

Chronic Pain

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A large number of persons who come to water fitness classes and aquatic therapy have a common goal. That goal is to decrease their pain. Our task as water fitness and therapy professionals is to do our best to address that need. My own experience includes a half century of working in the water teaching swimming, exercise and therapeutic techniques to people who have chronic pain conditions. In addition, I experience my own arthritis, fibromyalgia, and cancer rehab issues of pain. When I asked the participants in my Fibromyalgia Aquatic Exercise class last week for their comments on re: pain reduction, the answers ranged from “its magic “from a PhD college prof, to “I can’t afford to miss my class.” My own motivation includes sleep deprivation if I don’t exercise. A half hour aerobic set in the pool enables me to sleep adequately. Many of the reasons class members prefer water to land exercise are keyed into initial muscle soreness which persists from land work. In Fibromyalgia, for example, micro tears may occur which last for several days. Motivation is not high to repeat that performance. In water, simultaneous, eccentric and concentric muscle action means one has little or no pain after exercise. The buoyancy factor relieves joint pain and problems which may be related to orthopedic or obesity issues. In short, my Move It or Lose It ® Logo proves true once again. We seek pain reduction and comfort and find that in the water.

Success stories are many, but there are as many stories of failure due to lack of motivation and adherence to program. How then, does one avoid that problem? Education seems key, but that doesn’t occur automatically. I learned, after many years, that not everyone is a water person. Some are uncomfortable, some are TOW (terrified of water) for one reason or another and some just uncomfortable about changing clothes or threatening to get hair or make up messed up. Our job as professionals is to get folks to the pool and make their time there as positive as possible. We also show success and keep encouraging and making progress occur.

We can provide brochures or flyers which explain the types of pain and promote understanding of the cycle of pain. We can listen when people share their symptoms and try to relate daily work, adls, and other exercise to their increased pain. Giving a client or class member extra time outside of class is an option too. Keeping a list of therapists as referrals is helpful. Our professional hat does not cover psychotherapy usually and we need to operate within our scope of service.

I have found the following tools helpful in my work with chronic pain clients/patients. We strive for realistic assessments and interviews which may then continue regularly. Listening is vital. Inclusion of the client’s goals in her treatment plan or in your class lesson plan is your job as a professional. Frequent review of goals and promotion of the client’s ownership is useful. Home programs which are easily maintained are helpful. Your interest in her adl’s and work activity help to raise consciousness.

1. Review the precautions and risk management suggestions in the sidebar and ensure his/her understanding and practice of same.

2. Educate your client re: the effects of immersion and properties of water as you see fit.
3. In addition, emphasize and practice posture and alignment, breath work, gait and balance skills. Ensure understanding of exercise progressions and provide information to lead to independent program. For example, Start slowly, moderate, stop/start, change direction, vary upper extremity movement and think heavy to increase work load. Employ tried and true rebound, neutral and suspended techniques when appropriate in aerobic work. Teach and practice interval work and encourage cross training activity. Include education re: joint protection and energy conservation with Arthritis, Fibromyalgia and Post Polio Syndrome clients.

Following is a moderate water exercise program which chronic pain clients may adapt for their own needs. "Listen to your body and don't work through any new pain" is an important adage. Remember that pain reduction and independence are our goal.

Sidebar: below

Moderate Aquatic Exercise Program (30-45 min., 3-6x per wk., warm water-86-89 deg.F, waist to neck depth, safe entry & exits, learn recovery, sculling, avoid new pain...listen to your body)

Choose several exercises from each group

- Center of Pool, circle formation
 - Walking, breath work, Ai Chi, Posture and alignment
 - Head turn
 - Chin retract/relax
 - Prayer hands/elbows back (scapular protraction, retraction)
 - Door knobs
 - Shoulder circles
 - Bicep/tricep curl
 - Cross over shoulder stretch
 - Side stretch
- Standing side at wall:
 - Runners stretch

