

••• Exercise Foolishness •••

by Korey Thompson

Korey Thompson, of Milwaukee Wisconsin, started clowning in Maryland in 1973. Last year, she created the *Exercise Foolishness* program at Luther Manor Day Care Center in Milwaukee. Korey has taught workshops and participated in symposiums on aging and on "intergenerational" clowning. She is also a real estate broker who specializes in assisting elderly persons with real estate and relocation situations. We will be hearing a lot more from this dedicated clown.

Apparently, getting older doesn't make it easier to participate enthusiastically in daily exercise programs. Most eldercare/day care facilities have two exercise sessions on their daily agenda, and a variety of exercise-themes have developed as ways to make these necessary activities attractive to participants. There are special videos, unusual routines such as exercising while waving paper plates, and even programs with an Irish theme on St. Patrick's day.

Now, there are exercises with clowns! **Exercise Foolishness** is the name I have given to the practice of nonverbal Therapeutic Clowning in routine exercise sessions with elderly persons affected by dementia, stroke, or other disabling disease or depression.

Clowning has many natural and comic ties to a program of physical exercise. Exaggerated body movements is a clown's standard fare. Clowns put the repetition of movement to music, make odd accompanying noises, make the motions bigger or smaller or faster or slower and call it fun! Humorous body positioning is a clown's delight! Everyone agrees "Let's do more!"

Exercise Foolishness has been most successful when the regular exercise leader leads the group through familiar exercise routines, giving the clown freedom to focus attention on individual participants. The regular leader knows the level of physical exertion appropriate for the group, and is the perfect "straightman (or straightwoman)" in the gig!

The exercise leader brings additional skills to the clown-and-exercise experience by knowing the participants from experience. They can offer invaluable direction to the clown by pointing out either someone who needs special attention from a clown, or someone whose behavior is unusually volatile and is best served by not receiving focus from the clown on that day. The leader can also provide an occasional useful verbal bridge for a participant that can facilitate involvement for the participant.

An important element in the practice of Exercise Foolishness is for the clown to individually greet each of the participants upon entering the room. This can be accomplished by escorting someone to their chair, or just moving around the circle and greeting participants with a hand shake, tip of the hat, hug or whatever.

The power of this ritual became abundantly clear to me when on the third visit to one of the groups, I entered the room with a big smile and silly leap into a big body -"Hello!" by extending my arms upward in a big V. To my surprise and delight, a good 75% of the room responded with an enthusiastic big V arm greeting in return! That was a warm way to begin our individual greetings and the pleasant surprise of it made everyone feel good!

As the actual exercise session begins, the clown starts by sitting next to the exercise leader and following instructions exactly along with the group. This sets up a sense of order for the experience. Then the clown can begin to take liberties by humorously exaggerating physical movements or by adding interesting sound effects.

"Lift your arms up," is the command. The clown's arms lift to full extension, while cooing a glissandos, "Uuuuppppppppp," and similarly in the reverse with the "Dooooowwnnnnnnnnn." The exercise leader then commands "Now we will touch our toes". The clown looks worried and intones a serious, "Oh ohhh!" (What everyone is thinking but politely not saying!) Chuckles go through the room, and the clown ends up getting stuck in the touch-toes position. What else would you expect from a clown! Giving the sergeant of these drills a little good-natured flack unites the participants in the group in some satisfying mischief. However, the clown makes it clear by his or her action, that this sergeant is in truth, the compatriot and friend of the participant and clown alike.

Laughter -- good for the body and good for the soul -- gives the body a boost of oxygen by having you breathe more deeply. It raises the level of those good endorphins in the bloodstream that make you feel good and which persist in the body for several hours after the event. Laughing and exercise make a great combination.

But there's a LOT more to exercising with clowns!

As the exercises proceed and an instruction to raise arms is given, there may be a few in the group who can't raise an arm because of disability. Enter the clown! The clown can go to the person having trouble with the motion, and "ask" by an action if it is OK to help with the exercise. The rest of the group, meanwhile, is continuing the class with the leader so there is no major attention drawn to the person having difficulty.

The clown can gently pick up the impaired arm and help the person lift the arm into the air. The clown may stay and help the person through the repetitions called for by the exercise leader. (The leader has been previously cued to continue another few repetitions when they notice that the clown is assisting a participant.) When that exercise is completed, the clown congratulates the participant for their fine effort and moves on to help another person with another exercise.

