

Enhancing Healthy Aging

Exercising and changing health behaviors are easier said than done. One health wellness program demonstrates how to make doing them easier.



© Marilyn Barbone/Dreamstime.com

Susan Snyder
Basia Belza

The physical and emotional benefits of exercise are increasingly well-known, but just 20 percent of older adults are engaged in regular leisure-time physical activity, a rate that has not budged since the mid-1990s. Older adults—even the most frail—can improve their health and maintain their independence by incorporating daily physical activity into their lives. To do this, though, they need access to enjoyable physical activity opportunities designed specifically for them and that are proven to be effective. Many older adults know they want to become more active but don't know how. Project Enhance programs offer a great opportunity to insert exercise to their day.

Project Enhance (www.projectenhance.org), is an initiative of the private, nonprofit Senior Services in King County, Washington. The initiative packages a number of health-enhancement components to form a comprehensive health and wellness program that addresses the wellness needs of older adults ranging from those who live with physical challenges to those who are ready to take a challenging exercise class. Two of its key evidence-based programs—EnhanceFitness, a group physical activity class, and EnhanceWellness, a participant-centered behavior change program—are based on studies conducted in the early 1990s through the University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center in partnership with Senior Services, PacifiCare, and Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington.

Although organizations can choose to adopt one or the other program, the EnhanceWellness and EnhanceFitness programs work best together, reinforcing each other as a wellness package. They are easy to implement, attract new people to community sites, and empower participants to sustain independent lives. Most importantly, they result in measurable improvements in the health and well-being of older adults.

In the past 10 years, Project Enhance has received funding not only from local resources

such as the Seattle/King County Area Agency on Aging but also from regional and national resources, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the CDC Arthritis Program. Its funding is supplemented by income from program sales. The operating cost of each program is low. Typically, a class fee (\$2.60/class) is charged for EnhanceFitness, which covers the cost of the instructor's salary. EnhanceWellness services are provided on a donation basis with program operational costs covered by a variety of funders.

Dissemination of the EnhanceWellness and EnhanceFitness programs started in 1997 at four senior centers in King County. Today, the programs have expanded to nearly 200 sites in 21 states. Program participation has increased from 80 to more than 4,000 participants. Program retention is very good; more than half of the EnhanceFitness participants have remained in the program for more than one year, and EnhanceWellness has a 75 percent graduation rate for its six-month period of enrollment.

Increasing activity

EnhanceFitness helps even near-frail older adults become more active, energized, and socially connected. The program includes exercises to improve flexibility, balance, cardiovascular capacity, and strength. Certified fitness instructors receive special EnhanceFitness training, giving them the expertise they need to lead the three one-hour classes each week. EnhanceFitness participants complete physical function tests upon enrollment and every four months thereafter. Project Enhance collects and analyzes outcomes data and provides individualized site reports annually.

Although originally offered only in senior centers, EnhanceFitness is also now available in residential settings, YMCAs, recreation centers, and other community settings—any facility that has appropriate space for an exercise class and where older adults are comfortable going. For example, a current study using EnhanceFitness as the intervention is being conducted at meal sites in Oregon managed by Loaves and Fishes, Inc.

In Seattle, the local Area Agency on Aging and Group Health Cooperative support management of sites and instructor training. In addition, Group Health provides EnhanceFitness as a benefit to its Medicare enrollees.

Beyond exercise

The six-month-long EnhanceWellness program is designed for individuals who want to make health behavior changes but need support and skill-building to do so. Typically, when individuals join the program, a nurse and social worker, sometimes complemented by trained volunteer health mentors, work with each individual to develop a personalized health action plan based on what the individual wants and is ready to work on. Health plan goals include such things as attending a group physical activity class, walking, and attending a support group on weight loss or on management of chronic conditions.

Participants complete tests measuring different health behaviors such as physical activity and social connection when they enroll in the program and when they graduate so that they have written documentation of progress made. Their physician is informed of their enrollment in the program and of their chosen goals so that the physician also can support their patient in their changes.

Staff who are trained in motivational interviewing contact program participants regularly to provide support as the participants work on their health plan. The social worker also conducts support groups for participants and other community members. Popular topic areas include transitions, living a healthy life, depression management, and weight management. Groups are provided whenever several participants need to work on similar issues and could benefit from their peers' experiences.

Research has shown that people participating in EnhanceWellness can decrease the length of hospital stays, lower their use of psychoactive drugs, alleviate symptoms of mood disorders, and develop a sense of greater self-efficacy.

EnhanceWellness has found that robust partnerships with health care systems and providers are crucial. EnhanceWellness staff complement the work of health care providers by being available for participants as they make difficult health behavior changes and guiding them through the ups and downs of such changes. Most providers don't have the time to do this and appreciate the support that community providers can give their patients.

Project Enhance works

Project Enhance is regularly evaluated for effectiveness and reach. The University of Washington Health Promotion Research

Center, for example, has conducted three formal evaluations of the EnhanceFitness and EnhanceWellness programs. As new research regarding each program, or healthy aging in general, becomes known, program curricula are revised.

The success of Project Enhance is measured by its positive participant outcomes. The research indicates that EnhanceWellness participants have had a 72 percent decrease in hospital days, 35 percent decrease in psychoactive drugs, and 11 percent decrease in depression. EnhanceFitness participants have had a 52 percent decrease in depression and a 35 percent improvement in physical functioning, as reflected in an index score of various physical function measures.

The size of the US aging population is increasing dramatically, and it will be critically important to offer proven programs that maintain older adults' physical, emotional, and mental health. Project Enhance programs connect participants to their peers in a community setting, which may be the one thing that gets them out of their homes and socializing with others. Participants then begin to take part in other activities in the senior or community center, either as participants or as volunteers. They become healthier, more confident, and more active members of their community.

Project Enhance programs are easy to implement, attract new people to community sites, and empower participants to sustain healthy and independent lives. Most importantly, they result in measurable improvements in the health and well-being of the older adult program participants. As one participant stated after enrolling in both EnhanceFitness and EnhanceWellness, "I honestly feel 20 years younger! I am so much more flexible and able to move more easily. I carry my own groceries to the car and unload them myself. I can reach the top shelf in my cupboard. I have more energy. And as a result, my whole outlook on life is brighter." n

Project Enhance Packaged for Use

Project Enhance has a turnkey package providing all the tools needed to successfully implement both EnhanceFitness and EnhanceWellness, including training and other workshops, instructor and administrator training manuals, instructor listserv, tracking and measurement forms, and ongoing program evaluation. Experienced Project Enhance administrators provide technical assistance to on-site instructors and program and administrative staff.

Find information about the programs, their current locations, and how to implement them at www.projectenhance.org or call 206-727-6219.

Authors

Susan Snyder is director of Project Enhance with Senior Services (Seattle). Basia Belza, PhD, RN, is a professor of Biobehavioral Nursing and Health Systems in the UW School of Nursing.

Resources

The Pocket Guide to Staying Healthy at 50+. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. www.ahrq.gov/ppip/50plus/.