



“This wasn’t just a class that helped me with my pain, it helped me with my life!” Chronic Pain Self-Management Program participant

Every time a participant shares feedback like this, I am reminded just how valuable the evidence-based programs can be to improving “whole person” wellness. There are certain core elements, common across many of the evidence-based programs that truly help participants (and Leaders/Coaches) achieve this outcome. Three of the most important seem to be:

- 1) Knowledge based on reliable information, both situation/condition specific and general;
- 2) Skills/practices which are designed to be accessible to very diverse audiences (ranging from exercise routines, to communication to action planning, problem solving and decision-making;
- 3) Self-confidence about learning new things and achieving goals one sets for oneself;

“I live alone, and this was so helpful. My whole life has changed. I left this class filled with greater self-confidence.” Matter of Balance participant

This was brought home, front and center, to me when my son, my husband, and I recently, sequentially, had COVID-19.

My own experience of the virus, though difficult, was blessedly manageable. I had two main symptoms – extreme fatigue and extended awful bouts of coughing whenever I took more than the shallowest of breaths. It may sound strange, but once I realized that, making an action plan and setting an achievable goal was the first thing, and then the second thing, I did that really seemed to help. Here was my first plan: I will stay laying down in the bed, practicing pursed lips shallow breathing whenever I am awake (the only way I could avoid those horrendous coughing fits) except when I have to get up to go to the bathroom or sit up to eat for the next two days. I recommitted to a new plan for 5 days when after 2 days the breathing triggered cough was still very much present. While lying in the bed during the day, exhausted and so frustrated at the same time, I couldn’t seem to sleep. It took me two days to “think” of it, but when I remembered the Relaxation Body Scan exercise (Session Three, CDSMP) I used it as a way to focus and it worked while breathing shallowly. And it often put me back to sleep. I wish I had had the energy to get the CD running, but alas that was more than I could manage. I couldn’t even manage to ask my husband to set it up. (He was still well during my bout and made sure to get me to eat something every day). As I began to edge back to normal, I realized how stiff I had become from so much inactivity. I started with the gentlest Matter of Balance exercises in the bed (like the ankle and wrist work!) and moved up to the chair work when I felt a little better.

“I am 94 years old and I benefit so much from the diaphragmatic breathing. I rarely have a breathing episode now, even while walking,” Chronic Disease Self-Management participant

The instant I regained energy and my normal breathing came back, about 5-6 days into those two symptoms, the virus hit my 77-year-old husband like a ton of bricks. He became too weak to walk, too tired to do anything for himself, and needing his oxygen all the time (typically he just uses it at night for sleep apnea). Everything I ever facilitated in the self-management programs and Matter of Balance was called into play at some point over the next 3-4 weeks:

Action Planning and Decision Making: from how to use a walker to how to get up from fall (yes, my son and I used the Matter of Balance approach with him safely rather than needing the EMTs); from how to prioritize which tasks to complete (getting healthy food together for 6-8 small meals a day that were his favorites) and which, mostly, to let mostly go (all but the most basic housekeeping). Completing a daily “gratitude review” (another Action Plan) certainly helped to take my mind off my troubles, whether when I was so or when every waking moment seemed to be about one aspect or another of caregiving.

Problem Solving: how to get an oximeter when there were none (yes, 0) available from any retail source; How to get past the triage personnel to set up an emergency telehealth appointment for what appeared to me to be an urgent need to adjust medication (turned out I was right, when his blood pressure was 89/50 for several consecutive readings, his blood pressure medication need to be changed).

I did not become a slave to using the skills and ways of thinking that I learned and then facilitated as a Master Trainer, Coach, and Leader. It did not become an obsession with me. It just began to come naturally to use them as a first response when a few early on techniques worked so beautifully during this most difficult and scary time of self-care and caregiving.

We are all three doing well – My husband and son seem to still have a few carryover issues, months afterward but nothing serious. I seem to have no lingering effects. But I do have one significant outcome. More than ever, I believe that the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence that people gain in the evidence-based health promotion programs can be very broadly and effectively applied to all kinds of life situations. I’ve heard that from participants for years, but now, to my core, I know it to be true.

“This course caused me to pause and take inventory of my life...and I can now face crises without allowing pain to consume my emotions and daily activities.” Chronic Pain Self-Management Program participant

All the good work being done in the evidence-based space has impact far beyond the condition or the situation being addressed in the moment. Breathe in, breathe out, celebrate and keep going. That’s my new mantra.

“It’s not just fall prevention, we learned good advice for everyday living.” Matter of Balance participant