

# Miniwakan Tiyospaye News



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## **Growing Older With A Physical Disability**

**By Dr. Erich Longie, President, Spirit Lake Consulting Inc.**

Twenty-five years ago, I was involved in a car accident that resulted in a broken spinal column and numerous other injuries. Due to my injuries, I became partially paralyzed on the left side of my body. I also injured my right knee in that accident, and as a result still need constant physical therapy.

Because my left leg is partially paralyzed, it is weaker than my right leg and this has resulted in my right leg (and knee) bearing the majority of my weight these past 25 years. This extra weight on my right leg has made even my 'good' knee injured and I now wear a brace on my right knee to stabilize it. Eventually, I will need to have a knee replacement and/or end up in a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

For the past 20 years or so, I have played pool with a person who also suffered a spinal cord injury, which led to a disability far more severe than mine. He has been in a wheelchair since I met him. This person, who is now approaching 60, is the most independent person I know, disabled or non-disabled. He does everything for himself, from mowing his lawn to changing the oil in his car – and he is one heck of a pool player.

But recently, I've begun to notice signs that he is "slowing" down. I say slowing down because when we first met, we would play pool for eight to 10 hours at a time. Now, when we play, we only shoot for three to five hours. I've also noticed his attitude has begun to change. He becomes moody at times. He once said to me, "When I go, I hope I go quickly." Observing my friend's physical and emotional changes made me wonder how my disability could affect me emotionally, psychologically, and mentally as I grow older.

So I began to do some research on the subject. I was surprised by the amount of material I found on aging with a disability. There were a wide variety of topics from growing older with cerebral palsy to aging with physical, mental, visual, hearing and intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. There was information on various issues from policies and best practices to quality of life issues such as self-determination, independence, aging with dignity, and decision-making.

One web site had an interesting article about people with learning disabilities being misplaced in older people's homes, which resulted in them living with much older and more incapacitated people. (Go here for the article: <http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/page.cfm?pagecode=PRAROB>).

One of the best sites I visited (<http://www.disabilityresources.org/AGING.html>) included information on aging with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. This site touched on physical fitness and dealing with changes in vision and hearing.

Although my disability is not as severe as my friend's and I am several years younger, I have already noticed subtle changes in my physical abilities. This has been most evident in my inability to lift my left leg high enough

getting up is not as easy as it used to be. Compounding this is the fact that my balance is not what it once was, which also leads to falls.

The more research I did, the more I realized I should become more aware of my overall physical health. I realized I needed to get a complete physical, as I have not had one done for 15 – 20 years. I also should select a primary care physician. I very seldom go to a doctor so I do not have “my own” doctor. Like most Native Americans who grew up on reservations, I have a fear and distrust of doctors due to my negative experiences with them at our Indian Health Services clinic. (That’s another story.)

As I mentioned earlier, growing older with my disability was not something I thought about until recently. I was young, 29 years old, at the time of my spinal cord injury and my body was able to compensate for some of my disability. Because of this, I didn’t follow the advice of my physical therapist, who had outlined a regimen of exercises for me to follow when I was discharged from the hospital so many years ago. Those exercises would have slowed down the effect of my disability as I grew older. It wasn’t until recently that I fully understood growing older with a disability. I also discovered that while it was too late for me to go back 25 years and do my physical therapy, it was still possible for me to start exercising now – which could help ease the process of aging with my disability as well as improve my overall health. Knowing this, I started exercising more often and now I exercise every day I can.

Thinking about growing older with a disability led me to information on how growing older will impact other areas of my life such as driving. I love to drive but lately I’ve noticed my vision, reaction times, and even my thinking have slowed down. Realizing this I am beginning to become more cautious than I normally am while driving. Because I have a reputation as a fast, reckless driver, I jokingly tell my family that I’m losing my nerve. After reading the University of Michigan’s *Driving Decisions Workbook*, I realize what is happening to me is normal -- I just have to make the proper adjustments in my driving style.

However, in order to live independently, people must to assess their needs, plan and set up the necessary services to meet those needs, advocate for those needs and find a way that they can access cost-effective social and health services. As a person with a disability becomes older, he/she should make it a point to become aware of programs and agencies that have free material on the subject and provide related services.

I feel much better after doing research on growing older with a disability. I know the proper exercises to do, the proper foods to eat and the proper precautions to take when taking medication. As a result, I am adjusting my lifestyle accordingly. However, the most important thing I learned was having a good attitude toward growing older. The Creator has bestowed many blessings on me throughout my lifetime and I do not think he will quit doing so now. With that in mind, I look forward to enjoying the next 30 or so years of my life.

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**Other websites that I found useful:**

[www.ficodot.ca/Conferences/Default.aspx?ConfID=1&lang=en\\_US](http://www.ficodot.ca/Conferences/Default.aspx?ConfID=1&lang=en_US)

## **Aging with a disability: Even if you lived a healthy life, you still get old**

By Dr. AnnMaria DeMars, Vice President, Spirit Lake Consulting, Inc.

*It is not late adulthood, it's getting old.* This is what I thought as I was updating the developmental psychology course on our website. I am getting a bit irritable (Is that a sign of aging?) reading all of the positive spin put on getting older.

I read articles that say if we lived right and ate organic brown rice, were never overweight, didn't drink and generally lived in a way almost no human being I ever met has lived, we would all be like Joe Smith who just ran in the marathon at age 90. Not only do those articles not help me, they make me feel depressed because I know that, no matter what those authors say, there is no way I am ever going to run a marathon in my whole life unless it is on artificial legs.

The secret to successful aging is not -- as some articles seem to suggest -- to deny the effects of aging, but rather to face these changes with a positive attitude and the creativity that is necessary to overcome the obstacles age throws in our way.

