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Fear of Falling and What You Can Do

by Sally Wendkos Olds

In my circle of friends, practically everyone - including me - has fallen within the last couple of years. One friend hit the floor when the chair she was standing on to reach a high cabinet tipped over. One tripped over a small rug in her apartment. One tumbled down stairs when, wearing her progressive lenses, she could not see the bottom of the staircase. One slipped and fell on her face on a marble floor, injuring her eye socket. I ended up spread-eagled on a sidewalk when, looking up at the marquee of the theater I was headed to, I caught my toe in a crack in the cement.

The ways we fall are as varied as we are - and the ways to prevent falls are also varied, as we acknowledge and compensate for changes in vision, balance, muscular strength, and other abilities we've always taken for granted. Fortunately, we can change our ways and do a lot to prevent falling.



Reaching your sixties should be a wake-up call," asserts Celeste Carlucci, the founder of the fall prevention and strengthening program FallStop...MOVE STRONG™. Of course, younger people fall too, but the risks are greater for people 60 and older. These years, says Celeste, are a time when we need to look at changes we've already experienced and those to come. Until we do something about them, we're at risk of taking a fall that could drastically change our lives

But because of what one student of Celeste's described as "the arrogance of youth - and I'm no longer young," we tend to dismiss these concerns and avoid doing anything about them. We need to take inventory of ourselves and our surroundings -- and then make changes. Do I have a good enough sense of balance? Do I know how to walk safely outdoors? What about in the home? Do I really need to keep that beautiful little rug I keep tripping over? Do I need to learn better ways of picking things up off the floor and putting things away high up? Is my lighting good enough?

The most basic things we need to do are improve balance and increase strength, because the stronger your muscles are and the better your sense of balance, even if you trip or misjudge distance, you can catch yourself and avoid going down. Just as important is paying attention to your environment. Celeste teaches three levels of classes to improve balance and strength at the Jewish Community Center (JCC) on Manhattan's West Side and at the Martha Stewart Center for Living at Mount Sinai Hospital. Another JCC teacher, Linda Rose Iennaco, teaches Balance and Bones™ and Exercise with Ease there and also



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in private classes at the Gateway School. Both women (each a former dancer) also offer one-on-one sessions.

Other classes also focus on teaching better balance, including those for Tai Chi, which, as physical therapist Elise Stettner, PT, M.P.S., BCIA: BCB-PMD, points out, is an excellent way to improve balance "because all the movements are designed to maintain your body weight over its center of gravity. This is necessary in order to avoid losing one's balance."

Here's a compendium of recommendations from Celeste, Linda, Elise, and other sources, which will help you stay upright:

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR BODY

- ✓ To decide if you need a class to improve your balance and strength, try the exercises in the sidebar and grade yourself honestly.
- ✓ If you sometimes feel dizzy or unsteady, have your doctor check you out and analyze all your medications (including over-the-counter) to see whether any one or any combination is causing the problem.
- ✓ Check and correct your vision.
- ✓ Be sure your feet give you good support. Either see a podiatrist to take care of foot problems that may interfere with well-balanced walking or a pedorthist who can help fit you with the right shoes.

EVERYDAY BALANCE

- ✓ Since most falls happen when you shift your weight and lose your balance, focus on keeping your body weight over your feet, especially when changing direction.
- ✓ To pick something up from the floor, bend your front leg, keep your rear leg about a foot behind the other, and bend down. You're less likely to fall than if you bend over with both legs together.
- ✓ To reach something up high, take the same stance: one foot forward, one back.
- ✓ When walking down steps, if you're feeling off balance, place your feet sideways and hold the railing.
- ✓ When you wake up in the morning or after sitting for a long time as at the theater, open your lap, organize your body, and, as Celeste says, "pump the gas" for a couple of minutes before getting up by alternately flexing and pointing your feet.



