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Move With Balance fosters equilibrium and cognitive fitness in older age

The ASA-MetLife Foundation Mind-Alert Award Program annually recognizes innovative mental fitness programs developed by nonprofit organizations. *Move With Balance* is the 2012 MindAlert Award winner in the Mental Fitness Programs for the General Population of Older Adults program category.

For Karen Peterson of Maui's Giving Back program, life is all about balance. Having moved to the Hawaiian Islands in 1992 after her three children were grown—and after 30 years working as an educational kinesiologist and vision therapist, she was unsure of her next step. As a kinesiologist she taught kids movements that enhance brain function and improve focus, concentration, coordination and academic performance. So when Peterson happened to drop into a local senior center, she ended up demonstrating exercises she had used in her past career. By 1994, she had found new meaning and a settled place in Hawaii, teaching a movement program at the center.

A Move to Combat Ageism, Frailty

As she worked with older adults, Peterson, now 67, realized she was becoming older herself, and didn't appreciate the way "our society doesn't really like seniors." She wanted elders to "feel significant. Wouldn't it be better if they felt more involved in their community?"

Peterson also kept running up against society's negative image of elders—"of an old person who can't walk right." As she says, "the 55 to 105 age group is so varied," and she imagined a program where mobile, younger elders could be more involved in the community by mentoring children in local schools. This was in 2000, and marked the genesis of her nonprofit, Giving Back.

In 2005, the program added the option of active elders, some as old as 85, who would mentor frail elders, dividing people into categories by mobility level, not age. Since Giving Back's inception, Peterson has trained 500 mentors and 1,500 frail elder mentees on Maui.

By 2010, this elder-to-elder program, now named Move With Balance, concentrated on fall prevention and cognitive fitness, using the same integrative movements and activities she had used with children. In her current work, she has developed many more exercises based on kinesiology and vision therapy principles, and geared them specifically to elders.

Forging Neural Pathways, Preventing Falls

Peterson trains volunteer mentors in exercises that "integrate both right and left sides of the brain." Simply stretching the right arm over to touch the left knee engages both sides of the brain,

helping with balance and memory. Research has shown that cross-lateral, integrated movements such as these contribute to new cell growth and brain activation. Exercises are designed for relatively mobile elders who can stand, or for those with limited mobility who find it easier to exercise from a sitting position. The mentors are then each paired with a mentee to practice the Move With Balance activities together in a safe atmosphere.

As mentees become skilled at basic movements, Peterson ups the ante, having students complete simple math problems while, say, standing on one leg. Or do leg lifts while counting by threes backward from 100. These physical-mental exercises are combined with vision improvement and hearing techniques aimed at reducing falls. There are “fusion activities” that force the eyes to work in tandem, helping to improve depth perception and peripheral vision.

Hearing exercises function similarly, concentrating more on processing than function. Instead of using a hearing aid only to amplify sound, students perform a physical activity while listening to a conversation; this integrates the sensory and motor systems, and the visual and aural processes. Such exercises simulate real-life situations, instill confidence in mentees and help to prevent falls that can happen in distracting environments.

This past June, Hawaii’s Department of Health showed in a pilot study (not yet published for peer review) that Move With Balance reduced falls by 38 percent in frail elders who had completed 10 weeks of the program.

Everyday Improvement and Inspiration

Peterson witnesses rapid improvement in program participants every day. The program “rebuilds neurons, activating, keeping everything alive,” says Peterson, likening the exercises to learning a new skill, like driving, where one must remember multiple small actions that experienced drivers take for granted. Move With Balance mentees are concentrating just as hard—and forging new neural pathways. Mentors also learn and enhance their own cognitive function as they engage in exercises with mentees.

Students remain inspired, too. As mentee Dorothy Wall said, “I learned different ways to do exercises that I had already been doing, but they were easier to understand, therefore, I was more motivated to do them.”

“Move With Balance engages all ages [of] seniors to be fully present in the moment, fully engaged in life, [with] the mind and the body fully integrated,” says Peterson. “You continue to grow and learn, which is what we were meant to do.”

Peterson’s long-range plan is to replicate the program beyond its current four sites on Maui. In September she plans to launch Move With Balance on the mainland, and sell “kits” with a facilitator manual and a DVD to allow program managers or staff to create Move With Balance programs in group homes, as well as packages with one-on-one lessons that both caregivers and independent, mobile older adults can use. And the interactive Move With Balance website offers backup help in the form of videos and updates. ■

To find out more about Giving Back, visit www.givingbackmentoring.org; for Move With Balance, visit www.movewithbalance.org.



Karen Peterson

Mentee Dorothy Wall, at right, does exercises with mentor Maggie Elliott.