

Aino Sarje, Department of Sport Sciences, University of Jyväskylä

Group members' experiences on "gentle exercise" program for over 55 year olds

The weakening of capability of moving, through arthritis, muscular degeneration, inflammation of foot nerve, or significant stiffness, may begin as early as the age of 55 to the extent that it is impossible to make use of exercise services, generally available. Although fitness centres offer a wide range of different kinds of sporting activities, these people may find starting to take exercise insurmountable, even if they were aware of the necessity to take some exercise. (Tuominen, 2002) In addition, it is not easy for persons with difficult diseases to go on regular exercise. In addition, these people may have inhibitions concerning the psychological and social atmosphere of the exercise environment in spite of the beautiful and pleasant environment of the fitness centre.

It is for people like this that I have developed an alternative form of exercise, a "gentle exercise" program. In the program, man is understood as a psycho physical whole. Besides physical, mental and social aspects are considered in the practice. In all these dimensions many aged persons need support to take exercise regularly.

In this paper, I'll describe the group members' attitudes and experiences on the "gentle exercise". I studied the physical, psychological and social effects of the programme. Next I will present the programme and its gentle principles.

The "gentle exercise" group

We had our meetings in the group members' home area in Helsinki, in the club facilities of Kumpula suburb, to make it possible to exercise as near home as possible. The "gentle exercise" group has gone on for many years, with a varying combination, including from seven to ten participants. The group is fixed and the participants commit themselves to it. The group members are from 55 to 75 years old.

In the "gentle exercise" group we don't do gymnastics in the light of glow bulbs in front of a mirror of the gym, but the exercise room is dimly lit. There is relaxing classical music or sounds from nature in the background. The leader is telling all the time what is done and why so that the participants don't have to strain their memory. The atmosphere of the meetings is friendly and appreciating.

What's done during the "gentle exercise" program

People whose stiff body or even pains may determine the experience of their own body find exercise difficult. But the body can be persuaded. The "gentle exercise" programme resembles a peaceful and flowing ritual. Its principle is to accept the fact that it is impossible to command a body that has been stuck for a long time especially if the aches have been continual. The programme is carried out as gently as possible according to one's own breathing, in this way the stiff and ailing body does not resist. The metabolism is stimulated with the help of acupuncture massaging making one sweat, which relaxes and also improves the state of activeness. The movement material has elements from Finnish women's gymnastics and the different forms of self-treatment. The movements are relaxation,

stretching, and balance movements improving the strength and flexibility of body, fingers and toes included. In the program, changing of levels is avoided, there are no jumps or leaning on the knees. The program is light so that all the participants would be able to finish it.

The lengths of the parts of the programme vary according to the wishes of the group members. The leader of the group tries to find out before the group begins what the participants want to do each time. In a small group it is possible for the leader to take impartial notice of these wishes, for instance, somebody may ask for a longer relaxation period or somebody may be suffering from lumbago, which is relieved with certain stretches and these parts of the programme are made longer.

1. Lying on the floor:

- **Concentrating** on this moment following the leader's suggestive speech and deepening one's own breathing
- **Listening to one's body** by relaxing and gently recognizing its shape, weight, warmth and friendliness
- **Feeling** one's vertebrae and joints and improving their movements

2. Sitting on the floor:

- **Stimulating the circulation** of the lower part of the body by massaging one's toes, calves and thighs

3. Lying on the floor:

- **Stretching** the lower body: the feet and the muscles of the pelvis

4. Sitting on the floor:

- **Reviving the circulation** of the upper body by massaging the fingers, arms, shoulders and the neck
- **Stretching** the upper body: the fingers, arms, shoulders and the neck

5. Standing next to the wall:

- **Stretching** the back vigorously making use of the wall

6. Standing in the middle of the floor:

- **Developing the body balance** with the help of a course of extensive movements

Methods; the participants' experiences

I collected the group members' experiences two times: first time in the spring of 2006 from eight female aged 55–75 years, and second time in the spring of 2009 with six females and one male participant aged 55–70, some of whom had been in the group before, some were beginners. My test persons suffered from arthritis, rheumatism, lumbago and so on and many of them had aching and stiff joints and vertebrae and for this reason showed a weakened mobility/flexibility of vertebrae and co-ordination.