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WALKING OUTSIDE

- ✓ **Consider every walk a mindful meditation:** so you're constantly thinking "Where are my feet?" "Where is my body?" "What is the road surface like?" When I went trekking a few years ago on the narrow, rocky roads in Nepal, I had to focus on every step. If I wanted to look at the spectacular scenery, I knew I had to stop – I could not walk and look at the same time. We need to do this in New York City as well. As East Sider Myra Braverman told me, "When I walk and talk, I trip. When I just focus on how I'm walking and don't engage in conversation, I don't trip."
- ✓ **Walk heel-toe.** Make good contact with the ground by hitting it first with your heel, then your toe, with your legs a little bit apart so you're not shuffling.
- ✓ **Use your whole leg and body** to develop a good stride, but don't make your steps so big that you lose your balance keeping up with them.
- ✓ **Practice using your STOP muscles:** lunge forward, then pull your body back to catch yourself. Make this a habit so that if you do trip or suddenly see a bike coming at you, you can pull yourself back.
- ✓ **Standing a foot away from a wall,** keep your body straight as you lean forward, with your hands still away from the wall. Practice putting your hands on the wall so the movement will be automatic and if you do trip, you'll fall on your hands.
- ✓ **Swing your arms when you walk.** This can be a challenge on crowded sidewalks – but it's important to keep your body loose and have an easy gait.
- ✓ **On snowy and icy streets** ([video](#)), engage your abdominal muscles, plant one foot and then the other firmly on the ground, angle your body slightly, and lean forward a little bit so you won't fall backward.
- ✓ **When walking your dog, keep Fido under control.** Keep the leash short and the dog close. When you bend down to scoop the poop, open your feet one in front of the other so you won't lose your balance. And keep one foot on the leash so Fido can't bolt and drag you with him.
- ✓ **Be alert to what's around you:** puddles and potholes, cyclists coming the wrong way, cars turning into the crosswalk, smartphone users about to bump into you.





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TAKING BUSES AND TAXIS

- ✓ Let the new taxis with high steps pass and wait for one that's easier to get in and out of.
- ✓ To get in, sit sideways, hold the door frame, & swing both legs in at the same time.
- ✓ To get out, do the reverse.
- ✓ Always exit from the front of the bus, no matter what that recorded voice says. The front step is lower than the rear.
- ✓ To get in or out, step sideways and hold the railing.
- ✓ Don't run for a bus. My mother used to say, "Men are like streetcars – another one will come along soon." That goes for buses, too, so leave yourself enough time that you won't be tempted to run.

CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AT HOME

- ✓ Light is important. Keep an easy-to-reach switch lamp by the bed, and a flashlight handy, at home and when traveling, so you never have to walk in the dark.
- ✓ At home always wear shoes or slippers with a back, give your feet structure.
- ✓ Never walk in stocking feet, which are slippery.
- ✓ Use a sturdy step-ladder with a hand rail to reach high places, be sure it's level before getting on, and hold on.
- ✓ Always keep your cell phone with you so if you do fall you can summon help.
- ✓ Keep your floors free of clutter you might stumble over.

Enrolling in a class to improve your balance and strength can bring tremendous benefits.



To find out more about classes and DVDs by Celeste Carlucci, go to www.fallstop.net, email her at celeste@fallstop.net, or call 917-599-6008. Join her newsletter and she will send you a list of five exercises she recommends doing every day.

To find out about Linda Iennaco's classes, including Balance and Bones™ and Exercise with Ease, and her TAPaerobics® DVD, email her at lrifit@aol.com, go to www.danceandfitness.net, or call 212-873-9042. To find out about classes at the Jewish Community Center, go to www.jccmanhattan.org or call 646-505-4444.





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SAVE THE DATE

The TTN-NYC Caring Collaborative will offer a Fall Stop...Move Strong class and fitness research presentation by Celeste Carlucci and Nimali Jayasinghe, PhD on April 20th.

MORE LINKS

For a home safety checklist from the Centers for Disease Control, go to:
<http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/falls/checklistforsafety.html>

For a one-minute link to a video demonstrating walking on snow, go to:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1tmDiA40BY>

To read a study about the value of Tai Chi, go to:
http://www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Falls/compendium/1.4_tai_chi.html

SIDEBAR: HOW'S YOUR BALANCE?



According to Atul Gawande, MD's book "Being Mortal," three primary risk factors for falling are poor balance, muscle weakness, and taking four or more prescription medications. Here are some tests to evaluate your balance, as developed by physical therapist Stephen V. Rapposelli, PT, OCS. If you have trouble doing any of these tests, see your doctor – and then see a balance trainer.

1. Stand on one leg without holding onto anything for 30 seconds.
2. Stand sideways next to a wall, lift the arm beside the wall to shoulder height and hold it straight. Reach forward along the wall as far as you can without falling. Reach 6 inches. Then turn the other way and reach with that arm.
3. Place a chair against a wall and measure out 10 feet. Get up out of the chair, walk 10 feet, turn around, and sit back down in 14 seconds.
4. Sit in a chair. Stand up and down five complete times as fast as possible, standing up fully and sitting down with your tush touching the chair, in less than 13 seconds.

Steve Rapposelli notes benchmarks for tests vary, according to gender and age. The number of repetitions that you can stand up from a chair, for example, will differ if you're 50 or if you're 90. But no matter what your age, you can work to improve your balance.

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