

I Have Parkinson's Disease, How Exercise Helps Me Cope

My name is Bob. I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease back when I was 55; I am 62 today. Since my diagnosis, I have never let the disease take over my life; I've tried to live as normal a life as I can.

Exercise has played an important role in my battle with PD. I go to a boxing class once a week, have personal trainers come to my home for an hour twice a week (instead of me having to go to a gym, something that would be too easy to skip). I play golf whenever I can; I walk the course. Except for golf, I didn't do the other things consistently before my diagnosis. I guess you can say that having Parkinson's Disease has improved my life as I am more active and in better condition than I would have been without it.

I wish I could say that exercise has cured my symptoms but I can't. I can say that exercise, combined with a supporting family, a top-notch medical team, and a positive attitude has helped to relieve my symptoms a great deal.

You should know that I have had bi-lateral Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) surgery. The decision to try it came after many different drug combinations failed to control or make my symptoms feel better. I had the first probe implanted in 2013 and the second in 2016. While DBS isn't for everybody, my surgery has controlled the essential tremors that I would have continued to suffer with if I hadn't undergone the procedures.

Let's explore some of the aspects of my life and how exercise can help with the day-to-day.

Lately my voice has become softer, less loud and difficult for me to use. It sounds like I have a cold and the hoarse throat that goes with it. But, I don't have a cold and I don't feel anything in my throat. Everything feels normal until I talk, then it becomes difficult to breathe and keep my voice going so that I can complete sentences. To alleviate this symptom, I've gone to Voice Therapy in the past and have started another course of sessions recently. The exercises the therapist recommends help me to speak louder and with more clarity and confidence.

Balance is an issue. While I have not fallen, I do find it difficult to catch my balance at times. To combat this, my personal trainers incorporate balance exercises along with the weight and cardio training. They will have me hop on one foot for 20 or 25 yards, throw and catch a ball with one hand while walking around or standing on one foot, things like that. When I am waiting for something, the oven to pre-heat for example, I stand on one foot for as long as I can and switch feet when I lose balance. I've found that I can stay balanced on one foot for up to a minute and probably average 30 seconds before I need to put both feet on the ground.

I find that Parkinson's does not affect my golf game much. I am terrible at the game at best before my diagnosis and I am still terrible after. I do find that if I am experiencing break-through symptoms such as a slight tremor or a balance issue, when I address the golf ball the symptoms go away at least until after

I hit the ball (usually into the rough when I get a different set of symptoms – frustration, rage, self-loathing, you get the point).

One important thing that I learned when I engaged my personal trainers was that they should be familiar with the disease and design the exercises they give me with PD in mind. The same can be said for boxing classes. When I started boxing, I went to an ordinary gym and signed up for classes. What I found was that I was one of the oldest people there and I could not keep up with the pace of instruction. Then, I found a boxing class that was tailored for people that suffer from PD and other movement disorders. That difference has made the classes much more enjoyable and above all more therapeutic.

Some more pointers:

1. Don't allow the disease to define of who you are. Let it become a part of who you are, nothing more.
2. Let others in your life know that you are living with the disease and educate them if they ask about what Parkinson's is.
3. Be thankful that, if you had to be struck with a movement disorder, it is PD. The symptoms are nothing like MS or ALS and the prognosis is better too.
4. Be patient with your support network.
5. Find out if DBS surgery is for you. Discuss it with your neurologist to see if you are a candidate. It's worked wonders for me.
6. Don't give in to depression. Seek help.
7. Exercise, exercise, and then exercise some more.
8. If your significant-other is your main care-giver, don't take them for granted.
9. Remember, PD isn't a death sentence. Be positive and as happy as possible.

The last tip on the list reminds me of an episode from Star Trek that loosely illustrates the point. The episode called "Day of the Dove" is about a disembodied alien entity that takes control of the Enterprise and starts irritating the crew so that it can feed on the negative emotions. It causes a war on board the ship between the Federation Crew and their arch-enemies a group of Klingons where even mortally wounded characters miraculously become alive again so that they can keep fighting and so that the fighting would never end. It feeds on the negative emotions and grows. It becomes so powerful that it takes over the minds of the combatants to make them hate each other more.

Finally, Captain Kirk, a character whose ship is so much a part of him, that even an alien with tremendous power can't fully control him, discovers that positive emotions weaken the alien's resolve. He somehow convinces the Klingon commander, Kang, to stop the fighting and be of good cheer. The alien, disgusted with the mirth, leaves the ship and dissipates in space.

Treat PD that way, be like Captain Kirk, laugh and be mirthful, the positive emotions will start to make it easier to get back into living your life.