've learned the hard way not to rush and to keep at least one hand, preferably two, on the railings at all times. We have also learned that when getting up in the middle of the night, be sure you are fully awake, have a night light on and know where pieces of furniture are to hold on to steady yourself. When we hike the woods each morning, I carry a staff to stay balanced and avoid falling. Falling and breaking one's hip, pelvis, arm, wrist, etc is not fun! Believe me, we know!

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