

Flexicore Challenger: A report on an alternative approach to traditional exercise for the elderly and the recovering patient

Preface

Heavily ingrained in our culture is the need to achieve results. The athlete who goes through extraordinary sacrifices, pushing the body to extreme lengths, is rightly acclaimed for achievements in the Olympic world. For the elderly and the recovering patient this approach would clearly be absurd. Hence my suggestion in this report of everyday body movements, done easily with the emphasis on alert awareness of doing, of effortlessness and pleasure, is more appropriate for those of advanced years and with a history of health problems like myself. More can be achieved by coaxing than bullying the body, which for whatever reason has been punished enough.

For those recovering from illness and other forms of ill health the FlexiCore Challenger can provide an alternative approach to traditional exercise. It is a gentle introduction which could lead to more vigorous activity at a later time if satisfactory progress is maintained. This short report is not so much a record of targets aimed for or achieved, or levels of fitness attained: It shows how I approached the whole idea of fitness and exercise with the Challenger, and what might be accomplished by someone like me, eighty-five years of age, with a legacy of a low standard of fitness stemming from twenty-five years of chronic fatigue syndrome, let alone the deterioration which can come for most of us with age.

I'd had some prior experience of these types of machines, from a friend who owns a Vibrafit Gym. I had, on and off, experienced the beneficial effects that Whole Body Vibration Training equipment has in alleviating the effects of hip and knee joint problems, but no experience of what I called the "Wobble boards". (These were very popular among women interested in slimming hips and butts.) And this led me to my interest in the Challenger as a possible alternative. The first week was far from promising. I felt distinctly uncomfortable with this process. I'd looked at the exercises recommended, and viewable on online videos, explored the various options the Challenger provided, tried some of the exercises, and found the whole experience unsettling. I particularly disliked the modified press-ups practised by younger fitness enthusiasts, which seemed intent on shaking my head from my shoulders. Nonetheless I continued persevering with various exercises of short duration for about ten days.

Reviewing my experiences thus far, the thought entered my mind that the machine was, at least, mildly addictive. And it was that insight which brought about an epiphany. Over the years I have practiced the Feldenkrais Method on and off: "Awareness through Movement" with others, and on my own, using audio tapes and DVD's, as well as practicing Functional Integration with practitioners. The aim here is body awareness - that movement is life, its absence, death; that movement is essentially pleasurable, and life enhancing. What if I switched from a target of formal exercise to one of movement??

Thus I experimented with standing, varying my posture in subtle degrees, noting the changes in vibrations in my body as I shifted position. Progressed to twisting, turning, bending, reaching, all the movements one does as a matter of course during the day. The nearest I came to traditional exercises were gentle knee bends, careful here because of a weakness in my left knee, caused by a fall running along the beach many years before. And the last set before bed, gentle press-up positions (again caution here because of a fractured elbow several years ago, leaving me with two small plates in my right elbow). From three minutes a set, to four, then five minutes a set, two to three times daily, with a mild upper body set before retiring at night. The outcome so far after 2 months: these modest efforts have been totally worthwhile. My aim of improved flexibility, balance and fluidity of motion have been in large measure met in this short time.

Marilyn Brannan in her Book "Your Body in Mind" writes of a sixth sense. Not the commonly held one, but "a complex system of detectors built into the muscles and ligaments which provide the brain with information about every aspect of bodily function". Others have indicated it goes much further involving the skeletal structure and organs. It's this process which gives us our sense of aliveness and well-being, or its opposite, over-indulgence or illness. So seven weeks on: a friend gives me a lift down to our local library, 15 minutes away from home. Up till now I had been depending more and more on my car because of the discomfort of walking. I collect my reserved book. It's a beautifully sunny autumn day and I head back through the village. My body feels alive, I feel alive. No sign of the nagging knee problem. It's a pleasant walk back home. Do I have strength? No. Endurance? No. Am I Aerobically fit? No. But I'm moving. Pleasurably!

Many years ago I bought Stephen Huffaker's little book - "The I HATE to Exercise book." Five minutes is all it takes. I've now begun these six exercises daily as a counterpoint and yardstick against my daily Challenger sessions. (It's the reason I initially settled on five minutes for the Challenger". As Huffaker pointed out, not even the busiest person should have any excuses about finding time!) As my fitness improves, my intention is to gradually introduce Challenger exercises for endurance and strength. Aerobics will come from walking.

The Movements:

Note: This short series of exercises for use with the Challenger is designed for the unfit for whatever reason, whether as the consequence of ill health or simply as a result of advancing years. Both situations can make any decision to exercise a daunting one. These simple movements serve the dual purpose of not only gently conditioning the body to greater activity, but to also allow one to become comfortable with the Challenger process itself. They can be considered, if you like, as an overture to a more serious approach to the task of increased fitness through exercise.

