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Maximizing Physical Potential Without Pain

by Christine Tarlecki



As a child, Catherine Luchini Gerson, PT, was very physically active.

“I have always enjoyed exercise and was brought up in an active, health-oriented household. I competed locally and statewide in the areas of tennis and swimming,” she explains. “From a personal perspective, I appreciated a healthy, functioning body, and realized I was fortunate to have the family and environment that allowed me to develop myself physically from an early age. I have dedicated myself to helping those — especially children — with physical pain and disorders.”

Gerson began her own small private practice, Healthy Bodies, out of her home office in Waban, MA. The purpose of her practice is "to take care of your body from the inside out, because a healthy body enables the mind to stay strong and focused." She says her programs allow one to achieve harmony between the body and the mind. "Through individualized physical therapy programs, we teach proper body mechanics, which allow you to maximize physical potential without pain. I utilize modalities of water therapy, massage and therapeutic exercise and focus primarily on clients with musculoskeletal disorders. In addition, I am a pediatric physical therapist working with young children in the public school systems. This school year, my focus is in the Cambridge Public Schools, working with preschool-age children."

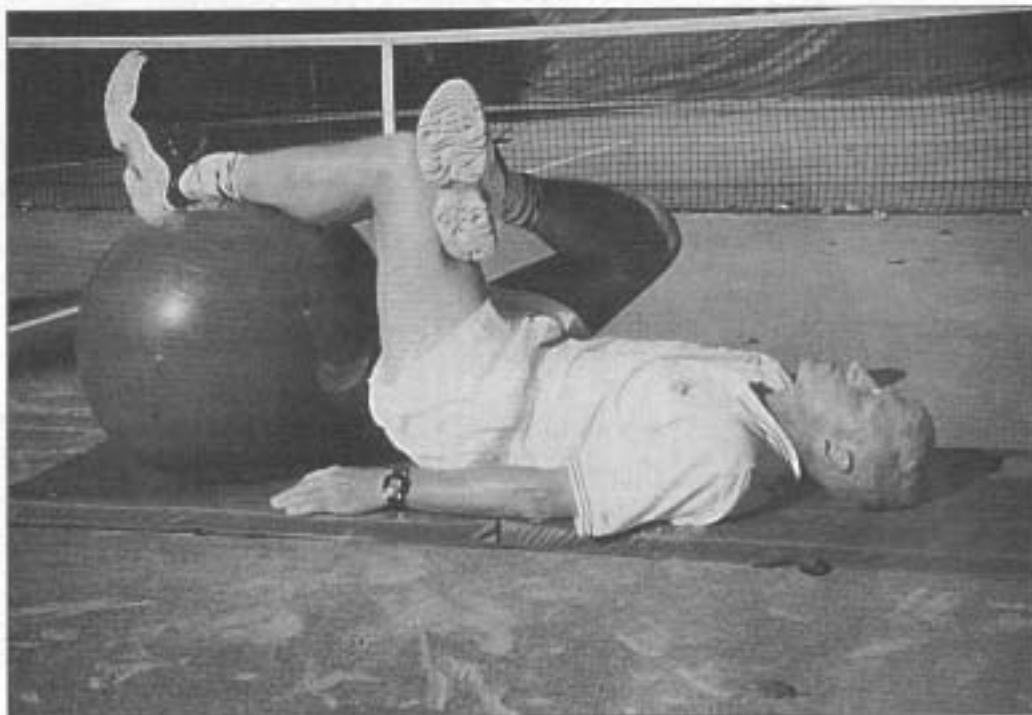
Gerson's day-to-day responsibilities as a PT with the school population include screening and evaluating young children ages three to five, using standardized diagnostic tests. "These are children from Head Start early intervention programs, as well as in community preschools and hospitals, who have been identified as having gross motor or developmental delays, with specific diagnoses," she says.

"I also design treatment programs and activities for preschool classrooms and integrate physical therapy into the child's daily school activities. I am a team member for the educational plan each child has in the school system. The team consists of an occupational therapist, speech therapist, psychologist, educator and behaviorist. Home programming is also included in this plan so that the parents can be involved."

So that others can also help the students reach their potential, Gerson trains teachers, aides, parents and physical therapy students. "We prepare for the basis of posture, gross motor development and the adaptations (environmental) that are required to encourage maximum developmental progression in each child."