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The caring and occasionally comic giving-of-aid through physical manipulations are endless. For example, helping to coordinate the feet or legs when the exercise leader calls for marching, gently helping coordinate hand exercises with stiff or permanently curled fingers, or making funny faces to encourage participation in facial exercises which can help express emotion and ultimately make interactions more satisfying.

One day a woman who had a stroke was having trouble with arm lifts and the clown went over to help her move her arm. As the clown raised her arm and began to feel stiffness and tension in the arm (the clown's cue for lowering the arm to its regular position), the woman called out, "C'mon, c'mon!", indicating that the clown was supposed to lift her arm higher. Checking her facial expression carefully and determining that to continue the lift was what the woman meant, the clown tried to ease her arm higher. The stiffness increased as her arm raised higher than before, so the clown started to bring her arm down again. The woman called out even louder, "C'mon, C'mon, C'mon." The clown wanted to stop, but the woman's urging was so strong that the clown helped her lift it again. Up that arm went, maybe 65% in the air! The clown saw success, but the woman was not done!

The third time, at the woman's insistence, they went through the call and the lift procedure and miracle of miracles, the woman's arm did not snap off, which it surely felt tight enough to do. Her arm extended nearly 90% up, raised in a fist of triumph! Everyone around her broke into spontaneous applause!

The next time the clown came for *Exercise Foolishness*, the same woman called the clown over and proudly lifted her arm in the air to the 65% height by herself, and said with determination, "There!" She did it!

Many times an individual will have impairment in moving feet or legs, so a huge portion of the exercise class is lost to them. Furthermore, inability to join group activity has the indirect effect of discouraging active participation in the group.

A clown can carefully place an arm under a knee and help march a patient's leg to the music, or

manipulate motionless feet to the count of an exercise. One man burst into tears while nodding his head, "Yes, Yes" as the clown moved his legs in time to the marching music.

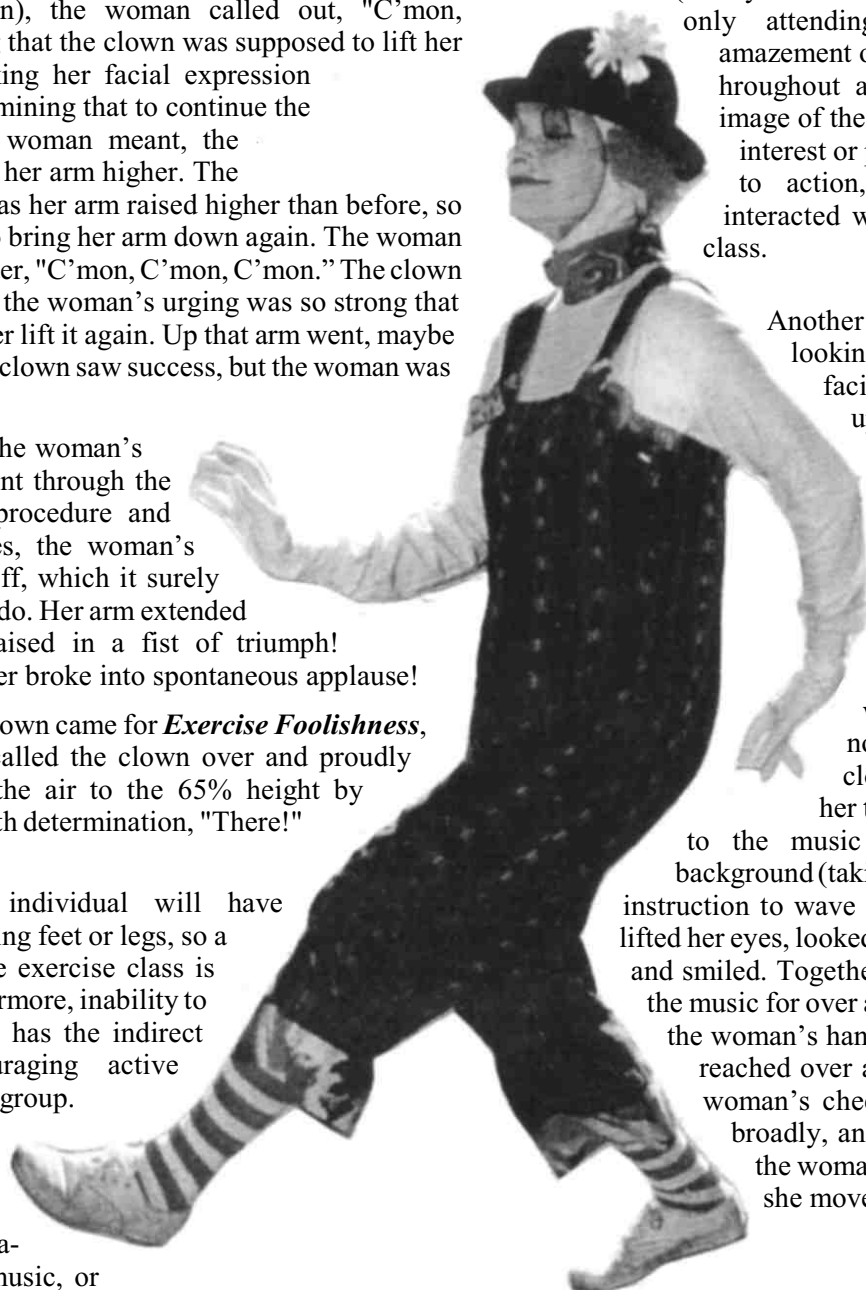
Non-involvement is a big thief of quality of life.