The method to collect material was questioning. My test group met once a week for 90 minutes from January to May. After each meeting the participants anonymously answered the following questions: what was good and pleasant this time, and what was boring or unpleasant this time. The feedback was mainly positive, in spite of the fact that I encouraged the participants to include their negative and irritating experiences as well.

The experiences of the participants of the "gentle exercise"

I have grouped the experiences of the group members into three categories: physical, mental and social

A. The physical experiences related by the participants of the “gentle exercise” programme

The most feedback was given about physical experiences. The participants reported that they got help to their physical symptoms like that their knees had arthritis, the back and the joints ache or painful lumbago or rheumatoid arthritis.

1. The physical strain of the program

Most of the group members told that they enjoyed “gentle exercise” because it was not too active or vigorous.

- “It’s a good thing that we don’t have to jump, since my knees couldn’t take it.”
- “I’m glad that the program didn’t include very hard exercise.”
- “All in all, the “gentle exercise” program is good: I don’t feel too strained and am able to complete the program.”
- “The tempo was adequate for me. I’m not in a good condition.”
- “I am not in a good condition. Some of the movements were too harsh for me.”

2. Apprehending and listening to our bodies

The participants’ attitudes to their corporality became more positive.

- “’Gentle exercise’ is a very different kind of experience than any other stretching-type exercise programs.”
- “After the massage, I felt as though I got to know my own limbs in a new way. It felt like drawing my body into the air and saying: Hi toes and fingers!”
- “This new and peaceful way to exercise has given me a boost to start taking care of my health again.”

3. The feeling of pain decreased

The tension and the aches were relieved even to the extent that it was possible to reduce the use of medicines.

- “I feel good, no pain.”
- “The exercise relaxed my sore shoulders.”
- “My arms and thighs aren’t achy any more.”
- “The program finished off with my headache, and the pain in my shoulders eased.”
- “After the group, I have no back pain. I have managed to reduce my daily drug consumption.”
- “I entered the lesson with my joints aching and departed feeling much younger and much more flexible.”

4. Stiffness of body decreased

All the participants mentioned stiffness brought on by age and many of them felt lither and lighter for a few days after the group. Some of them had difficulty in making the movements properly or move a certain part of the body at all. They were surprised that they were able even to bend somewhat.

- "A constant feeling of stiffness eased."
- "For a moment I felt much lither than usual."
- "I feel good for overcoming my stiffness and got energy."
- "I felt alert and my stomach was in a very good condition after the exercise."
- "In the group, I have realized that although I suffer from rheumatism, I am still able to bend."
- "The day after the group, I felt five centimetres taller than usual."
- "Even if I was not able to complete all the movements, due to the stiffness of my joints, I enjoyed the exercise and felt much lighter after the program."

5. Breathing and the circulation of blood became normal

Many of them paid more attention to breathing and posture. Those with a weak peripheral circulation felt that the blood started circulating and made them feel warm.

- "It felt good, when my blood circulation became more effective."
- "My cold feet became warm at the minute when blood began to circulate faster in my veins."
- "Gentle Exercise reduced my blood pressure."
- "During the program, I have begun to pay more attention to an appropriate way of breathing. I have realized the meaning of a correct breathing."

B. The psychological experiences related by the participants of the "gentle exercise" programme.

The psychological experiences felt by the participants through the "gentle exercise" programme were refreshment, relaxation, the relief of irritation and deep sleep.

1. "Gentle exercise" refreshed

Many participants were going through a life situation eating up with one's energy, for instance a relative's illness or other responsibilities or worries of everyday life. They needed refreshing moments into their life. Their mood became better when the body felt fine.

- "I felt absolutely more refreshed."
- "I gained energy, and paid much more attention to my posture."
- "My spirits rose as my body felt better."
- "After the group, I felt as I had left ten years behind me."
- "After our group, I felt vivacious and energetic throughout the evening. The next day I felt much perkier compared to an average day."

2. "Gentle exercise" relaxed

Many participants told me that they were unusually relaxed during the evening and the following day after the group.