Her greatest challenges lie in treating pediatric patients. "I believe in educating parents and teachers about the value of and necessity for daily gross motor activities beginning at birth, to

and improving their athletic performance. I am continually seeking the most effective and simple methods for helping them. Many do not have the luxury of a health club membership to meet their needs. I focus on improving posture and gait, exercising specific muscle groups that are weak and joints that are tight. I help them identify their sources of pain and focus on the causes — and [I] avoid treating only the symptoms with temporary remedies, i.e., using prescriptive drugs, rather than working on improving their sedentary lifestyle."



Tennis pro Ron Perry uses an exercise ball on the court for stretching to improve his game.

enable each child to progress and reach his maximal development. My belief is that with improved gross motor skills also comes greater self-esteem and smoother integration of the other areas of development, i.e., language and fine motor."

In private practice, Gerson tries to help her patients make lifestyle changes that will benefit their health and well-being. "I am committed to working with adults who enjoy sports and are seeking an effective means for preventing injury, maintaining health,

Gerson considers a reassuring 'bedside manner' indispensable to getting patients to change their habits or to participate in their therapy. "In order to be successful, a PT must have the technical skills to diagnose a complaint and orchestrate and execute a corrective plan. That is the technical aspect of my work. But there is another vital component, and that is the emotional care of the client," she explains. "A young child who has developmental issues is most often already concerned about her situation and a bit fearful. As much as the technical prescription for

the child, a warm and nurturing emotional climate between the PT and the patient will do wonders for the effectiveness of whatever remedy is being pursued. Likewise, the parents of such a child are often distraught as well. They can be confused, frightened, unsure of what to do — and even feeling a sense of guilt. My time with them is built on this understanding and is always characterized by careful listening, simple, understandable explanations and a healthy dose of empathy."

Gerson realizes that taking the time to create nurturing relationships with her patients is, in a sense, swimming against the tide of contemporary healthcare.

"Therapists are required to streamline their programs and maximize their effectiveness due to the healthcare insurance restrictions placed upon them. They must become better educators to the layperson and teach the benefits of wellness and necessary lifestyle changes to their patients. Otherwise, their patients will not make the progress needed when the insurance is exhausted," she states.

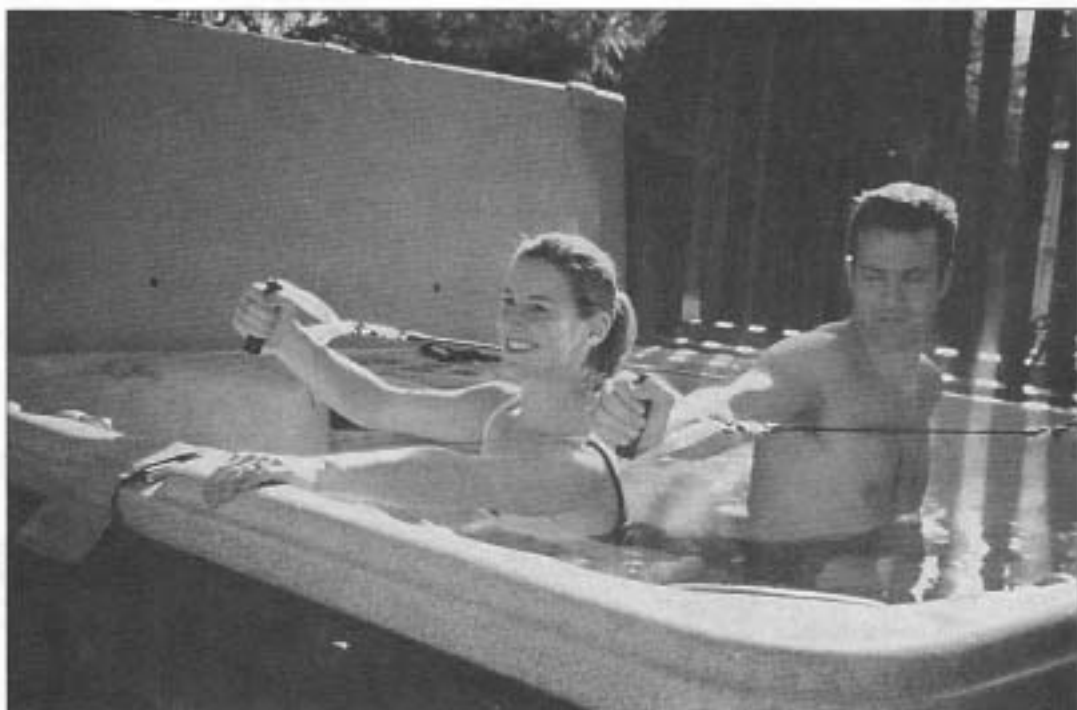
One of her biggest concerns is insurance coverage cutbacks. Physical therapists now have less time for comprehensive treatments and wrestle with more paperwork. "Physical therapy, as a profession, is for the first time being cited as being one of the 'most stressed career fields' to pursue. This does not shine a positive light on our profession," she observes. "When you think about the lifestyle and mantra of a PT as one of wholeness and integrated body and mind, it is incongruent

that PTs should be feeling emotionally and mentally stressed [by trying] to do their jobs correctly. Perhaps the current shortage in our profession is due to this situation. Stress and physical therapy do not belong together on the same line."

