



DYNAMIC AGING

Music, exercise, and friendships are good medicine!

My last article focused on the power of social connections in reducing stress, reducing feelings of isolation, and possibly even reducing the incidence of illness. We've certainly heard plenty about the positive effects of exercise on aging. In either case, past articles have provided local resources for both senior meals that provide social connection and local exercise opportunities that are beneficial for prevention or reduction of chronic disease (if you would like copies of past articles, please contact the author).

What if we combine connecting with friends to exercising? This is exactly what Bev White does in her class "Hep the Step" Women's Hop. Thanks to the generosity of Casco Community Church and Bev's passion to "give elders a zest for life and to enjoy themselves," about 25 senior women get together for exercise every Wednesday morning from 10 to 11:30, free of charge.

Throughout her working life and as a mother of five children, Bev has always made physical activity a priority for herself and her family. From playing ice hockey to cross-country skiing to swimming, Bev found value in the informal forms of these activities.

When Bev retired three years ago from Windham School District, she wanted to create something that carried on her values and brought joy into older women's lives. During the first hour of the class, women can "move their bodies in such a way that's comfortable for them," says Bev. Circle dances, dancing to the 50's and 60's, and a variety of other types of music are all part of the mix. Most importantly, "we are playful and we laugh," adds Bev.

A review article in the September 2002 issue of the Journal of Aging and Identity cites "it is now widely recognized that music for many older people is crucial in supporting a sense of well being." Additionally, notes William Fry, M.D., a professor emeritus at Stanford University Medical School, "laughter also deepens breathing and eases muscle tension, both of which contribute to stress reduction."

It looks like Bev has hit upon a formula that works: Combine exercise with music and sprinkle in some laughter! The second part of the class is devoted to the other part of the equation: social connectedness. After some time for sharing, the women discuss a specific topic of interest, many times provided by one of the participants. According to Bev, the best thing about this time of the class is "many friendships are formed with lasting bonds."

Bev's class has grown by 300 percent in just one year. The formula is a successful one: exercise, laughter, music, and friendships. If you are interested in attending the Casco class or learning more about how you can start a class in your town, Bev is very interested in talking with you. She would like to see the class expand into other areas and is happy to be a mentor to anyone who has the desire to lead their own class. Bev White can be reached at 627-4179.