

Program profile

Walking in the water

by Jana Headrick

Appropriate for



Active
now



Getting
started



Needs a
little help

Therapeutic water walking

3 days a week
45 - 60 minute class
10 - 15 participants
2-1/2 years in wellness program

The official name of the class may be Therapeutic Water Walking, but the participants like to call themselves “The Walkie Talkies,” because they tease about doing more talking than walking. Between 10 and 15 people join the afternoon class on Monday, Wednesday and Friday each week.

The Wellness Center at Inverness Village Retirement Community has been open for 4 years, and this class has been offered for over half of that time. This class was started to meet a specific need. Residents can choose from several water classes (Arthritis, Aqua Fit, Liquid Weight Room and Aqua Lite), but these classes were often too difficult for people who had stamina issues, problems with range of motion, severe joint pain and gait disturbances.

By using walking as the main mode of movement, this class provides balance training, gait training, endurance and range of motion through simple movements in the water that are applicable to daily living.

The participants make the program successful because they are a very vocal and social group. They keep each other accountable, they enjoy coming and tell their friends to come, too. Their bodies also keep them loyal. Everyone has said that if they miss a class or two, they can really tell by the stiffness in their joints. They are determined to improve their health.



The Walkie Talkies get ready for a round of pool Scrabble to exercise their physical and cognitive skills—and have fun.

In fact, we use this class as a springboard to our other classes. We encourage people to begin in the Therapeutic Water Walking class, and once they improve, to transition to a more challenging class. Our only challenge is to get people to leave, because they all enjoy participating in the class so much.

Perhaps the most important component for a class of this nature is the instructor. The instructor for this class teaches in the water, takes an active role in improving performance and likes to be hands-on with each participant to offer assistance as needed.

Meeting many needs

The Therapeutic Water Walking class is designed for people with the following conditions:

- problems with endurance and stamina
- recovering from knee or hip replacement/surgery
- gait disturbance due to stroke, Parkinson’s or other neurological conditions
- trouble completing daily activities of living

Continued on page 17...

Continued from page 16

- restrictions with range of motion
- neuropathy
- severe limitations due to arthritis or other joint pain/complications

On land, participants feel the pain or difficulty of every step and they may have to rely on a walker, cane or scooter to aid them in ambulating. But, once in the water they seem to become supermen and superwomen—they are faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!

Water is a supportive environment where they don't need an ambulatory device and don't have to worry about falling. When they are in water up to their shoulders, they are only carrying 10% of their body weight, which greatly reduces strain on aching joints and sore muscles.

The participants generally fall into these ICAA functional levels:

- 30% Active Now
- 50% Just Getting Started
- 20% Need a Little Help

Managing the class

The pool is 50 feet long, 25 feet wide and 5 feet deep. There are balance bars fastened around the perimeter on all sides and a ramp that allows easy access in and out of the water.

The pool is dedicated to the classes during their scheduled times, so the participants have the water all to themselves. The pool temperature is kept at 89 degrees, which is right between a fitness and therapeutic pool temperature. This works well for our lap swimmers who actually find the fitness temperature at most local gyms to be too cold.

All the participants have limitations (for example, using walkers, canes or scooters), but once in the water most are able to keep up with the exercises without much assistance. The instructor stays close to all



How to Play Pool Scrabble

Cut a noodle into 1 to 2 inch pieces, and use a magic marker to write on the letters. The game begins by placing the letters inside a hula hoop positioned at one end of the pool.

The players start at the opposite end of the pool. They perform a walking exercise to the game pieces, repeating the journey until all 7 pieces are collected. The instructor can change the exercise for every trip.

Each letter is awarded points. The players keep going until all the "tiles" are collected and spell out words on the edge of the pool. Whoever has the most points wins.

new participants until they are acclimated to the water and class structure. She is available to provide some assistance for those who require additional help or more supervision.

There is a lifeguard on deck, and the instructor also is lifeguard-certified. Because of the nature of this class, we do try to limit the number of people who attend. We make room for newcomers by encouraging people to "graduate" to the next class once they are ready and physically able.

Continued on page 18...

Continued from page 17

How the class works

The class always starts with a friendly hello and warm greetings by the staff, instructor, and class participants. Each class begins with a 5- to 10-minute warm-up and a “catch up.” Everyone offers an update on how they are feeling and what is going on in their world. This conversation sets the tone for the rest of the class.

The main components of the class include exercises for range of motion, endurance, gait, strength, balance, dexterity and cognitive function.

