

Chapter 3: With a Gentle Hand

Age may be relative, but aging is not. So, while everyone is surely different, and the aging process affects people differently, there are definite characteristics of aging that are common to most people. Our goals, of course, are to live as long as possible, to be as healthy as we can, and to minimize the suffering we experience in our older years. Our goals as children of aging parents are to do what we can to help our parents realize their goals.

In this chapter we'll talk about ways we can help our parents stay as healthy as possible in mind and spirit. We'll talk about keeping fit, good nutrition, and some common medical conditions that occur in older people, such as Alzheimer's disease, adult-onset diabetes, dementia, osteoporosis, heart disease, depression, substance abuse, hypochondriasis, and gum and dental disease. We'll also discuss things you can do when your parents eyesight begins failing or their hearing becomes impaired.

The focus will be on what you, as caregivers and children of aging parents, should look for to make sure your parents are not experiencing some physical or mental distress for which some treatment is needed. We'll give hints to help you and your parents choose doctors and other medical personnel. We'll talk about ways you can make your parents' home more suitable to their needs and more accessible if they have any physical limitations. And we'll discuss medications—their effects and keeping track of them.

Young at Heart: Keeping Fit

First, let's make something very clear: fit does not mean youthful. In fact, our whole definition of "old age" has, by necessity, changed dramatically in recent years. It's a common sight to see senior citizens running in marathons or triathlons, or performing some other physically challenging task (many of us who are much younger can't run a mile or swim 100 laps in a pool). It's become even more common to see senior citizens in health clubs pumping iron, mastering stairs, and aerobically stepping. The point is, the goal of an older person is *not* to be young again. There's nothing wrong with getting older (like the old joke, "consider the alternative"). Most older people wouldn't trade their age for anything. They love being exactly who they are: a composite of all the experiences they've amassed over a lifetime. You obviously can't stop time and you can't stop aging. But you can delay some or all of the physical deterioration that comes with aging. One of the best ways to do that, for most people, is through exercise: a regular, appropriate, routine.

Important: Needless to say, everyone starting to exercise, regardless of age, should be certain it is an appropriate regime given their age and physical condition. With your aging parents, it is especially recommended that they consult their doctor or physical therapist before starting any exercise regime.

The Goals of Exercise

What do we mean by a regular, appropriate routine of exercise? This is the same for us Baby Boomers as it is for our parents. Simply put, there are three ingredients:

1. Aerobic activity for a healthy heart and lungs
2. Flexibility exercises so that muscles and joints don't atrophy from lack of use
3. Strengthening exercises to maintain muscle tone and prevent injury

The specific routine your parents adopt should be designed in coordination with their medical consultants. It should be something they can do often and with little hassle (otherwise it will be much too easy to put it off). Furthermore, whatever routine they choose should be one they enjoy doing and look forward to.

Walking is certainly one of the best activities your parents can do regularly. More and more we see hordes of retirees dressed in their workout clothes and specially-designed sneakers "walking the mall" in the morning hours before the stores open. Walking meets all three of the goals of exercise. And "walking the mall" means there's always a lot to see and other people with whom your parents can interact, which makes it more enjoyable. In addition, because they are indoors, weather is almost never a problem.

If there's a mall near your parent's house, there's likely a group of seniors there every morning limbering up and then walking briskly from one end to another. In some malls there is even an organized club or association that sponsors the exercise or, at least, keeps it safe and supervised.

To learn more about mall walking, check with the central administration office of the mall or with a nearby senior community center.

If your parents are in a wheelchair, uses a walker or cane(s), or have some other disability, physical exercise should be an essential part of their lives, as any physical therapist will say, “to maintain muscle strength and flexibility.” Be sure your parent works closely with the therapist and has a recommended exercise routine mapped out.

Where to Go

In addition to mall walking, there’s always the great outdoors. Although in some places your parent will have to deal with weather, traffic, and other barriers, there are many towns and areas that offer walking trails and park courses. There are many also fitness and aerobic classes available for seniors offered through the local community recreations centers, adult schools, senior centers, YMCA’s and YWCA’s, churches and synagogues. These are usually low-cost or free, run by professionals, and supervised.

In addition, many health clubs and gyms offer reduced rates for seniors or lower-cost limited memberships to people who will use a club during off-peak hours (e.g. between 9:00 am and 4:00 pm).

Note: If your parent has some physical disability, it may be possible to get a doctor to prescribe an exercise regime. In that case, all or part of a club membership or activities fee may be covered by health insurance (classified as physical therapy) or tax deductible (but be sure your parent checks this out with a tax advisor).

For more information about fitness for seniors, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) offers a great deal information to members. You can call the headquarters at 1-(800) 424-3410 or your local chapter office (there are nearly 4,000 local chapters). You can also visit the AARP web site at: <http://www.aarp.org>.

Warning: Remind your parents that if, at any time while exercising, they feel faint, light-headed, or short of breath, or feel any sort of chest pain or “palpitations,” they should immediately stop exercising. If the condition persists, they should seek medical attention immediately!