

Movement for Us is Medecine

One health management group's story of resilience in the face of a pandemic

Being diagnosed with a new health challenge can be difficult and scary. For many years, our YMCA has offered specialized health management programs like Healthy Hearts, Living with Parkinson's and CancerSmart to support people who are managing a chronic health condition.

When Christine Hartley was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in 2016, she was shell shocked. She didn't know what do, but her neurologist recommended the Parkinson's program at the YMCA. "I went and had a visit at the Y and met the instructors, and some of the other participants and I thought this seems like a nice comfortable place, so I've been there ever since doing the exercise program" remembers Christine.

Before COVID-19, the group met in person three times a week where a YMCA instructor would lead the group through a variety of gentle exercises, stretching, purposeful breathing, posture, balance for fall prevention and a variety of strength training exercises, all designed to improve the delay of Parkinson's symptoms.

When the YMCA was forced to temporarily close its doors on March 13, 2020 to help stop the spread of COVID-19, Christine describes how awful she felt. "It was devastating. A lot of us had a sense of abandonment, not from the Y, but from the government. Hopelessness and feeling like a lost puppy basically because people with Parkinson's have a distinct reality to deal with and exercise is the only way to have a course and effect on the outcome of the disease. Movement for us in medicine, so we all thought - oh my goodness what do we do now".

The well-established, close-knit group found ways to stay connected through email and telephone calls and quickly worked together, with the YMCA instructor, to develop a program that would replicate what they had at the Y. Then the group, consisting mostly of older adults who were not all comfortable with computers and the internet, made a bold choice. In August, they were the first program at the Oakville YMCA to move their classes online onto zoom and they haven't looked back.

After some adjustments, the group is now confident and comfortable online. They continue to meet virtually three days a week from the comfort and safety of their home. They keep their classes light-hearted and fun and always include a social component. According to Christine there were some in the group who did deteriorate in the time between the shut-down and when the online classes began but they noticed improvement after the classes got going again. "It's been a lifesaver. It really has. Even my dog enjoys it."

The classes offer more than just the benefits of movement and physical fitness. The group has morphed into a friendship circle connecting in several other ways from emotional support to physical support and offering a forum for sharing Parkinson's advances in research. They also love that there are no transportation or weather concerns and that they can just walk down the hall in their homes to participate in the classes. To put it in Christine's words "The luxury and the ability to be able to have this zoom class has been a lifeline for our minds bodies and spirits and we soar together."

To quote one of the cheers the group likes to end their meetings with "...Here is the rainbow I've been prayin' for. It's gonna be a bright (Bright), bright (Bright) YMCA".