

Use it or Lose it – Part I

My mother, now 72, complained to me recently that department store doors are too heavy and she finds them difficult to open. The doors have not changed of course, she is simply ageing and losing strength in the parts of her body that she is no longer putting under regular stress. To illustrate this I pointed out to her that she never complains about having to climb stairs and she readily agreed. Stairs are not a problem for her and why would they be? She must climb two flights of stairs to get to her apartment. On some days she does this several times: checking the mail, doing some laundry and perhaps go out to run an errand or two. Because of this minor but regular stress, her legs have remained strong. "But I'm not doing any less with my arms!" she protested. Ah, but she is. She no longer does laundry or groceries for a whole family, carrying heavy items. She no longer has the volume of cleaning, cooking or other manual tasks that she used to have and she is also retired from what was a very physical job, being a nurse.

Personal trainers learn something called the SAID principle: Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demand. Put simply, it means that your body will quickly adapt itself to whatever it has to deal with on a regular basis. By extension it also means that parts of your body that do not receive regular stresses weaken. For my mother, this means that two flights of stairs are no big deal and department store doors are. This is why personal trainers change their clients' programs every six to eight weeks, forcing the body to adapt to a new set of circumstances and become stronger.

As we age, we tend to let the hard "work" slip and replace it with "conveniences". We get a car and no longer walk as much as we used to. We get the kids to mow the lawn or wash the car. Strength isn't the only thing we stand to lose. As we become too "adult" to sit on the floor, to dance, and to play we become stiff, especially in the hips and shoulders.

Too much stress can be a bad thing. Moderate physical stress, however, is essential to maintaining a strong and healthy body. In general you need to provide your body with more physical stress than you are under on a daily basis in order to perform your day to day activities without fatigue or strain.

Women need to pay special attention to maintaining upper body strength. Men need to pay attention to flexibility in the lower body. Both men and women need to ensure that they maintain good balance to protect from falls, as well as maintain good posture and spinal flexibility as the body tends to curl inward as we age.

Yoga is an excellent choice as a physical activity because it provides both strength and flexibility. Yoga lowers blood pressure and has a wonderful relaxing effect on both the body and mind. It is non-impact and can be done by nearly everyone all throughout life. Some of yoga's greatest teachers still practice and teach well into their 80s and 90s!

Ageing is inevitable, but how we age is up to us. Sitting on the sofa watching TV will lead to rapid ageing with a loss of physical mobility and independence. Maintaining an active lifestyle will help you to age more gracefully and allow you to enjoy your independence.

Enjoy your practice.