

GROWING OLDER

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The flow of life brings us into this world as infants, needing care and protection from adults. Then, we grow to adulthood ourselves, a time when we utilize our physical wellness to nurture our children and participate in our communities. Then, we engage the "aging process" in which accumulated injuries, illnesses, everyday use, and even gravity reduce our physical capabilities, strength and posture. Some of us at that stage of life may lose our independence and require the care and attention of younger adults.

As we experience those golden elderly years, it is important that we continue to embrace meaningful activities for both the sake of our physical wellness and our mental wellbeing. But what are "meaningful activities?"

Mary Gustas, Executive Director

MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES

AS A MEANS TO BETTER HEALTH

of the Comstock Community Center, describes meaningful activities as anything that keeps a person from being "cooped up in their own home with no one to talk to." For these people, significant social interaction could be eating lunch and conversing with others, regardless of age, at a community center or a neighborhood restaurant that allows people to linger over dessert or a third cup of coffee or tea.

For others, meaningful activities could include a no-impact exercise program, such as tai chi. "The amount of energy a person puts into health maintenance depends on each person's age, social circumstances and what feels right to their bodies," says Gustas.

Some people consider going on a trip to be a meaningful activity. For those who no longer drive or are without a family traveling companion, this often means boarding a comfortable charter bus to a new and exciting destination with others of comparable age and circumstance. These outings could be day trips, overnight excursions or weekend or week-long adventures, depending on a person's comfort level.

"Trips are great ways to laugh and be silly with new people who aren't going to be upset at you," Gustas says. "Nobody will yell at you. There are no kids to monitor your behavior. So there's more freedom because what happens on the bus, stays on the bus."

Karl Sandelin, President of Walking Together of Greater Kalamazoo, is also an advocate of group activity, especially if it involves physical exercise. "People who have matured to retirement frequently have more disposable time than those with job-related activities. That's a luxury. But then comes the question of finding an activity to

devote one's time to," Sandelin states.

Sandelin admits that he stumbled into Walking Together and its physical fitness program known as Fit Michigan, formerly Fit 2006 and Fit 2007 in each of the past two years. After his physician, in 1977, advised that he was "getting a little flabby," Sandelin joined the YMCA and began running marathons and ultra-marathons.

He learned that physical inactivity costs Michigan government and businesses billions of dollars each year in unnecessary Medicaid payments, increased insurance premiums and lost productivity. The Michigan Fitness Foundation estimated in 2002, for example, that preventable illnesses cost each Michigan resident \$1,175 in higher taxes and increased cost of goods. Sandelin estimates that cost in Kalamazoo County in 2007 at \$1,600 per adult.

Through a wellness consultant, he also learned that that this high cost is reversible, as evidenced by institutions whose employees have significantly lowered their risk of illness and, thus, the cost of their employer's insurance premiums through organized exercise programs.

This information motivated Sandelin to establish and implement a countywide fitness program that espouses "moving is medicine." In the program, businesses, schools, churches, and organizations post their exercise hours on an Internet web site where they can compare their level of activity with others within their team as well as their team's ranking with that of other teams.

Having started slow in 2004 and lying dormant in 2005, Fit Michigan is taking off now with participants throughout southwest Michigan and

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in various global locales. More than 1,800 persons participated in 2007. With program revisions for 2008, Sandelin expects even more Fit people this year.

And how meaningful are meaningful activities – whether dining, traveling and conversing with a community of friends or participating in an organized exercise program? Well, health, itself, is meaningful because, by being healthy, we can better take care of ourselves and enjoy the company of others, regardless of our stage in life.

SOURCES:

Comstock Community Center, (269) 345-8556; www.comstockcc.com; cceec@yahoo.com

Walking Together of Greater Kalamazoo, www.FitMI.org

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH/ALZHEIMERS

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COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

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NORTH BERRIEN SENIOR CENTER 6648 Ryno Rd. Coloma, MI 49038 (269) 468-3366 Visit our website at: www.NorthBerrienSeniorCenter.org

PORTAGE SENIOR CENTER 320 Library Lane (269) 329-4555 www.portagemi.gov/living Learning • Health • Fitness • Friendship • Opportunities • Enhance Your Life! See our ad on page 27.

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