

Ideas for Aging Gracefully

By Angela Williams Duea

We've all seen them – older individuals who are aging gracefully. They are still able to move their bodies effectively with a minimum of pain and tension. They complete daily tasks without a physical struggle. Though their joints become more frail and stiffen easily, especially when arthritis is present, these seniors are citizens enjoying life, and ease of motion. By contrast, many people find that as they age they are no longer able to do what they used to do. Internally, their proprioceptors, those nerves that supply information to the central nervous system about the musculoskeletal system, become less potent. Because of this, the elderly lose some perception of their own body position and movement. Their bodies become stiffer and more tense. Their balance is off-kilter, and everyday tasks become challenging.

In many cases, this build-up of tension started years earlier, and patterns of stiffness and restriction became entrenched in the muscles and mind. For example, the body's reflexes are supposed to catch us if we slip. We may think we are preparing our bodies to prevent it happening again, but in reality if the muscles are already tight, the reflex won't work as well. The same idea applies after an injury. Long after it has healed, the muscles around the injury are still protecting it like a suit of armor.

Body aches and pains tend to become more common as we age. Pain in one area may start a chain reaction of pain and avoidance that affects the entire body. It is just like having a pebble in

a shoe. We change the way the foot rolls when walking to avoid the pain, which changes the ankle's movement, which changes the knee's movement. These changes will affect the hip and back, all the way up to the neck.

The Trager® Approach is a gentle way to ease tension and pain, while improving range of motion. It suggests smoother movement and increased range without insisting or using force. It uses a mind/body connection by teaching the mind new, freer patterns of movement that release built-up tension in the muscles and tendons. When Dr. Trager was in medical school, he observed an older patient in the hospital who was very stiff. While under anesthesia during surgery, this patient's body became very relaxed.

*What could
be freer?*

After surgery Dr. Trager watched the anesthesia wear off and the body gradually returned to its original rigid state. This observation confirmed Dr. Trager's belief that patterns are held or formed in the unconscious mind, and that this mind/body connection is more important than most people realize.

The Trager Approach uses self-help movements that Dr. Trager named Mentastics® (mental gymnastics). He was inspired by the waves of the ocean to become more graceful in his movement.

While some think the actions look like Tai Chi, it is actually free form movement with no steps to learn. Rather than exercises to be performed at a certain time of day, these are simple movements

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to integrate into daily life. For example, imagine your feet are round on the bottom like a rocking chair. Feel this by standing with your feet shoulder width apart. Then place one foot in front of the other in a comfortable stance. Be sure your knees are soft, not locked or bent. Gradually shift your weight forward and back a little to feel the rocking. Slowly step forward with an awareness of that feeling of the rounded rocker bottom.

Because the elderly tend to suffer from old patterns of stiffness and pain that have affected many parts of the body, the Trager Approach can be especially useful in helping them age gracefully. A person's age and condition can be a large factor in the amount of tension and pain they experience. A person may be in their sixties but the movement of his or her body might be comparable to an 85 year old – or vice versa.

People in their eighties and nineties often have fragile skin that tears easily. Holding patterns in the muscles are much more entrenched. For these reasons, the Trager Practitioner has to work even more gently. Sessions can be adapted when it is physically difficult for an older person to get on the massage table or when they can only tolerate sitting in a wheelchair.

Aging gracefully is not a lofty ideal – it is a practical, attainable goal. Our bodies have greater ability to deflect tension and pain than most people realize. By introducing freer movement, we can resist many of the aches of aging and consequently enjoy bodies that move easily over time. Free, graceful, easy movement – what a gift!

To locate a practitioner, go to the Trager® website www.tragerus.org or call the United States Trager Association at 440-834-0308

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