

Knapp: Aging in place: walking and talking

By Guest column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

Posted Nov 03, 2010 @ 06:00 AM

I know I should exercise more and am aware of all the good reasons why: make my heart pump; keep my muscles strong; get rid of minor aches; and clear my mind. Exercise for me is primarily about walking. I try to walk two or three times a week mostly into the village or, when the weather is good, around Cold Spring Park. When I do get out and walk, I am proud that I am keeping myself healthy and I feel the positive effects. But I am a lazy and reluctant exerciser. The congratulatory pats I give myself each time I walk are unwarranted, because, if I am honest, I know that I may not walk again for days. When my doctor asks me how much I exercise, I lie and say I walk more than I do. Most of the time, I see myself as an honest, mature thinker and decision-maker. When it comes to exercise, I am an inconsistent adolescent.

The reality is that I hate to get my body moving. It feels like an enormous effort to get motivated, dress properly and take that first step out my back door. Why does it feel like such an oppressive task when it should be something to look forward to? Why can't I elevate the importance of this simple activity? It's time for me to figure it out.

Maybe it is physical thing. Ugh, that effort to move my bones and stir my arms and legs. It's not that my body is in bad shape (although that nagging arthritis in my neck is annoying and uncomfortable). It is more that it is very happy in a static state. It likes being holed up inert at home. "It's too hot, too cold, I'll walk tomorrow," I tell myself and that gets me off the hook until the next day when I go through the same internal argument.

Maybe I avoid exercising because it is hard to see an immediate advantage. When I pay my bills, do the shopping or finish an article, I get on-the-spot gratification. I procrastinate with these chores but they all have deadlines, and I know if I don't get them done, there will be consequences. But exercise is a different matter. The benefits seem down the road, disconnected, too far away in time for a sense of accomplishment. "In 20 years, will I be glad that I exercised when I was 72? Who cares?" I think. "And besides, my mother, who lived to be 95, never exercised much and look how old she got to be!"

When I do walk, I usually walk alone. A good part of me likes that solitude. In fact, that is one of the few things that pushes me out of the house — quiet time for reflection and talking to myself about current quandaries. There is immediate reward from my solitary walking — searching for solutions to problems, getting rid of pent-up stress, or coming up with ideas for articles. But walking only when there is a mini-crisis brewing means it is haphazard.

I know I am missing something by walking by myself. I don't have the benefit of another voice to help me sort out what is going on in my head. Hearing another person's thoughts prompts me to think about

things other than my own immediate issues. Each time I walk and talk with someone, I treasure their comments and find new ways of thinking. I love the back-and-forth creative exchange that only comes with quiet, intimate conversation.

Seeking other ways to think about these issues, I talked to Nancy Scammon, senior programming director for Newton Parks and Recreation. She reinforced the importance of exercise with passion.

“Being physically active is not about chasing after youth or trying to stay younger. It is about being healthy and independent as you get older,” she said. “In fact, this can mean being able to live in your home longer.”

Nancy runs close to 40 activities and sees three important aspects to all of them: exercising for a healthy body; learning new things; and staying socially connected.

“It is the social aspect that really gets people to come.” She meticulously plans and tests all of her offerings making sure they are good for people at all different levels of fitness. Among her programs are aquatics, Winter Workout, off-road biking, pickleball (fun!), dancing and walking groups where people tend to drift into smaller groups so they can talk.

“Not being physically active prevents you from moving forward,” she said. “You can’t change that you are getting older, but you do have some control over how you are going to arrive there!”

I know Nancy is right and I take her advice quite seriously. Although I will continue to walk alone and talk to myself, I will try to find ways to be active with others like me who look for excuses to stay put. If you need a little shove (as I do), talk to Nancy at 617-796-1506 and, perhaps, join her for a walk. Newton Senior Center fitness classes will also get you moving — check them out.

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and caregiver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on “Aging in Place in Suburbia.” She is a facilitator for community groups wishing to address and improve health and social issues at the local level. She is a commissioner on the Newton Council on Aging.

Copyright 2010 Newton TAB. Some rights reserved