The participants practice a wide variety of walking steps. For example: the bridal march (step together, step together), crab walk (heels together, toes out, knees bent), side step, walking forward and backward, heel to toe, toe to heel, walk in circles, spiral, walking in a crowd.

Other types of activities include:

- Range of Motion (ROM): stretching or playing basketball to increase ROM in the shoulders
- Endurance: walking or moving continually (walking, playing follow the leader, marching)
- Strength: using the balance bars attached to the pool sides with equipment to target specific muscle groups for exercises such as biceps curls, lat pulls, squats with bands and leg circles
- Balance and agility: weighted synthetic toy animals scattered on the bottom of the pool are picked up with toes and raised to the opposite hand

The class ends with a cool-down of 5 to 10 minutes composed of stretching and balance exercises.

Although all participants see great improvements in these components, what keeps them coming back and working hard

is the social aspect of the program. The instructor plays a huge role in encouraging social interaction, accountability between participants and loyalty to the instructor and the program itself.

Teaching aids and equipment

The instructor uses anything she can get her hands on to make the class more enjoyable and applicable to daily life skills. So the props are usually toys! There are floating basketball goals and beach balls to work on balance and coordination. Floating noodle pieces with letters on them are spread throughout the pool to play Scrabble for cognitive fitness!

We use much of the same equipment in this class as we do in other classes, and adapt them to the functional and fitness level of the individual and the class. For example:

- Thera-Band tubing
- Water fins
- Kickboards

Anything we can think of to create resistance and create opportunity for stimulation and improve function is used in the class.

Promoting attendance

People know about the class because all residents who join the Inverness Village Wellness Center are informed about the programs that are available to them. During their initial orientations, the Wellness Director makes suggestions to guide them to the programs that may be most appropriate.

If a resident’s health changes due to surgery or illness, or if their physical function declines, the Wellness Center staff encourages them to join classes such as therapeutic walking.

We organize competitions between the different water classes based on attendance

Continued on page 19...

Continued from page 18

or through athletic competitions like basketball or water volleyball.

We celebrate by throwing pizza parties, themed lunches or “giveaways” such as gift certificates for a massage, dinner for 2 in our formal dining room or a yoga session with our senior yoga instructor. These gifts may also be given to a participant who brings a friend to class.

There is no additional fee for residents to attend the class because it is part of an existing multi-dimensional line of wellness programs.

Administration

Teaching staff. All of the teaching staff at the Inverness Village Wellness Center are degreed professionals and/or certified in many areas that deal with fitness for seniors. All are certified water instructors through the Arthritis Foundation. Besides education, patience and a positive attitude are virtues that an instructor must have to teach this program.

Budget. The cost to run the program includes the instructor’s compensation and any props/equipment used. However, the same equipment may be used for other programming, so the cost is spread among multiple classes.

Lessons learned. Make the program accessible and comfortable. The more barriers and hurdles you can eliminate for this population, the more opportunity for successful aging.

For example, the ramp into the pool and the balance bars fastened around all sides eliminate physical barriers. A new person can stand next to the bars for support until feeling more comfortable. The tubing used for resistance training is tied to the bars so people don’t have to worry about holding onto it and are next to the bars if they need to regain balance.

The class participants themselves make newcomers feel right at home and

welcomed, which overcomes their apprehensions about the water, exercising and joining a new group. The instructor welcomes every newcomer, stays with the person until he or she is situated, and sticks with the new member for the duration of the class to make sure that the transition into the program is successful and comfortable.

Jana Headrick is the wellness director at Inverness Village Retirement Community (www.invernessvillage.com) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Headrick has a degree from Oklahoma State University and several certifications in areas dealing with senior fitness. She also writes a monthly “Aging Well” article in a local magazine The Vintage, which is a publication specifically for older adults.

Therapeutic Water Walking is taught by JoAnn Firestone, a certified Water Safety Instructor, Lifeguard, Arthritis Water Instructor and certified in Water Walking. Firestone was terrified of the water only 4 years ago! She started taking water aerobics, learned how to swim, and now is constantly in the water.

The wellness program at Inverness Village received an ICAA Innovator Award in 2006 for creativity in programming.

ICAA precon features functional water fitness

At the ICAA Active Aging Conference, an all-day preconference workshop on Wednesday, November 28, will feature program ideas, motivational techniques and new program ideas for the pool.

For more information, visit the conference section on the ICAA web site (www.icaa.cc/convention/precon.htm) or telephone 866-335-9777 or 604-734-4466.