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Preventing Falls Through Exercise • August 31, 2016

EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Francesca Fisher

Creator of the Gere-Fit® program

Gary Barg: I love the name of your organization, **Geri-Fit**. Can you tell me what Geri-Fit is and what it does?

Fran Fisher: It is basically just a shortening for Geriatric Fitness, so Geri-Fit. We are teaching older people how to stay fit and healthy well into their golden years, so they are able to enjoy life later on. That is what we are all about.

Gary Barg: If I am an older person who might want to stay more fit, how do I find Geri-Fit?

Fran Fisher: Normally, a program like this would be offered at a senior center, a JCC, a YMCA. Even a retirement community would offer it to their residents. We are new in some states around the country but have been very well established in Ohio for over twenty years. In fact, the same twenty people who enrolled nearly twenty years ago are still involved in the program today. Now they are in their 80s and 90s and still reaping a lot of benefits of the class. We are very happy to see that they have maintained their independence.

Gary Barg: I know Geri-Fit is one of the 48 US government approved Tier 3 Evidence-Based programs and I think that is pretty neat. Can you talk about that a bit?

Fran Fisher: Our program is one of the 48 evidence based exercise programs reviewed by the Administration for Community Living, the National Council on Aging, and the Administration on Aging. And we were chosen as one of these programs that will be under the Title IIID Older Americans Act federal funding. We are very happy to be up there with some of the other really great programs, such as A Matter of Balance, Fit and Strong, Enhance. We had to work really hard to get there. We also have a complete video line where people can do Geri-Fit at home or they can take the class for a month and say, "You know, I can now do this at home," and use the video to keep up with their workouts.

We have undergone scientific evaluation and know that Geri-Fit is proven to be effective with measurable effects and results with the older adult population. Geri-Fit strengthens the lower half of people's bodies so that they are able to have more strength in their legs, hips, and feet which is especially important because of what is known as the 'geriatric shuffle.' This is when people begin to not pick up their feet when they are walking. Geri-Fit helps to regain a more normal gait and that helps with their balance. This is monumental to an older adult who has lost the ability to walk and we get them back walking. We are basically unstoppable at that point.

In the late 80's, we teamed up with the Cleveland Clinic Foundation and Dr. Martin Gorbien who, at the time, was only one of four geriatricians in the United States. He helped us fine tune the program to where it is today and we continue working to improve it.

We have even added an element of fall prevention exercises called proprioceptive exercises. Those are little movements which coordinate the brain, nerves and muscles so that people have the ability to react faster. For example, like stepping on the brake if an animal crosses their path while driving or if they have to react quickly if a shampoo bottle slips through their fingertips and is headed for their toe so their foot moves out of the way faster. This is all part of a brand new process that we are presently unveiling. We are working with another university to do another balance test study, so great things are happening right now for **Geri-Fit**.

Gary Barg: Let's talk about fall prevention. In-home falls are the number one reason for emergency room visits for seniors as well as for long-term care placement. So how do I access your in-home exercise care program?

Fran Fisher: This is a whole new division of Geri-Fit that we see as an explosive place for growth because so many of our seniors want to age-in-place and remain independent indefinitely. By having a trainer come to their home and do the Geri-Fit exercises one-on-one or even with the DVD with some coaching, you have that ability to be able to exercise. It only takes 30 to 45

minutes to do Geri-Fit and it is highly effective.

Gary Barg: Why is strength training so important for fall prevention?

Fran Fisher: That's a great question. A little known fact is that once we reach the magic age of fifty, we start losing one pound of muscle each year. So if you are eighty years old and you have not done any type of strength training exercises in the last thirty years, you will have lost thirty pounds of muscle. This can really add up. Muscles are what get us from point A to point B. And, if you do not have enough muscle to support your bones, frame and structure, you are going to end up walking with a cane and eventually a walker and then a wheelchair. You basically lose your mobility.

The primary focus of this muscle loss is in the lower half of the body from the waist down. So, in the Geri-Fit program, we do exercises such as squats and lunges. What we are striving for are four sets of 10 to 12 repetitions allowing them to be able to get out of a chair. And some of our seniors actually even use an 8 to 10-pound dumbbell underneath their chin and get up from the chair. As their body gets used to it, they want to build more, are getting stronger and are feeling younger, so they have all this pep and energy just from doing these lower body exercises.

Gary Barg: Do you recommend a senior getting their balance tested annually?

Fran Fisher: This is so ironic you should ask this because we have just partnered with a new company called BTrackS Balance Systems and they have a balance plate that we are going to be using in our Geri-Fit program. We are also starting a three month study that will conclude around Thanksgiving. It will be testing seniors' balance, assessing how much they move back and forth, front and back and sideways. It is a two minute test taken three times where they just stand there for 20 seconds each time. The machine records their score and takes the average. And that gives the senior their test result and that shows them where they fare on the scale of where other older adults their same age would also rate. The seniors hovering in the 50s and 60s range on the scale should start doing some sort of balance, strength training and fall prevention program. So, we do feel that getting your balance tested on a yearly basis, just like your cholesterol or blood pressure, is vitally important.

Gary Barg: If you only had one piece of advice to share with the family caregiver, what would it be?

Fran Fisher: It is the same as our motto in the company. "How are you ever going to know unless you try?" We hear, "I am never going to be able to get out of the chair," or "I cannot do those exercises. There is no way," or "Those would

kill my knees. No, they are not for me. I cannot do it.” And we come back with, “How are you going to ever know unless you try?” At least try it.

When you actually get out of your comfort zone and have tried something new and different and it did work, that is when it gets really exciting.

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