



it's all about community

Getting involved in community programs
is key to long-term fitness success

By Jane Langille

CASSANDRA CEY wanted to exercise but didn't know where to start, and she didn't know anyone else who had diabetes. "I thought a regular gym would just be too much," says Cey, who lives in Airdrie, Alberta. "I wanted to feel confident I was with people who understand my condition and that I wasn't going to rush into anything too fast."

At the time, Cey was 28 and undergoing dialysis for kidney complications. She had been living with type 1 diabetes since she was nine years old and knew that she should be exercising to help manage her diabetes. During one treatment procedure, she spotted a poster on the wall and learned about a community exercise support program tailored for people with chronic illnesses.

She decided to give it a try and signed up for supervised exercise classes with the Living Well with a Chronic Condition program in nearby Calgary. Living Well offers three pillars of support for those who have chronic, long-term health conditions like diabetes, including supervised exercise programs, disease-specific education classes and a self-management workshop called Better Choices, Better Health.

"They were so amazing; they custom fit a fitness program for me at my level of fitness, taking my goals into account," says Cey. "The group I was with was great, because we were all diabetic, so we would check our blood sugars before getting started and the therapist would check our blood pressure."



Cassandra Cey: "The program's had a huge impact in my life."

Murray Chrusch, care manager for Living Well with a Chronic Condition program for Alberta Health Services, says, "The program has been very successful. We have data that shows it has helped lower health risk indicators, like cholesterol, blood pressure and blood glucose levels, as well as decreased the number of people accessing emergency rooms and in-patient beds in hospitals."

He believes that the support that develops among participants in the program contributes greatly to the program's success. "They develop a support network by exercising with other people that they can relate to, that have certain obstacles to doing physical activity. Many people find that valuable. They benefit from their peers and they gain support from our clinicians as well."

Cey knows firsthand how being able to tap into a community program has improved her health. "The program kick-started my confidence, that feeling that I could do things," she says. "It's had a huge impact on my life." She also made a close friend, another person with diabetes who is also now in her early 30s, and they support each other by exercising together, sharing information and helping each other to make healthy choices when eating out.

Elisabeth Cardoso Pereira is the Living Well coordinator for the self-management workshop, which was developed by Stanford University and has been shared with many other countries. She finds that the community support is a vital element for the workshop's success and notes that participants start to form their own support networks and organize additional activities outside of class after getting to know each other. There are many participants who finish the program and move on to take leadership training—like Cey, who now leads a workshop in Airdrie, where she is spreading the word among her students about the supervised exercise and disease-specific education classes.

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Garfield Wilson can attest to the importance of community involvement to plant the seed for improved health and achieving fitness goals. He was a personal trainer for the recent CBC program, *Village on a Diet*,

GET INVOLVED IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Communities now offer a surprising range of activities. Take a look at the fitness programs available in your area and check with your healthcare provider to find out what level of activity is best for you. Here are some interesting examples of community exercise programs found in recreation guides across the country to give you some inspiration...

VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA—FLASH MOB DANCE (ADULTS)

Participants in this fun four-week choreography course learn how to stage a flash mob dance and then put on a surprise public performance. No previous dance experience required.

CORNER BROOK, NEWFOUNDLAND—RUSTY SNEAKERS (SENIORS)

This program includes fitness classes, strength and endurance training for seniors while focusing on health, wellness, social interaction and learning.

LONDON, ONTARIO—HORSESHOE PITCHING (FAMILY)

Participants learn how to throw horseshoes, as well as proper etiquette and scoring. Fun for the whole family.

BRIDGEWATER, NOVA SCOTIA—FUN & GAMES DAY (55+)

A free program to promote physical fitness and community networking, games include shuffleboard, bocce, baggo and croquet, as well as the chance to try Nordic walking or a "Nice & Easy" fitness class.

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where residents of Taylor, British Columbia, successfully lost a collective 2,000 pounds in three months by becoming more physically active and eating healthier meals. Wilson says, “The community aspect was the largest factor that kept people involved and kept them motivated to make healthy changes for life.”

Five months after the show ended, Wilson and the program crew returned to Taylor in the deep cold of winter to film the follow-up episode, *Beyond the Diet*, to see if the participants had continued their healthy lifestyle habits. They were delighted to discover that the Taylor townsfolk had lost an additional 511 pounds.

The community spirit was the secret ingredient for continuing to exercise on a regular basis. Some of the participants had moved beyond their original workout routines to organize new activities and achieve new fitness goals. For example, some organized group fitness classes for entire families, some had completed their first



Garfield Wilson: “The community aspect was the largest factor that kept people motivated to make healthy changes for life.”

endurance races, and others started a co-ed hockey team for skaters of all abilities, even those who had never tied on skates before.

The Canadian Diabetes Association’s 2008 *Clinical Practice Guidelines* state that a modest weight loss of 5 to 10% can substantially improve insulin sensitivity and glycemic, blood pressure and lipid control. The *Guidelines* also recommend that a comprehensive healthy lifestyle intervention program should be implemented for overweight and obese people with diabetes to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.

According to Dr. Ali Zentner, the physician for *Village on a Diet*, studies show that patients who exercise 30-60 minutes per day, everyday, are ten times more likely to keep their weight off as patients who don’t. Wilson agrees that daily physical activity is important for everyone, including people managing diabetes and says, “There is no one right plan to manage weight. We were promoting that you have to get to know your body, what it means to be energized.”

Now 32 years old, Cey is more active than ever before, thanks to her kick-start in a community fitness program geared to taking her needs as a person living with diabetes into account. She is training for her first 5K run and participates in volleyball, baseball and fitness classes every week. But she still needs to manage her health carefully, using tools she learned in the Living Well program.

A few years ago, her complications became so severe she needed a kidney transplant and received one from her father; just last year, she received a new pancreas. She doesn’t need to take insulin right now, but knows that there is a possibility she may have to again in the future. “I’ll be better able to manage my diabetes the next time around, now that I have more tools and a better understanding, thanks to the start I got in the Living Well program.”

Jane Langille is a freelance health writer based in Richmond Hill, Ontario.

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