

Quality living: Older adults work toward better health

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Mike Green was like a lot of middle-aged men a few years ago.

The 56-year-old self-employed asset manager struggled with his weight, hypertension and high cholesterol. He didn't work out and didn't eat particularly healthy. After his 52nd birthday, that all changed.

"I decided I'd better start taking care of myself," he said. "I was a sprinter in high school, and I wanted to run sprints in the Huntsman Senior Games."

He joined a gym, which is where he met the man who changed his life — Paul Holbrook.

"I walked into a gym where Paul was training someone 4 1/2 years ago," Green said. "That's where it started."

But his training with Holbrook, a gerontologist and physical trainer, reaped him more rewards than a return to his athletic glory days. He needs half of the medication he once took, he's lost 40 pounds and his cardiovascular health is greatly improved.

He runs 50 meters in 7.09 seconds and the 100 meters in 13.3 seconds when he competes in not only the Huntsman Senior Games, but the Senior Olympics.

He relishes being an anomaly among his age group.

"It's a little unusual," he said. "Some of my friends go out and play a game of golf or tennis, but I run sprints. My mental health is so much better now, too. When you work this hard for something, and achieve it, the sense of satisfaction and self-worth is unbelievable. I'm living in the moment."

Holbrook began his work with clients over 50 in regular gyms around Salt Lake County 12 years ago. But the atmosphere wasn't always conducive for mature adults attempting to changing the habits of a lifetime. So he recently opened the AgeWell Center, 2670 S. 2000 East, a small space devoted to helping adults over the age of 50 improve their lives by returning strength, balance and flexibility to them as they age.

"I wanted to create a place to change the way we think about aging," Holbrook said. "This is not anti-aging. First of all, we have to admit the medical community has done a wonderful job of extending our life span. But our health span hasn't kept pace. We're living longer, but we're not as healthy. We need to improve our health so we live not just longer but quality lives."

The atmosphere is markedly different from the modern health spa, with soft music, calming colors and no mirrored walls. The purpose is to focus on bettering one's health, he said.

"Outside stimuli take away from what's going on inside," Holbrook said. "I think you can focus better and the workouts have more intrinsic value. . . . I think the fitness industry is doing a terrible job meeting this need."

The average age of the clients of the AgeWell Center is between 70 and 75. However, Holbrook encourages people to come in as early as 50 to begin minimizing the effects of age. The workouts help with balance and flexibility, as well as strength and cardiovascular conditioning. The drills are meant to help clients retain their mobility and abilities, even as time marches on.

Loss of muscle strength is one of the major reasons people end up in nursing homes, hospitals or with joint replacements.

"Our bodies are designed for physical activity," he said, "and you're never too old to get started."

He has one client who is 91, and many around Green's age.

Ric Collier began working with Holbrook to improve his ability to run distance races. Holbrook said age doesn't determine the workouts he plans for a client, but instead, he bases it on their needs and abilities. The AgeWell Center uses air-resistance machines, which are gentler on the joints, he said.

"I didn't want to injure myself," said the director of the Salt Lake Art Center. Then he began having ear pain and discovered a tumor growing in his left ear in March 2001. He knew he'd have to have surgery to remove the tumor, and was warned it could mean a loss of balance.

"I started reading Web pages, and I just got really depressed," he said. "I was so active, and some of these people took up to two years to recover."

So he talked with Holbrook, who had just the answer.

"We started working on a balance routine to help me recover quicker," Collier said. "Paul said you could literally train your muscles to compensate for the loss of the balance nerves in my ear."

He stood on one foot, caught a weighted ball and tried to balance his weight on what looked like a tiny wooden see-saw.

"It was like being an adult going to a kids park," he laughed. "Four or five weeks after my surgery, I went back to the gym. I could tell I didn't have the balance I did, but I came back stronger. . . . It was a remarkable adventure."

Many of those who work with the older population say their needs go largely ignored by traditional fitness clubs.

"That industry puts out a strong message and it's about vanity," said John Rudd, founder of Age Dynamics, which sets up wellness centers all over the country and offers support services as well as motivational material. "It's about looking good. . . . Those focused on the older population ask us to think about how we feel and how we function."

He said trainers in a traditional fitness club may not be trained to deal with the special health needs of elderly patrons, and machines may be difficult for older patrons to use. More importantly, older patrons who haven't been active may not want to begin working out in the traditional club, which means they won't stick to an exercise program.

"It's very intimidating for a non-fit, older adult," he said. Also, most wellness centers require a doctor's cooperation and approval of any new workout plan.

"If you've been inactive for a while, you should always talk to a doctor first," Rudd said. "You can have ill health and not know it."

The issue may be more critical than just being able to go for a jog or fit into a favorite pair of pants. In 2002 alone, 12,800 people over the age of 65 died from unintentional falls, according to an article on the Web site of the International Council on Active Aging. Stated another way, each hour, one older adult dies and 183 are treated in emergency rooms for fall-related injuries.

"Falls and fall-related injuries in older adults are health concerns in the active aging field, which is committed to health, well-being and quality of life for older adults," said Colin Milner, founder and CEO of the ICAA, in the online article. "Physical activity interventions that improve strength, balance and mobility can reduce falls in the older population and prevent the often devastating effects they have on individuals, as well as their families and communities."

He goes on to say poor physical mobility is a key contributor, which can be mitigated by exercise.

The falls are expensive, too. The article estimates that by the year 2020, the cost of those unintentional falls will be \$43.8 billion.

Both Holbrook and Rudd agree that it is never too late to begin an exercise program, and studies show it always improves the quality of a person's life.

"We work with people age 70 to 100, and we constantly monitor their behaviors and outcomes," Rudd said. "No matter what age they start, people continue to develop muscle mass, and balance and endurance can be improved regardless of age."

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