Practicing physical therapy with a loved one

Pick a task you expect to help with at home. Watch the therapist demonstrate it, then ask to practice your part while the therapist watches both of you.

An active adult may be used to walking, exercising and managing household tasks independently. A sports injury can change those routines overnight, including how much help is needed getting into a chair or walking outdoors.

A hip injury can affect both balance and movement. Someone who did not expect to need help may find that pain or movement restrictions make familiar tasks difficult. Ask the therapist which movements to practice and what support to use.

Physical therapy may involve many sessions and practice between visits. A caregiver can help by tracking what is getting easier, listening when progress is frustrating and checking technique with the therapist before offering hands-on assistance.

When you're a caregiver, it's important to keep things in perspective. Bouncing back from surgery or illness can take longer than you expect. Try to think of your loved one's rehab as a marathon, not a sprint.

Expect Ups and Downs

The person you're caring for may make huge strides one day and slide backward the next. That's normal. Don't worry if a sudden burst of recovery is followed by a standstill. It's fine as long as there's an overall upward slope.

If progress stalls or an activity becomes harder over time, give the treating clinician a concrete example. Explain what the person could do earlier, what assistance is needed now and when the change began.

Set Realistic Goals

Base your expectations for his ability to move on how well he got around before his surgery or illness.

Choose a goal that reflects function before the injury. Walking a short distance safely with a walker and walking several hundred feet independently are different starting points. Agree on a measure that fits the person.

A therapist may recommend a cane, crutches or a walker as strength and balance return. Ask which aid is appropriate for this stage and how it should be fitted.

It can be difficult to accept a walking aid. Let the therapist explain how the recommended device changes stability and demonstrate how to use it safely before trying it at home.

Expect progress to unfold in stages. During the first phase, for example, crutches may help your loved one feel comfortable as he builds up strength. Then he'll move to the next stage, which may be walking on his own.

Independence is a positive, realistic target to shoot for. The more he can do himself, the better.

Celebrate Small Victories

Even a tiny improvement is something to cheer about. In the beginning, it can be as simple as sitting up in bed. It's the first step toward getting around more freely.

Walking around the neighborhood was a meaningful milestone in the original example. Ask which short trip would feel like a milestone to your loved one and what help they would need for it.

Each small step is a sign of progress. Celebrate each one in all its glory. Give your loved one a hug or a high-five when he passes some key milestones:

- Dresses himself for the first time
- Showers by himself
- Walks up steps
- Strolls outside
- Drives a car

Be Understanding

Recovery can take an emotional toll as well as a physical one. Some days a caregiver's most useful role is to listen. Ask what kind of help the person wants before offering it.

A change from independence to needing help can be frustrating. Give the person time to express that frustration. Discuss persistent low mood, anxiety or discouragement with the care team.

Help, but Not Too Much

Encouraging independence means allowing the person to practice the parts that are safe. Ask the therapist where to assist, how much support to give and what should wait for staff.

Do not try to lift or transfer a person beyond your training. Have the therapist demonstrate the task, then watch you practice your part with the equipment you expect to use at home.

Reassure your loved one that recovery takes time and remind him how far he's come. When he says, "I wish I didn't need help just to walk to the end of the driveway," tell him, "But a week ago, you couldn't even walk out your front door."

At your next therapy visit, ask the therapist to show both of you how to practice one activity safely. Agree on when to stop, who will assist and how to report a setback.

Talk with Lakeview

For questions about a possible stay, call Lakeview Admissions at (262) 534-8509. During a stay, ask the bedside nurse who can help with your question.

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