

Balance, A Life Skill

By: Patricia Tremblay, BS, NSCA-CPT
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Balance is a necessary part of daily life. Think about all the things you need that require balance. We have to balance our personal and professional lives, balance the checkbook, balance the in-laws and parents, balance work and play, balance ourselves with shopping bags while holding onto the child and when we grow older simply balance ourselves stepping off a curb. Balance is a Yin-Yang kind of thing. What is this Yin Yang? Well, depending on who you talk

to it's generally thought of in terms of Qi which can be defined as "the energy produced when complimentary, polar opposites are harmonized." When opposites are unified, mind and body, conscious and subconscious the end result is vital energy also known as Qi. An electrical current also requires a positive (yang) and negative (yin) pole to supply a steady supply of energy. Qi requires the same balance between positive (yang) and negative (yin). Okay that's my Chinese lesson of the day, week and year.

To put this in simple terms think of balance like an ice cream cone, if I pile too many scoops of heavy ice cream on top of a cone designed to hold 2 scoops, the whole thing will topple over and I'll be left holding an empty, broken cone not to mention a big mess on the floor! Sometimes life feels like a three ring circus act. In one ring we are juggling work, family and play, in the other we are walking the tightrope of finances and in the third ring we are tempting fate by risking our health by closing our eyes and sticking our heads into a hungry lion!

My point that I admit is filled with analogies that are weakly woven together is that balance is not something we should leave to chance. This is especially true when it comes to our physical health. Did you know that falls are the leading cause of accidental death among older adults over the age of 65? The falls that are non fatal often lead to fractures which in turn result in loss of confidence, reduced activity levels and ultimately an altered lifestyle leaving the poor soul watching endless hours of The Price is Right in reruns. When someone tells you they can't walk and talk at the same time they might not be joking. Research has studied this very phenomenon, in what is titled the "dual-task" method. This study required people to perform multiple tasks simultaneously while maintaining postural control (which means not falling over). This study demonstrated that

postural stability (staying upright and not laying on the floor) was reduced when the subjects had to perform two or more tasks concurrently.

What this all means is that most of us are fine when we are standing still or performing one task at a time, but throw in some extra stuff and WHOMP...we are down on the ground faster than a bad boxer. For example, stand on a step stool reach overhead with one hand while simultaneously reaching across your body...how stable do you think you will be? Please don't try this at home or if you do make the step stool 3 inches high with pillows around it. In fitness one of the components that are often overlooked in many training programs is balance. I guarantee you if your exercise program consists of hauling your behind from one machine to the next, you have not challenged your balance unless of course you count having to stand up and walk from seated machine to seated machine. Please bear with me for a minute while I explain balance in scientific terms.

Neuromuscular efficiency is what allows a person to maintain their balance in functional movement patterns, which could be daily tasks or an athletic task. Balance is not a static activity but in actuality is an integrated and dynamic process that requires our nervous system to remain in constant communication with our muscular system. In simple terms balance is this ability of the body to maintain its center of gravity over a base of support. This ability is accomplished through the complex interaction of the Kinetic Chain (which is comprised of our muscular, articular and neural systems), and our environment. When everyone is working together as a team, our Kinetic Chain gets along really well with our environment. For example, if my "chain" is fine-tuned then walking on a bumpy trail and talking incessantly is performed with barely a thought of falling into a ravine. But if my "chain" is weak, then I must pray that the ravine is near a highway so they will be able to find my limp body at the side of the road. Yes...maybe that's a bit extreme but I hope you get the picture, ugly as it is.

Okay so now how do you train the chain! This is where the machine road dead ends and the highway to functional fitness begins. Here are three simple exercises you can start with for training balance.

Exercise #1: Single leg balance (Easy)

Stand on one leg, knees slightly flexed. Do not lock your knee, that's cheating and it also stresses the knee joint and your low back. For kicks...close your eyes.

Exercise #2: Single leg balance with directional changes (Harder)

Stand on one leg and with the lifted leg point your foot to 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock and 2 o'clock.

Exercise #3: Single leg balance with opposite arm/leg reach (Fall on your butt hard)

Stand on one leg, reach forward with the opposite arm while simultaneously reaching backwards with your free leg. If this gets easy then try switching arms reach right then left and of course you have to alternate the free standing leg.

Have Fun, and remember when we lose balance in our lives we often find ourselves laying face down on the cold hard surface of life whimpering for some ice-cream.

Patricia Tremblay is a NSCA certified personal trainer and owns Physiques By PT, a personal training company specializing in on site fitness programs



Voodoo board balance



Single leg reach with cable



Single leg reach finish position



Standing on a Swiss Ball a circus trick!