

SUCCESSFUL COPING THERAPIES

Whether you are coping with a serious illness or simply the impediments of normal aging, a positive attitude may indeed be your best medicine. Our bodies were not designed to last forever. Thank goodness. Only a bit of reflection helps us realize that immortality would not be suitable to us or to the planet. But a serious illness or a fast approaching 60th, 70th or 80th birthday challenges us and reminds us of how much we wish to live.

In an interview with Barbara Walters on 20-20 before his death, Christopher Reeve, former actor and victim of a tragic accident that led to paralysis, said, "Let's look at the two choices I have. One is to vegetate and look out of my window and the other is to move forward. The second choice seems to be a whole lot more attractive."

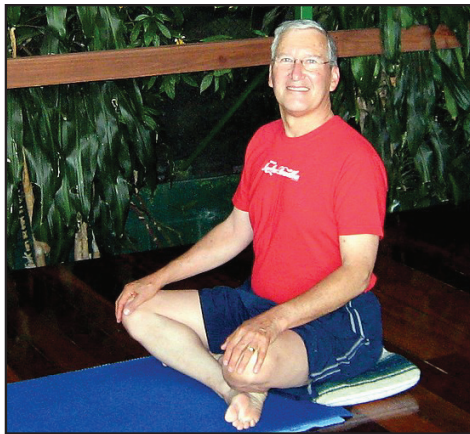
So we set out on a path to overcome our obstacles, and often it's a confusing path that presents us with complicated choices for which we are not prepared. Coping with a serious illness or the difficult aging process stretches us and pushes us to the edge of our capacity and then further. But this journey can be an awakening - a better understanding of ourselves and our relationship to all life.

We recently interviewed three individuals who have faced various circumstances, but have maintained a positive attitude and found the love of art, yoga and gardening as ways to cope with the undeniable stress in their lives.

Bob Fagan

Known to many as Dr. Fagan, Bob was a practicing dentist for 30 years. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's nearly five years ago and has recently discovered the healing powers of yoga. Introduced to yoga through a close friend

Sid Head, Bob joined Yoga for Life and participates up to five hours a week in Kripalu, a type of yoga that blends



meditation with postures or asanas. "It's really meditation in motion," said Fagan as he demonstrated his favorite asanas called "Headstand", "Pigeon", and "Downward Facing Dog." Yoga has not only given Bob an outlet for exercise, but also a place for the social interaction that he feels is the key to stimulating his brain and slowing the progression of the disease. "We just took a trip to Costa Rica with our yoga instructor,



Debbie George," said Fagan. The resort had incredible yoga halls and a beautiful spa. Our side trips included a waterfall garden, butterfly garden and aviary. We even spent a day hiking through the rain forest." Bob has also remained active throughout the last five years by volunteering with the Alzheimer's Association, Habitat for Humanity and recently Hospice and Palliative Care of Charlotte. In addition, Bob plays trumpet

in the Charlotte Concert Band.

"I decided a long time ago, I could either sit around moping and feeling sorry for myself or I could get out and do things, said Fagan. Yoga is great for anyone who sits behind a desk all day or is under any kind of stress. It is a very calming form of exercise. It develops the core body strength, improves balance and flexibility."

For Bob, yoga also helps him remain focused, it gets rid of extraneous thoughts, allows him to become very centered and brings him closer to God. In Bob's words, "I think I'm in really good shape...mentally and physically."

Sylvia Fiano

Who could have imagined that a 49-year-old, registered nurse, who led an active, healthy lifestyle and had no family history of dementia, would wake up one day and realize she couldn't remember how to drive or how to get to the grocery store or the bank? Sylvia



Fiano is quickly approaching "senior status" at age 54, but unfortunately, she's lost more than five years of a normal life to Alzheimer's disease.

"Coping with this disease has changed my life drastically," said Fiano. "Having to quit my job as a nurse was probably the most difficult challenge. I loved

working and I loved helping others.” Despite her illness, Sylvia continues to help others. As a support group leader and participant, Sylvia has spread the word that the Alzheimer’s Association is the best source of information and assistance for those with dementia. She has used her gift of public speaking to motivate and inspire hundreds of individuals who suffer from Alzheimer’s disease and those who care for them. But how has she learned to care for herself?