Gerson does what she can to decrease stress in others, though. In June of last year, she gave a lunchtime talk to 200 members of an ITTC, a data-processing group. "I

tation. The visuals were informative and necessary to accurately determine the appropriate treatment approach. PT as a profession has come a long way," she says.

"PTs are seeking specializations in their field. Fortunately, a PT who is a generalist has the basis for sound treatment approaches, but will benefit from a specialization and continuing education courses. It is mandatory for PTs to constantly seek education in order to con-



Resistance cords and aquatic therapy assist a couple in improving muscle strength during an exercise session.

taught them how to stretch with a stretch band at their desks and in the office. It was fun and brought forth lots of laughter and encouragement to those who had not tried to stretch a muscle in years!" she recalls.

Always on the lookout to continue her own education, Gerson takes a variety of courses and seminars. "I recently took a course on gait analysis. The lab was built for \$1 million at USC. A patient's gait is now being analyzed in this lab by computer graphics, with highly refined electronic analyses and therapeutic interpre-

tion to be current with health issues and treatment approaches."

Gerson sometimes adapts older equipment to new patient populations. The therapy ball (Swiss Ball) was developed in the 1970s in Switzerland for children with cerebral palsy. Gerson uses it to treat orthopedic and neurological patients of all ages. "I like showing people how to use the ball. As people age, they lose their balance reactions and they don't shift their weight from side to side or front to back as easily, especially if they have a weak joint or a weak knee. They can lose coordination. By

doing some of these exercises on the ball, they contract muscle groups that they would not ever have to use."

An avid golfer, Gerson is certified in Body Balance and Performance, a golf-specific fitness training and therapeutic treatment program to reduce injuries and improve swing performance. She gives seminars on proper golf techniques and injury prevention. "I became interested in developing educational materials for active people who enjoy the game of golf, since I also play golf. In 2000, I produced an exercise video and a booklet as an educational aid for therapists, golfers, physicians, PGA and LPGA pros. The video, *Prepare Your Body for a Round of Stress-Free Golf*, is a 35-minute program that offers simple and practical exercises for golfers for the prevention and rehabilitation of injuries. It is my desire to market this product to individuals and other physical therapists as well as [offer it] as an educational aid for my private patients," she says. "Most recently, I exhibited at the Boston Golf Expo and gave exercise demonstrations with Elaine Crosby, LPGA tour pro, on 'Taking Advantage of Your Off-Season' at the Bayside Expo." Gerson has also conducted seminars for skiers on "Tips and Techniques for Injury Prevention on the Ski Slopes" of the Stratton Mountain Ski Resort in Vermont.

Having produced so much educational material and having spent so much time giving presentations, Gerson's

next logical step was to do public relations work to promote physical therapy. "I have spent time educating the public about sports injuries and lifestyle changes which enhance their enjoyment for their activities. This has included giving workshops and lectures as well as being on radio representing myself as a physical therapist with knowledge about

ment or serious athletes, Gerson strives to help each one to be their best. "Physical therapy is about reaching out to everyone, helping everyone reach and stretch and realize they can achieve their physical and personal goals," she concludes.

Catherine Luchini Gerson received her B.S. in Physical Therapy from



A golfer participates in the video production of Prepare Your Body for a Round of Stress-Free Golf, a training video for golfers, therapists and patients.

exercises and proper body mechanics for the golf course, tennis court and workplace.

A championship tennis player in her own right, she is also marketing and selling a new tennis racket called Power Angle, designed with strings of equal length, strung diagonally, to absorb the shock of the ball and protect elbows, wrists and hands from repetitive-stress injuries such as tennis elbow.

Whether her patients are children needing extra help in their develop-

Ohio State University in 1969. She became certified in Body Balance for Golf Performance in 1999. She began her career more than 20 years ago in the field of pediatric orthopedics, treating children with severe neuromuscular disabilities. Membership affiliations include the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), New England Women's Business Owners (NEWBO), and Executive Women's Golf Association (EWGA.)

Christine Tarlecki is the editor of NEWS-Line for Physical Therapists and PT Assistants.