Stand easily with feet shoulder-width apart. (Challenger level one, later two.) Observe the vibrations occurring up and down your body. Notice how the slightest changes in stance alter the position and strength of the vibrations. Explore this. Focus on the sensations as your body responds to the moving platform. Pay particular attention to your balance. If you have any concerns about this, ensure your Challenger is positioned adjacent to a wall so you can reach it for security. Now:

- Turn easily to the left (or right) as if to speak to someone. Turn no more than is natural to you. And return to centre. Do this several times (I usually choose three.)
- Repeat in the opposite direction.
- You should find that as you progress that the range of movement increases. As you gain in confidence and familiarity with this movement, you might wish to increase the turn as if to look backwards over your shoulder to look for something. N.B. *Be very careful here of balance.* Be conscious of your feet placed firmly on the ground as you turn. This is important and is an aid in the body's control of balance.
- In the centred position feet shoulder-width apart, look up ahead of you as though to look for a book on a high shelf. With your right arm, reach forward and upwards as though to collect it. Then bring it back down in your mind's eye, and in movement.
- Repeat this three times.
- Do this movement again three times to the left with the left arm. Three times to the right with the right arm. Always easily and effortlessly as in real life. Be vivid with your imagining.
- Once you have the hang of it, try this technique with other movements taken from real life, such as tying each of your shoelaces from a standing position. Do it several times: reaching down to pick up something with your hand from the floor. (Note: The floor, in your mind's eye, will be level with the height of the Challenger).
- Do this in the Centre. Then Left. Then Right.
- Knees: (This can be difficult for those with joint problems. So do no more than you can easily.) Semi-crouch down as if to lift a carton from the floor and bring the imaginary carton up so you are standing. Keep your back straight! Do this several times.
- The hula hoop! Small circling hip movements left, and then right.
- (This next one can't be anything but an exercise.) Hands on hips, bending sideways first left, then right. But do it lazily, easily. Think of a big yawn and stretch to aid the idea.
- Do this a number of times. Again you will find the range of movement increasing over time.
- As you will with this one, too: Sideways stretch. Standing with feet shoulder-width apart and leaning to the right, slowly slide your right hand down your leg, while your left hand moves up your left side.
- Slowly reverse the move to come back to standing upright.
- Do this several times. Repeat the other side. If you focus on the feel of your hands against your body, as though this was a sensual massage, this removes the tendency to do the movements automatically by rote.
- Evening: Press-ups. (N.B. *The head neck and shoulders with their elegant design of skeletal bone, muscles and tendons serve us well for the most part. And we need to keep it that way for our own comfort and safety.* So be vigilant, take care and observe with sensitivity your movements when doing what I loosely call the Press-Up sequence. It isn't really a press-up exercise at all, apart from the body position, and is designed to work on the head, neck joints, spine and muscles.

- Challenger Level one. Kneel on the floor close enough to the Challenger to place your hands comfortably on the surface at each end of the machine. For a moment just observe the vibrations as they course through your arms to your upper body.
- When you are comfortable, slowly lean forward to gradually assume the press-up position. Stay aware of the vibrations and keep your head in alignment with your spine. N.B. *Do not let the head droop.*
- Focus your eyes on an imaginary horizon. Press downwards to increase the vibrational force, then slowly move back to your starting position.
- Do these movements a number of times, staying alert to the vibrations and your bodily response.
- With this exercise, as with all others, the aim is a comfortable movement without strain or discomfort.
- At some point when you feel ready, at the full press-up position, slowly turn your head to the left as far as feels natural without strain, then back to the centre.
- Do this a number of times, and then repeat turning your head to the right.
- Finally, just once or twice, in the full press-up position, head in alignment as always, do a full head circle (rotating your head on your neck), once to the left, once to the right.
- Return to the prone position.
- One concluding movement. Move forward, so your forearms are resting across each end of the Challenger. Your hands will be hanging over the edge and your head will be in a position where you can see the power cord plug entry point on the side of the Challenger.
- Allow the machine to massage your arms for a short time, then gently look to the left, look to the right, do a small circular head movement, then return to a resting position.
- Do this twice. And that's it.

Once these few movements have been mastered you may like to improvise with variations, or try others which may occur to you. Experiment with increasing the speed of vibration. Ultimately it's possible that a standard of fitness may be achieved so as to make you eager to progress to a more formal exercise regimen. I stress once again it's important not to think of these as "exercises" but to fully imagine purposeful activity. In this way you mimic real life body movements. This is how we gradually gained strength and power from an early age: by progressing from attempting, to doing.

Exercise is fine for humans with specific aims in mind but no one ever saw any animal doing calisthenics, or running, unless running away to safety or towards some hapless prey. Your initial aim here is to improve balance, flexibility, and range of movement. Formal exercise can come later. Just carry out your movements with the full flight of your imagination and let the Challenger do its magic.

References: The exercises outlined above are *not* part of the Feldenkrais Method, but Feldenkrais Method provided the inspiration for the suggested routines. I would unreservedly recommend this form of body work to anyone who wishes to have a greater understanding of their body and for greater well being: The Feldenkrais Method. Look for "Awareness through Movement" classes in your area. My source of books, CD's and DVDs is at: thefeldenkraisstore.com

"Your Body in Mind - the Key to Health and Happiness through Body Sense Therapy" by Marilyn Brannin. 1982. Simple exercises and massage to deal with common aches and pains. Available from Abe Books, and others.

"The I Hate to Exercise Book" by Stephen Huffaker. 1968. Still available from Abe Books, and others.

Personal Notes:

My approach to the use of the FlexxiCore Challenger has been strongly influenced not only by the experiences of 25 years of Chronic Fatigue/ME but also the brilliant work of Moshe Feldenkrais and the Feldenkrais Method, hence my emphasis on approaching any activity as movement and not exercise.

For instance, I've found five minutes to be just right. Alternating between two and three sessions during the day and a final short session on the head neck etc before bed session also means I'm comfortably within the suggested guidelines of no more than a half an hour in daily use. And I've found the evening movements, simple as they are, do wonders for my body alignment and posture.