

Exercise helps keep Parkinson's in check

By RYAN MURRAY/ The Daily Inter Lake | Posted: Monday, May 25, 2015

If you rest, you rust.

That's the adage of Lynnell Finley and the staff of Advanced Rehabilitation Services in Kalispell when it comes to patients with Parkinson's disease.

Finley, a physical therapist, is certified in two programs that specifically benefit those living with Parkinson's, a neurodegenerative disease.

"With Parkinson's, exercise is a medication. It's like any other medicine," she said. "It's been proven to slow progression and decrease symptoms."

Parkinson's disease gets progressively worse as a person ages. Intense physical activity and cognitively challenging activities can help stave off the effects.

"It has to be a high-intensity exercise at a level they wouldn't do on their own," Finley said. "They have to be pushed. I'm the pusher."

People with Parkinson's disease tend to make small motions. Short, shuffling steps and not swinging arms when walking make for slow going and poor balance. Falls are common.

The programs Finley implements are the LSVT BIG and PWR! programs, which emphasize intense exercise and exaggerated movements to compensate for the small movements typical of those with the disease.

"We do gait training with Nordic walking poles and may have them make big sweeping steps and swinging arm movements," she said. "It is a sensory disorder as well, so patients don't know they are moving small."

To someone with Parkinson's, what might seem like a giant step in front of them is actually just a normal step from everyone else's point of view.

The training isn't easy. Patients spend two hours a day exercising, one with Finley, and are expected to continue that work even after the four-week sessions are over.

"You have to do it every day," she said. "If you rest, you rust is what we say. Research has shown better results from doing these exercises in just a few weeks."

Finley does an evaluation when a Parkinson's patient comes to her, plus one midway through the program and one at the end. She said there is always improvement and it is well-earned.

Joe Jackson, 74, would agree.

"It really tested some limits," he said. "But it made me less conscious of my walking in some ways. A lot of Parkinson's is deliberation of movements and focusing on every step."



Lynnell Finley, right, walks with Joe Jackson during a therapy session at Advanced Rehabilitation Services. Finley is a physical therapist certified to assist those such as Jackson who are living with Parkinson's disease, a neurodegenerative disease. (Aaric Bryan/Daily Inter Lake)

For Jackson, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease six years ago, every step was a conscious, planned decision. The training he received from Finley six months ago has helped him back to living a normal life.

"When this is in my life, I'm better off overall," Jackson said.

He first noticed symptoms of what he can now identify as Parkinson's disease a decade ago. He noticed things like rigidity and occasional drooling — swallowing can be difficult for people with the disease.

"I joked with my friends that I thought I had a stroke," Jackson said.

One of the strategies for improving a person's condition is having the patient do two things at once.

"It could be walking and bouncing a ball, or walking and throwing a ball," Finley said. "Or maybe I'll have them stretching or walking while naming the capitals of the states."

No matter what the person's specific challenges in living their life to the fullest, Advanced Rehabilitation Services caters to that person's needs.

"They are just miracle workers," Jackson said. "My life is just better."

Better, and not a spot of rust to be found.

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