When an individual refuses or is unable to participate in activities around them, their level of stimulation diminishes making them less able to exert their personal power in life.

The presence of the clown has been able to intervene in some of those situations. In one case, a patient who had refused to be present to any kind or organized activity at the Center (totally unknown by the clown) insisted on not only attending exercise class to the amazement of the staff, but participated throughout almost all of the class. The image of the clown seemed to spark some interest or past memory that brought her to action, even though the clown interacted with her only occasionally in class.

Another patient spent all of her time looking at the floor with a very sad facial expression. She didn't look up at anyone, including the strange clown-creature that had entered the room. During the course of the exercises when the instruction was to wave arms overhead, the clown went over to her and gently touched her two hands that were laying in her lap. She did not pull them away, so the clown ever so gently picked up her two hands and began swaying to the music that was playing in the background (taking some liberty with the exact instruction to wave arms overhead). The woman lifted her eyes, looked curiously at the clown's face and smiled. Together the two of them swayed to the music for over a minute. When the clown put the woman's hands back in her lap, the clown reached over and touched her cheek to the woman's cheek. The woman was smiling broadly, and as the clown moved away, the woman tracked her with her eyes as she moved around the room.

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The clown looked over, smiled and waved occasionally as the exercise session continued, and the woman was watching most of the time. Later in the session when the clown went back to the woman, they did a fairly enthusiastic, rhythmic sit-down "Dance" to the music that was playing. The others in the group applauded the woman's participation and her face beamed with joy! Another one of those wonderful moments!

It is important for a clown to "gadfly" with calculated nonchalance throughout the group. It's important not to concentrate attention on just a few people in the group, even if they are the ones having the most trouble with physical motion. Every member of the group is important, and individuals in the group gain strength from being in a place of enthusiastic energy. Additionally, moving randomly through the group, is itself more visually interesting and stimulating.

Clowns are open to creating opportunities for complimentary kudos, hugs or whistles when a patient tries some activity that is challenging for them to do. Other members of the group may have a great deal of empathy and

understanding for the bravery of a person who's just attempted a challenging feat, and they too welcome an opportunity to join a congratulatory cheer.

A clown bears the cherished gift of the luxury of undivided attention and unconditional regard in relating to people. Sharing this gift within the boundaries of an exercise program creates a unique level of trust among those who are involved.

When the exercise session is over, the clown always makes a point of bidding the group goodbye for the day. On the days when there's time, going one-to-one is preferable, but an exaggerated and clear "Goodbye" motion at the door can bring closure to the experience for the day.

As clowns we are called to "play" even in common tasks, or tasks that may seem a hardship. When we share a sense of play and satisfaction with others in a common task, such as a required exercise class, we engender a sense of dignity and mastery. That promotes the feeling of personal power, which in itself is enough to make you smile!