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The Great Reconditioning: Recovering Strength and Mobility after Two Years of Inactivity



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If there's one thing many of us have been doing during these last-two long pandemic years, it's too much sitting! With so much of our daily life shut down and social distancing keeping us from friends and loved ones, we've all experienced what I call The Great Deconditioning.

As we blossom into spring's nicer weather and as COVID restrictions have loosened, now is the time to pivot our focus to The Great Reconditioning. To learn how to recognize deconditioning - including physiological changes like loss of muscle mass and functionality due to inactivity - and put steps (literally) in place to regain strength, flexibility and mobility, I spoke recently with Betty Ayetiwa, a senior physical therapist at the organization where I work, the Visiting Nurse Service of New York.

Betty provides in-home physical therapy to many older New Yorkers and says almost everyone she sees is deconditioned. This is apparent in how difficult it is for them to get up out of a chair, sometimes taking three or four tries to stand up, or in how short of breath they can get just walking to their front door to greet her.

"These are people who used to go to a senior center two or three times a week," says Betty, whose service area includes Staten Island. "But since everything shut down, they've been cooped up inside. They've been sitting a lot, watching TV and not moving around. And now they're struggling."

The first thing Betty does when she makes her home visits is perform a formal assessment, testing to see how long it takes the individual to transfer from sitting to standing five times. This "Sit to Stand" movement is a key measure of functionality. Betty takes her cues from the assessment results, gauging how much strength, mobility and stability have to be recovered to help someone live as independently as possible at home.

Even if we are not elderly or measurably deconditioned, many of us have become more sedentary than we were in our pre-pandemic lives. With workplaces, places of worship, community centers and other gathering places switching to a virtual existence for months at a time, the idea of visiting a friend or loved one or gathering together in the neighborhood became a distant memory. Now that normalcy is returning at last, Betty shares the following strategies for Re-conditioning, one step at a time.

Start slow. You can exercise even while you sit and watch TV. From your chair, you can do:

- Ankle pumps, pulling your toes up towards your head and pressing them back down again
- Leg raises, going from bent to straight knee and holding the leg straight, if possible
- Transfer practice, moving from sitting to standing

Betty suggests that, when her clients are watching TV, they use the commercial break as an opportunity to stand up. If you can, she says, walk the length of the room or apartment once or twice. You won't miss the show, and you'll start to get back strength and lung capacity. Once it gets easier, she finds that her clients aren't so quick to sit down once the show returns.

Stand, for strength. Simple exercises while standing can quickly help recover strength and flexibility. Here's what Betty suggests:

- Toe raises (just like it sounds: lifting your toes off the ground). Do 10 with each foot. If that's easy, she says, do 10 more.
- March in place, adding one more to your count each time
- Mini squats, bending slightly, as if to sit down, then raising back up

Take a walk. Betty has her clients start walking inside, taking laps around the apartment or the hallway, where temperature and terrain are consistent. The next step is to get outside and walk - which really begins the road to recovery. Many of her clients, after languishing in isolation for so long, are reluctant to walk outside. "I don't want the neighbors to see me," says Betty, describing their resistance. "I'm embarrassed to go out like this."

To counter this feeling, Betty has a simple suggestion: Dress like you're going out - to the senior center, to the doctor's office, somewhere you used to go, anywhere you'd expect to run into plenty of people. Put on nice clothes and a little make-up. "Again and again" Betty says, "we see how this basic step begins to transform people who've been shut in for the last two years."

The key is to move, at least a little, every day. Betty suggests posting simple notes on your refrigerator or inside your front door, reminding yourself to do ankle pumps, leg lifts, stand, walk... The beauty of regular exercise is that once it becomes an ingrained habit, your body will miss it if you stop.

For added support, try to find a friend or family member to report your progress to - not miles clocked or pounds lifted, but just how many days you stood up during the commercials or walked around the block this week. If they care as much as Betty, your reconditioning will make them feel better, too.

"I'm like a proud mother hen," Betty says. "I feel like my babies are flying the coop, and I'm so excited to see that. It's a true sign of spring!"

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