Here is a fact of life – I am getting older and as I get older there are many things I cannot do any more. I am not overweight. I have never been an alcoholic and I exercised all of my life, to the point where I won a world judo championship 23 years ago. Now, like many former athletes, my knees are missing parts – ligaments and cartilage. I have arthritis in every joint. My knees are the worst, but there are lots of days when everything hurts.

After setting four college track records, I cannot run any more, not even from the grocery store to my car when it is raining. I can't go dancing any more because my knees don't bend farther than a few inches. When my older daughters were children, we went for walks in the mountains and even sometimes went running on the cross-country trails in Jamestown. Now, when my youngest child, who is 9, wants to go rock-climbing she cannot go to the top because I won't let her go any higher than I know I can carry her back down when she is in trouble.

There are a great many things, large and small, that I cannot do at all or as well now that I am older. As I continue to age, I expect that my life will be more restricted. My eyes are failing, and at some point, I won't be able to drive.

What is the solution? Not whining about it, like I am doing here, but instead facing up to the facts and making modifications. I can't run any more so now I swim fairly regularly. I don't enjoy it as much as running, but it is something I can do with my 9-year-old and she likes it.

I am finding as I age that there are advantages and disadvantages to everything. When I work on my computer, I increase the font size. Whether you are using the Internet, reading a word document or a PDF file, almost every application has a "zoom in" or "larger" option. Because I am not raising four children (three of them have grown up and moved out), I have money for things like computers. As we age, our ability to do things that relieve stress -- like running -- may decline, but many of the things that cause us stress -- such as waking up with a crying baby, worrying if we will pass that exam or dealing with teenagers -- have declined as well.

When we do encounter stressful situations, we have more resources to deal with these. We have long-term friends we can call on for advice or help. We have experience dealing with similar situations in the past and know what to do.

What works best for me in adjusting to the inevitable fact of growing older is to follow the advice of my grandmother, "Count your blessings instead of your troubles." Some of those older people really know what they are talking about!

To read the section on aging of the FREE developmental psychology course from Spirit Lake Consulting, Inc. go here: <http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/SLC/sharedfiles/library/devpsych/old1.htm>

## Exercising as you age

By Maria Burns, Staff Writer, Spirit Lake Consulting, Inc

Exercise takes just one thing – motivation – and as most people who have aged will tell you, the older you get, the tougher it seems it gets to motivate yourself to work out.

However, exercise is an important part of maintaining health. Doing everything possible to promote health is especially important for people with disabilities. As people age, staying physically fit becomes even more important. By physically fit, we do not mean in body builder shape like Mr. Universe. Instead, we mean in a condition where you feel healthy, where you are not obese, where you engage in activities that get your blood pumping and maybe even work up a sweat.

It's true people with disabilities may not be able to do the same exact activities as people without disabilities, but – as anyone with a disability surely knows – modification is the key.

An article from the Mayo Clinic on exercising with a disability sums it up well, "Exercise may present special challenges when you have a disability — but it's not impossible. Get creative as you consider your options."

And no, you are never too old to start exercising. Now, if you happen to be 100 and reading this, you probably don't need to change or start a workout routine because what you've done up until now is obviously working. For the rest of you, keep reading.

Exercise strengthens muscles and improves heart health as well as your lung capacity. All of these things will benefit you at any age. To say that at 50, you're going to go into the gym and bench press 250 pounds – disability or not – is unrealistic. But, picking up a pair of five or even 10 pound weights and doing some basic exercises with them is not. Many weight machines at the gym have very low weight options and once you're instructed how to use them (all gyms have a person that can show you how to work the equipment), you can work on strengthening your muscles. This can be a huge benefit.

Another idea is doing exercises to benefit your lungs and heart. Running may be out of the picture, but going for a walk might be an option for some people, again depending on your disability. If you're in a wheelchair, you can get out and go around the block all the same.

Low impact exercises are key. This could include riding a stationary bike or, if you cannot ride a bike because of your disability, many gyms have hand bikes, which is like a stationary bicycle that you do with your hands. Both of these activities will get your heart pumping – which is good.

Getting in the pool is another option. Being in the water takes a lot of stress off the body. There are tons of options for working out in the pool. Swimming is just one option and it's a very good low impact exercise. Water aerobics is gaining popularity among those who are aging. Pool walking (or running) is another option, this exercise has the same effects as running or walking on dry land, but there is almost no impact on the joints.

Finally, stretching is a valuable exercise as well. It can relieve the tightness you feel and can help strengthen muscles as well. Some health clubs or gyms even have classes targeted toward older patrons that just focus on stretching. Once you get your muscles a little looser, you might find working out is easier.

Because there are so many different types of disabilities, it is impossible to give you exercises that are good for every individual but those are a few ideas to get you thinking. **As always, talk to your doctor before you start any serious exercise program.** Your doctor will be able to give you better exercise ideas with your condition in mind.

**On the Web:** This article touches on exercising with disabilities and while it is not targeted specifically at people who are aging, it does have some information that is useful to everyone:

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## NEW ON OUR WEBSITE THIS MONTH

Our FREE developmental psychology course has been updated:  
<http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/SLC/sharedfiles/library/devpsych/index.htm>

There's still a lot of work to be done, but we are sure you will find it interesting.

Virtual Field Trip - Women with Disabilities: [http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/SLC/sharedfiles/commonsarea/vft\\_women.html](http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/SLC/sharedfiles/commonsarea/vft_women.html)

There is always discussion going on at the Spirit Lake Forum - on disability, employment, our company, events in Indian country and whatever you want to post. Check it out here:  
<http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/forum/index.php>