

WORKING WITH OLDER ADULTS

By Andrea Pielen

If you are an instructor of older adults, it is important to be aware of the specific needs of this very special target group. My work with older adults for many years has been fulfilling. The University of Saarbruecken, Germany conducted a project about older adults over the last 2 years. Older adult participants were asked about their expectations with reference to a training program.

The most significant responses included the following:

- 1) to become more flexible,
- 2) to improve mobility; and
- 3) to increase range of motion.

Other responses included:

- 4) to have fun,
- 5) to enjoy the movements, and
- 6) to prove to myself 'what I am still able to do'.

With regard to the social expectations of participating in a training program the responses were as follows:

- 7) to work out with others, and
- 8) to make contact with other people.

Another interesting question in this research project dealt with the expectations that older adults had with reference to the instructors in the training program.

The most important instructor features included:

- 9) a high level of qualification,
- 10) a varied and diverse training program, and
- 11) being well-prepared.

When analyzing the responses to various questions, the study revealed another important aspect: the older the group questioned (that means over 65) the more the preferences shifted and this older group wanted:

- 1) to be encouraged,
- 2) to develop more self- motivation to be physically active, and
- 3) not to be over challenged.

Listening to the different topics dealing with older adults at this year's CALA Conference in Toronto, I noticed that instructors are finding it very challenging to cope with age-related attitudes. A predominant question emerged at the conference:

How can I make older adult participants feel more comfortable with physical contact in an aquafitness class?

Sensitivity and skill are required to encourage comfort with touching others in class.

It is important to find out why some people refuse to touch others during partner work. There may be an underlying cause such as: a personal loss, disappointment or even abuse. Personality may affect a willingness to touch. For example, someone who is introverted, shy, quiet, living alone and/or feeling lonesome may simply need to be given time and encouragement in order to be receptive to touch. They may have joined the class because they have decided to get out of their loneliness. As an instructor, you may be confronted with prejudice amongst participants. You may find yourself playing the role of mediator in the aquafitness setting.

*Andrea Pielen shows a different face during a beach based class - Punta Cana, April 2001.
Presenter: Older Adults, CALA Convention 2001*



Some practical ideas for instructors:

- Add fun activities like marching or jogging towards a partner, shake hands and introduce each other.
- Hold on to one another's hands and circle.
- Form a group circle, hold hands and jog first to the left for 16 - 32 counts. Stop and jog on the spot for 16 - 32 counts (to neutralize the current). Jog to the right for 16 - 32 counts. Jog towards the middle of the circle for 16 - 32 counts. Meet in the centre and raise hands together.
- During the stretch and relaxation phase: Form a 'lotus flower' in a circle: Every second person is standing, the others are supine, supported by their neighbours' arms on either side of them. The people who are standing walk in a big circle, moving to the right for 16 - 32 counts, stopping, then moving to the left for 16 - 32 counts.
- During the stretch - cool down phase of the class, integrate timid participants by asking everyone to stand in a circle, facing one direction, then placing their hands on the shoulders of the person in front and offering a gentle massage.

- To restore trust, work with a partner e.g. carrying him/her on your hands through the water and moving the relaxed body from side to side, let the participants who are carried close their eyes and enjoy the feeling. (This is a technique used in Watsu.)
- Form a square with 2 pool noodles and 2 bodies with the help of another participant who then guides the square through the water.
- Try stretching with a partner, for example during the standing calf stretch, gently press palms together, facing one another.

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