

Youth: the fountain springs from within

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Photos: CYD ABATT

Ponce de Leon shouldn't have wasted his time. There is now evidence that the fountain of youth springs from within every person.

"There's clear, scientific evidence that those who continue to be physically and mentally active will age better, stay healthier, and have more life satisfaction than those who don't," said Dr. E. W. Busse, founder of the Duke University Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development.

"One of the worst things we can do to our older people is tell them to slow down," said physical fitness expert Shirley Eyer. Called on to teach classes at a growing number of area private clubs, schools and the Birmingham YWCA, Ms. Eyer believes exercise is the closest thing there is to an anti-aging pill.

Recently, Ms. Eyer spent the weekend with fitness authority Bonnie Prudden, learning exercises for seniors. She thinks that everyone, including the youngest generation, should begin to look at fitness as a lifetime commitment.

"As we grow older," she said, "many people have the idea that if they move briskly, it's the worst. It's really an attitude that has been developing in them for years."

According to Eyer, the average person thinks of his body for the first time at the age of 20. She said it is usually only a brief concern too often judged on beauty alone. Between then and age 40, most of us forget our physical conditioning because we are more aware of jobs, raising families, and community involvements.

"Then, sometime between 35 and 40 a woman decides she is going to fight all the way or forget it. Men are different. He sees himself still as the college jock well into his 40s. Unfortunately, somewhere between 40 and 50, many people begin to think that moving is dangerous."

EYER SAYS this notion is ridiculous. Walking, she said, is the easiest and healthiest thing a person can do.

"Did you know that 20 minutes of walking four times per week can take 14 pounds off you in a year? Granted, that's brisk walking. Too many people look down on walking. I tell my students to go out the door, go 10 minutes, turn around and come back."

Eyer also believes there are exercises that a person can do in a chair that will keep him fit.

"I usually suggest that they pick up a couple of Frisbies," she said. "If they have something to work with, they are less likely to panic or feel self-conscious."

Eyer also suggests exercising to music.

"Americans will do almost anything to music. I believe music makes the entire program. Whatever you do, it

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—Shirley Eyer

has to be fun and music makes you move."

Considering that there are 21 million Americans over the age of 65, she said, there are 21 million Americans who need information regarding fitness. It wasn't until she met Mrs. Prudden that Ms. Eyer began to think about the fitness for older people program.

MRS. PRUDDEN, she explained, began a series of seminars that are weekend training sessions to teach "oldersters" the basics—good physical fitness activities that will help old injuries and correct habits that cause limitation of movement or the appearance of age.

"Just think what we are doing to ourselves," she said. "Too much emphasis is put on warnings." Among the worst, she said, are telling an olderster to avoid lifting, not to reach, take shorter steps and slow down.

"If they will walk every day, it will do wonders for them. I know oldersters who walk in the malls every day during bad weather. If you can walk, but are afraid of the ice and rain, then that's a perfect place. Some people have become regulars at it. They put on their jogging shoes and mark off the space they want to cover and they just walk."

However, Ms. Eyer said, there are people who can't get out for a brisk walk. For them, she suggests chair exercises.

Whether young or old, ambulatory or housebound, Ms. Eyer said every exercise session must begin with a two to five minute warmup, using any one of several light exercises.

"Roll your shoulders up and back and down and forward, then repeat it in the reverse direction. Next, do neck rolls for one minute. Shrug your shoulders to loosen up the muscles. Now, reach up and move from side to side. You are getting your body ready to do more strenuous exercise."

Taking the Frisbies in her hands she was ready to begin a chair exercise routine. "Start with the arms down at your sides and then raise them overhead. Tap the Frisbies and you can feel a beat beginning. Now, put your arms straight out in front and then to the side. Bring the Frisbies across your body and back again in a scissors movement."

The next step, she said, is to raise the arms overhead and tap the Frisbies again. Now gently bend side to side, holding the Frisbies together.

"It's a gentle movement," she said. "Once you feel comfortable with these movements you can move on to more advanced exercises." Among the advanced movements, she said, is bringing the elbow down to the opposite knee and then doing a crossover with the opposite elbow and knee. As agility increases, bring the knee up to meet the elbow.

"I suggest to any of my classes that they work in a circle with music as a background," she said. "Another exercise they can do is to walk in place or make giant arm circles. I'd have them stand behind the chair and raise their legs one at a time. Then they can swing their legs across the other and back."

Oldsters can also improve their fitness by walking in and out of the chairs in the circle, or leaning on the chairs to do waist bends.

"The important thing is to get them to laugh and enjoy what they are doing," she said. "I think the chairs are a good idea because most people at that age don't like to get onto the floor."

"These are activities that a person

can do even if he's in a wheelchair," she said. Quoting President Ford's Committee on Aging, she pointed out that physical activity is the key to prolonging good mental and physical health.

"We must do everything that we can," she said, "to resist the inclination to slow down the tempo of our living."



Shirley Eyer suggests that a couple of Frisbies can be a simple way to begin being active and limbering up.

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