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Balance Confidence: A Personal Story

By Kim Fox, PT, DPT

As a Physical Therapist who demonstrates and instructs others in balance activities, I never doubted my own ability. Balance had always come fairly easy for me. As a former gymnast, the ability to stay on a 4 inch wide balance beam, 4 feet in the air, was something I practiced everyday... and I was pretty good at it. My confidence matched my skill level. That all changed on October 15, 2008. In an instant, and for the next 6 months, my confidence in my own ability to avoid falling was a bit elusive.

One cold day in October, while riding my motorcycle, I was hit by a pickup truck. It was the classic event that was by no means intentional but unfortunate nonetheless. My injuries, while not life threatening, were life altering. I sustained 3 bulging discs in my neck, a left lower leg fracture and nerve damage, 3 torn ligaments in my left knee and 2 torn ligaments in my right knee. I underwent reconstructive surgery in 2009 on my left leg. One thing that I found myself lacking after the accident and after surgery was confidence in my ability to walk without falling. Crutches, sometimes a walker, ace wraps and knee braces became my external sources of confidence. The weight of a post-surgical brace added difficulty for an already weak and painful leg. I was also instructed to avoid putting any weight on my left leg while walking. My right leg, still with 2 torn ligaments, was my "good leg". I was fearful of doing anything to mess up my newly reconstructed left knee or further damaging my right knee. With 4 dogs and 1 cat meandering through my house, I became very guarded and fearful of something bad happening. Within a few weeks, still incident free, I found myself feeling a little more stable and confident. At times though, it was an effort to focus on the positive. Even though I was well trained in proper falling techniques in the event something did happen, I was at times paralyzed by the thought of sustaining further injury. As the weeks continued to pass I progressed to full weight bearing on my left leg and began walking without the use of crutches. Each new challenge, from increasing my distance walking, to going up and down the steps, to walking on uneven surfaces, brought me back to a more cautious and guarded state. At times I resorted back to using crutches again while I continued to heal. I initially reflected on this as a setback but later realized I was doing exactly what needed to be done in order to move forward. I found that as my confidence built back up so did my ability to meet each new challenge.

Two significant points that I have taken away from this experience are:

1. Exercising and being in better shape helps your body (and mind) deal with all of life's unexpected events, not just to prepare for a race or to look better in a bathing suit.
2. Confidence in your own ability has a huge impact on balance and sense of well-being.

There is growing research that looks beyond strength and flexibility as it pertains to balance and additionally addresses confidence and the perception of balance. Tools to measure confidence with balance during walking and daily activities are also proving to be reliable predictors of future falls according to the Journal of Neurology, the Journal of Gerontology Series and the Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy. The fear of falling is enough to warrant a medical and/or Physical Therapy evaluation to proactively assess for fall risks. If the risk of falling is present, then an appropriate exercises and balance program can be implemented to minimize such risks and potentially avoid the costly consequences of a fall: financially, physically and mentally.