- Achilles tendon stretch
- Hamstring and quad stretches
- LE exercises for ROM from Arthritis Foundation including:
- Leg raise forward, side, circle from hip, foot pedaling, heel raise, toe raise,
- Ankle circles, eversion, inversion
- Aerobic Conditioning (optional)
 - Jog with sculling, jog with arm circles, both directions
 - Rocking Horse
 - Half Jacks
 - Cross Country ski
 - Bicycle
 - Change water depth for variety. Belts and deeper water may be at end of progression or best for certain non weight bearing conditions. This set may also be done with one foot always stable and no bounce
- Standing Balance skills
 - Two foot pencil stance, arms, no arms
 - Progress to one foot, arms, no arms, cross on chest, cross on head
 - Eyes open, eyes closed
 - Hop on one foot to destination
 - Add poly critters and UCT commands as you wish (e.g. freeze)
- Walking techniques:
 - Chest deep to shallow for progression
 - Forward, backward, sideways, braiding, goose step, skip, alternate moves begin to use effective combinations with arms and hands. Begin with sculling and progress using shapes to vary movement around pool such as circles, squares, triangles etc.

- If your pool welcomes music, it will pep up class and change tone as needed. Music is secondary, to safety.
- Ai Chi breathing and relaxation, shoulders under water
- Return to Wall:
 - Runners stretch
 - Wall Curl
 - Swing and sway (spine stretch)
 - Shoulder extension one arm, then the other
 - Hug
- SIDEBAR?
- Hints to the Wise:
 - Promote good judgement re: number of repetitions, intensity and time. Use perceived exertion scale or talk test if aerobic activity is included
 - Hint for patients/clients: Don't allow yourself to get to HALT...hungry, angry, lonely or tired. Hydrate often
 - Add surface equipment such as gloves or paddles when conditioned and comfortable.
 - Success may be measured in the following ways:Time, # reps, smiles. Awareness and listening skills are important
- When documenting progress note:
 - Comfortable number of movements away from poolside and therapist
 - Comfort in more shallow water
 - Use arms less for balance
 - Sustain balance longer, eyes open, eyes closed
 - Variable length of stride
 - Change direction easily & more quickly

- General aura of confidence and comfort
- Willingness to try new skills w/o fear of pain
- Increased ability to transfer water balance and gait strength to land for adults

We move clients from fear to comfort. Quality of life is our goal and theirs.

In addition to the “do it yourself” moderate aquatic exercise program above there is great value in pain reduction through use of Watsu® and other forms of warm water bodywork. These forms of therapy and relaxation rely on muscle reeducation through stretching, soft tissue mobilization, trunk rotation, elongation and profound relaxation. This is a passive technique delivered by a practitioner. However, a simple buddy technique may be learned when a teaching practitioner with a therapy pool is available.

Mary Essert, B.A., ATRIC, has instructed in aquatics for a half century. Her skill is teaching others ...health care professionals, exercise instructors, class members and caregivers. Giving independence and self care techniques which reduce pain to others is her chief passion. She teaches and presents internationally and is employed by Conway Regional Health Systems in Conway, AR. Contact her for workshops, publications, information at www.maryessert.com.

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Resources

- Academy of Lymphatic Studies: www.acols.com
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
- American Pain Society: www.ampainsoc.org
- Aquatic Resources Network: info@aquaticnet.com or www.aquaticnet.com
- Aquatic Therapy and Rehab Institute: Atri@atri.org or www.atri.org
- Elaine Marie Watsu 100(Ph. 707-995-1998) watsuem@inreach.com
- Fibromyalgia Partnership: www.fmpartnership.org
- Jahara Technique (Email: jahara@juno.com)
- National Cancer Institute: www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/pdg/supportivecare/lymphdema/patient
- Post-Polio International Health Newsletter: www.post-polio.org
- Watsu® WABA; P.O. 889 Middletown, CA 95461 (Ph. 707-987-3801) (Find Peggy Schoedinger(CO) & Minakshi (FL) minakshi@bellsouth.net, www.waba.edu