- "During the exercise, I felt my body relax and get lighter, which led into a feeling of satisfaction and vitality."
- "I felt drowsy and relaxed, and got distance to my everyday life and its troubles."
- "I felt so relaxed that for a second I thought I would fall asleep."
- "Throughout the evening, I could still feel me drowsy."
- "The feeling of bliss remains until the very next day, as if I were reborn, each time."
- "Relaxation eases constant stress. I feel like, the only thing I need now, is relaxation."
- "During the evening which follows the class, my spirits are high and I feel good, although during other evenings, I feel extremely distressed and uneasy."

3. Getting healthy and profound sleep during the following night

Some of them told that they have been able to sleep properly, at last.

- "At night, I fell asleep immediately."
- "Although I suffer from insomnia, after the group I sleep like a baby."
- "An immense feeling of relaxation and repose, during the following morning."
- "All stress and pain was gone. At last I had slept well."

C. The social experiences related by the participants of the "gentle exercise" programme

The social experiences of the participants in the "gentle exercise" were important to them. They enjoyed belonging to the group and deepened their membership into friendships. It was important for them that the group members didn't chance much. The group also helped them to deal with sorrow and giving up feelings that are part of aging.

1. The group is a place where you feel safe and pleasant

Many of them found the safe atmosphere of the group positive.

- "Safe with people I know."
- "The feeling is good, it is easy to come, easy to be."
- "The atmosphere is pleasant, although I don't really know the participants."
- "The group is a place where you can be yourself. You don't have to feel nervous about anything."
- "Relaxing relieved my irritation and I was able to be with people."
- "There are no cliques, we are together... everybody is accepted."

2. Positive interaction with the leader of the group

A person in a life situation like this needs support to be able to commit oneself to the group. This is not possible in big and changing groups. The leader of the group should be able, if needed, to meet everybody personally.

- "It is nice to get personal guidance. I felt that I needed that today."
- "The instructor's friendliness is important to me, because I haven't exercised in a group for a long time."

3. The group allows concentrating on oneself and taking one's own time

It can be difficult to arrange some time of your own when you are continuously weighed down by worries of everyday life. It is easier to let it go and concentrate on oneself in a group for that purpose. In addition it is of advantage if the leader of the group approaches the participants with great consideration. A very vigorous and exacting leader can ruin the atmosphere and the participants don't dare to concentrate on themselves only.

- "Peace to concentrate in a friendly atmosphere. I got rid of the everyday routine."
- "This time I only sank into myself .. I needed that."
- "I was able to disentangle my thoughts from sad things."
- "Lately I have concentrated on other people mostly and experienced sad things, so the group felt wonderful. This is a new beginning to my own former balance."
- "It's a good thing when only the leader speaks and in a peaceful way and the group listens. That's when you get an opportunity to listen to yourself."

4. Chance to meet nice people

An exercise group can be a form of socializing where you can meet nice people and exchange opinions. The experience of a communal spirit calls for a fixed group.

- "It was nice to come to the group. I guess one is a little used to it already."
- "Nice to meet the old hags in the same lifeboat."
- "It is always nice with these people."
- "Nice company makes you happy."
- "The rewarding thing in this group is always joy. I felt like laughing."
- "It is always wonderful with wonderful ladies."
- "The group strengthens friendships."

5. The group supports in a difficult situation in life

Some people may face a situation in life, which due to a relative's illness, for instance, can be very stressful and then the exercise group can act therapeutically.

- "The group is a place where you can talk about anything."
- "I couldn't manage without this group in my present situation."
- "The group is a life buoy for me."
- "I cried in the group today, I unburdened my sorrow... difficult to disentangle my thoughts from my husband's illness."

Some ideas

I want to hold attention to how important in exercise for sick people over 55 year is gentle and easy exercise but also mental and social supportiveness of the exercise. The follow-up of my "gentle exercise" group showed that in addition to the physical objectives exercise has to enhance the participants' psychological alertness and social communication to enable these people to go on with a permanent interest in exercise. This idea is supported also by the latest neuropsychological research (Jeannerod 2006). According it our self is influenced by the action we perform, in other words, one's action determines the sense of being an agent. Exercise should be in harmony with the self consciousness of an aged person and his/her psychological and social world.