

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Laurie Roles, center, goes through an exercise with Melissa Jones, left, and Lois Friese during her Monday morning functional fitness class at the Truro Community Center. Laurie suggests spending some time each day standing on one leg, then switching, like when you're washing dishes. This will help improve balance.



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FUNCTIONAL FITNESS

Accessible, adaptable, affordable

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

The large, light-filled room in Truro's new community center is humming with activity as a group of women work their way around a circuit, each spending one or two minutes per station.

There's the balance disc, a soft circular cushion with raised nubs that employs core strength to improve balance and joint stability. A cloth-and-rope ladder stretched along the floor offers a hop-skip-jump course that tests agility in a manner reminiscent of hopscotch.

One woman flips a tubeless car tire over and over across the floor, squatting with a straight back, the correct posture for lifting a heavy object from

the floor. Another throws a medicine ball behind her head, working her "lats" (latissimus dorsi), the large back muscles that play a major role in shoulder mobility and back strength and can underlie significant pain in those areas when weak. There are hand weights to hold like suitcase handles while doing lunges across the room and plastic cones set up as an obstacle course to challenge agility. There are several "core" stations, including one equipped with a soccer-size ball centered on a bar that ensures correct

posture and positioning as you use it to twist from the abdomen rather than from the hips, knees or legs. At

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another, a medicine ball on a rope can be swung overhead. There's even a hula hoop. Keeping it spinning between waist and hips requires core strength ... who knew?

"Use it or lose it," or so the expression goes. But Laurie Roles believes it's possible to get it – fitness – even if you never had it, regardless of your age and physical condition.

"I start with whatever someone's ability is and then work from there," she says. Poor balance and the related

lack of core strength can be improved, she explains, and they are the main targets of functional fitness for older adults. "Functional fitness is daily-life-specific. We need balance and core strength for going up and down stairs, sitting down and getting up from a chair, reaching, lifting, bending down."

Laurie's classes emphasize strength, cardiovascular endurance, flexibility and balance. "The more conditioned you are, the less likely you are to have an injury."

Laurie's adult functional fitness class meets from 9 to 10 a.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at the Truro Community Center. (In summer, classes meet Mondays only.) "I call it

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a comprehensive full-body, full-mind workout," she says. There's no membership fee, and one need not be a Truro resident. Classes cost \$12; a \$60 six-class punch card drops it down to \$10. It's all part of her crusade to make exercise affordable, accessible and adaptable.

The "regulars" range in age but tend to be middle-aged and older. Men are welcome, but as is often the case, they're a rare sight in exercise classes. Some members are in better shape than others; some have health conditions that benefit from activity but require modification. For example, one has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, often referred to as COPD, which makes her short of breath. Others have knee problems or arthritis, which limit movement to a degree.

Laurie takes care to suggest alternatives while, at the same time, keeping the workout challenging at whatever level each person can achieve. Fit as I am, I was sweating and my heart was thumping by the end of the class I attended.

According to the Laurie's website, "The beauty of circuit training is that it is adaptable to all fitness levels, with endless possibilities for variety." The circuit allows Laurie to individualize each activity. "It affords me the opportunity to fine-tune them a little bit. For them, it's like having a personal trainer for a couple of minutes."

Periodically, she'll call a halt to the circuit work for a minute or two of straight cardio, to get everyone's heart rate up. It might be as simple as a low-impact foot shuffle or more taxing jumping jacks, which really quicken the heart-beat because they involve moving both the upper and lower body. This "interval training" relies on alternating bursts of intense activity with less-intense periods. Varying intensity expends more calories because it shakes up the metabolism and increases aerobic capacity.

"Studies now show that you burn more fat doing 20 minutes with your heart rate going up and down

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Truro Community Center
7 Standish Way
North Truro, MA 02652
508-487-1632

between 65 and 85 percent of your maximum heart rate than a full 20 minutes at 85," Laurie explains.

Your heart rate is the number of times per minute your heart contracts. As a rule of thumb, your maximum heart rate (MHR) is 220 minus your age. During cardio training an exerciser would set a target rate between 65 and 85 percent of his or her maximum heart rate.

So, for example, if you're 70 years old, your MHR would be 150 and you should aim for between 97 and 127 beats per minute while you are working out.

You can check your heart rate by holding your index and middle fingers against the side of your neck where your pulse is easy to feel. Count beats for 15 seconds, then multiply by 4. Do not use your thumb, which has its own pulse. Or do the "talk test" recom-

mended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: "As a rule of thumb, if you're doing moderate-intensity activity you can talk, but not sing, during the activity. If you're doing vigorous-intensity activity, you will not be able to say more than a few words without pausing for a breath."

Laurie keeps the intense intervals short because, she says, "I think if I started this class with 20 minutes of cardio, a lot of people wouldn't come back. It's much easier to do multiple intervals of a minute and a half. You

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Laurie Roles, Instructor

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know it's going to be over soon."

"Many people in the class have health issues, so I try to make it really adaptable," Laurie says. For example, she advises the class member with the pulmonary disease to move either the top or the lower part of her body at one time, not both, to decrease stress on her limited lung capacity. Another member who has difficulty getting down on a mat does "floor" exercises sitting in a chair. Push-ups can be done standing at a slant with outstretched arms against the wall. It's easier on the shoulders but still gives the arms, calves and pectoral muscles a workout by using body weight as resistance.

The balance disc is located near a wall so the user can try standing on two legs or one, with or without touching the wall.

Laurie urges everyone to practice one-leg standing at home for a few minutes each day, while washing the dishes, for example. The sink or kitchen counter is there to lean on

if necessary. Over time, she says, the combination of class work and home-work will result in better balance.

"The beauty of functional fitness is you don't need a lot of special equipment. You can use some hand weights, a stability ball, resistance bands or nothing at all. You can use your own body weight, sit down and get up from a chair, climb stairs," she says.

Passionate about fitness for all ages, the 42-year-old Connecticut native has a fistful of certifications, including as a trainer in youth as well as senior fitness and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. She served as assistant director of the Provincetown Recreation Department and worked in the town's schools.

In addition to her classes for adults and children, she's available as a personal trainer. One of the services she offers is to come to a client's home and, working within the client's budget, set up a workout routine with affordable equipment, then follow up periodically to monitor progress, maintain motivation and fine-tune technique.

Laurie has lived in Provincetown for 13 years. She vacationed there as a

child and returned for one summer to try her hand at writing.

"I ended up just staying," she says. She writes essays and is working on a play but uses exercise to work off what she calls excess energy.

The community center boasts a children's playground called Puma Park. Weather permitting, Laurie takes the class outside, where they use the benches, low walls, monkey bars and other equipment for stretches, stepping and sitting exercises but also for the fresh air and sunshine.

"I feel so much better working outdoors," she says. "You get your daily dose of vitamin D, plus it's an unstable environment, so it puts a challenge into your workout." She also values the serenity, which aids stress management, something we all need.

Toward the end of class, Laurie has everyone stand in a circle to toss around a "reaction ball," a fist-sized hard rubber ball dotted with curved surfaces. Bounced on the floor, it veers off in random directions so no one knows where it will end up. Whoever it heads for has to quickly jump forward or back, reach or bend to catch it. It's fun, and everyone is laughing

but supportive. They're testing their balance, agility and reaction time but with a playful spirit that's the essence of Laurie's approach to fitness. Clearly that mood is contagious, because class members keep coming back for more.

"I love that they show up for every class. I like that I can adapt and change things for them. Instead of focusing on what they can't do, I say: 'You can do this.'"

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty-nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.