“I’m fortunate to have a circle of friends that live within a 3 mile radius of my home, but my real life saver, has been my art,” said Sylvia. A few years after her diagnosis, a friend named Teresa



Hoover, brought Sylvia two big art books. As she flipped through the books, she realized that

a small 16 x 20 canvas with nothing but blue paint covering the entire piece was worth millions. She quickly decided that painting would be her new hobby and her love for art was born.

Sylvia turned her second bedroom into a studio, bought canvases and asked for gift certificates to Michael’s and Binders from her closest family and friends. She can spend 3 to 4 hours a day painting or researching a topic she wants to draw. “Art takes me away from Alzheimer’s disease. It is my way of coping with my illness and I don’t think about it when I’m painting,” said Sylvia.

Many of her paintings have been donated to the Alzheimer’s Association for auction at Memory Walk and other special events. Many have been given away to friends and loved ones. “It is an expression of how I’m feeling and it makes me smile. Sometimes it takes me to places I’d rather be.”

Nell Tevebaugh

There is no place Nell Tevebaugh would rather be, than in her garden. Well, the garden at Westminster Towers in Rock Hill, SC that is. But most of the residents would agree it is Nell’s garden. “She does all of the work here. She’s a

star,” said Ryan Troutman, Marketing and Sales Associate for Westminster. Nell is 80 years old. She and her husband, Dick moved to the community six years ago. “We are fortunate that we both have



our health and we have a nice, safe place to call home, but we still live with the stresses of life through our four children,” said Tevebaugh.

Despite a bit of a heart condition called atrial fibrillation, Nell doesn’t let it slow her down. “Gardening gives me an out. I can lose myself when I’m digging in the soil and I see it as a ministry of

sorts.” More than half of the residents at Westminster can look down from their rooms and see her work along the road that runs behind the community. “If I get discouraged, I always think of the ones who might like to be gardening and just can’t get out anymore.”

Gardening is great exercise, a stress reliever and one of the most rewarding hobbies a person can enjoy. Most gardeners start small and grow plants that can be contained in a few pots or on a small partial of land, but whether it is a chrysanthemum or a row of tomato plants, watching them bloom and produce fruit is excellent therapy.

Nell plants a little of everything including daisies, petunias, gardenias, roses, marigolds, tiger lilies and begonias. She even has a small garden on the roof outside her balcony. “It was hard to downsize and leave my home and my garden, but here we have a wonderful community and I still get to garden as often as I feel like it,” said Nell.

Coping therapies can range from climbing Mount Everest to writing a novel, but according to Vijai P. Sharma, Ph.D, the best way to manage disease and achieve the quality of life permissible under the circumstances is to:

1. Accept your illness. That word, “acceptance,” often bothers people who are still mourning the loss of better, happier days when were far more capable to doing things, but those who make an effort to adapt to their circumstance understand the value of acceptance. They know it helps them to get over loss and meet the new challenges they face.
2. Like yourself as you are today, with all your problems, illnesses, limitations, and of course, your physical appearance.
3. Get over the “Why me?” attitude so you can solve the problems of today. It might be, for example, the problem of how you could be more comfortable while lying

in bed or how you could still get some exercise in spite of a knee hurting so much. In order to look at the problem of today, you have to stop staring at the past and the future.

4. Take total responsibility for your health and never overlook all the help you can get.
5. Become an expert on your illness.
6. Take pride in what you can accomplish today, and don’t shame yourself over what you can’t.

Remember to keep a positive attitude and to discover new interests and hobbies that will help you find purpose and fulfillment in your life. “If we have to be ill, let us meet it head on. Let us welcome our illness with open arms. Let us live in such a way that we are grateful that our illness helps us improve our character. We should use the time of our illness to think about aspects of life that escaped us when we were healthy,” Reverend Shundo Aoyama, Naikan Method of Self Reflection.