

Rx: Exercise

“PEOPLE MAY TAKE A PILL EVERY DAY FOR PARKINSON’S DISEASE (PD), but they also need their daily dose of exercise,” says Becky Farley, Ph.D., CEO and founder of Parkinson Wellness Recovery (PWR!). A neuroscientist from The University of Arizona and a physical therapist, Dr. Farley started the 501c3 PWR! in 2010 to help improve the lives of people with PD through research-based exercise programming.

“Animal studies show that exercise can slow or even reverse symptoms of PD if started soon enough,” says Dr. Farley. “I want to implement exercise as medicine. We call it Exercise4BrainChange. My goal is to collect data and show that proactive exercise for life keeps people with PD moving better and longer.”

Parkinson’s Disease is the Number Two neurodegenerative disease in the U.S. (Alzheimer’s is Number One). Once someone has been diagnosed with PD, there should be no delay in starting an exercise program, Dr. Farley stresses. “Early intervention is key! Exercise gives people with PD a positive mechanism they can control to improve motor and non-motor symptoms; it makes a huge difference in their quality of life. They need this education and empowerment right away. Don’t wait three to five years after getting the diagnosis to get started. Exercise is more than balance or strength. It is a physiological tool we can use to change the brain.”

PWR! uses a research-based approach that addresses the physical, emotional and cognitive problems of PD. A variety of classes are offered at the PWR! Gym (134 W. Fort Lowell Road) to deal with all levels of PD, from the recently diagnosed to the more impaired. Also available are one-on-one sessions with a physical therapist and specialized programs, such as 3-5 day Surges and Antifreeze Intensives.

“The bottom line is the degenerative process in the brain with PD wants people to stop moving, but it gets worse faster with inactivity. At PWR!, we train people to move bigger and faster in their everyday life to avoid inactivity. We use music, visual cues, metronomes and suspended equipment to enhance the quality of movements and keep our clients engaged.

“It is remarkable to watch someone come in impaired by this disease and after one hour walk out with hope and a sense of empowerment.”



Becky Farley, Ph.D. (right), CEO of Parkinson Wellness Recovery, leads snowbird Corin Bosworth through some exercises. Photo by Kris Hanning.

The PWR! Gym also offers enrichment and education programs. “We are a community for people with PD; we are a place to come immediately at diagnosis and for life.”

The cost at the PWR! Gym is currently \$75 a month for three group classes a week (cash only — PWR! does not yet take insurance). “We have only 3,000 square feet and are bursting at the seams! We now have about 80 people a month who attend our group classes.” Eventually, PWR! hopes to have satellite facilities offering programs at other sites in the Tucson area.

To help fund the PWR! Gym, Dr. Farley (through PWR!) offers workshops and certification programs around the U.S. and Canada to train physical therapists and fitness professionals to work with people with PD. PWR! also relies on funding from individual donors, grants and a subsidy from the Arizona Chapter of the American Parkinson Disease Association.

Annual events include the 15-mile Bowden PWR!Hike up Mount Lemmon (from Catalina State Park) in April, and the PWR!Retreat held in May in Scottsdale. “This year individuals will be able to join in the Bowden PWR!Hike by creating their own fundraising challenges.”

Volunteers are needed to serve as coaches and assist PWR! instructors in the group

exercise classes. “Volunteers (who first undergo training) may be responsible for a certain area of the gym or they may be assigned to one person.” Classes are an hour long, and volunteers are encouraged to commit to one or more classes a week.

Dr. Farley has written a book called *PWR! Moves*, which can be used as an instruction manual for clinicians and therapists, as well as a stand-alone home exercise program for those living with PD. “The research-based principles I’ve outlined can be implemented into any exercise program.” The book can be ordered through PWR!’s website: www.pwr4life.org.

“This has been a huge growth year for PWR! We started programs for the newly diagnosed and young onset individuals with PD. We are constantly implementing the latest cutting-edge research on exercise as it relates to Parkinson’s, and we are developing the technology and partnerships to increase access to these new, innovative programs for the PD community. I want this model of exercise programming everywhere!”

To volunteer, donate or learn more, visit www.pwr4life.org or call (520) 591-5346.

— Wendy Sweet