

Senior Skiers and the Fear Factor

By Elissa Slanger, Ph.D.

It is no secret that as we age our bodies become less efficient machines. Muscles weaken, reflexes slow, eyesight and hearing become less acute, and overall flexibility decreases. Hopefully, we will at the same time have gained compensating personal attributes- the wisdom that comes from experience, a greater measure of emotional stability, more balanced judgment. Were we still living a primitive tribal existence, at this point in our lives we would no longer be counted on to wage the battles, hunt the predators, do the heavy work. As the elders, we would have an honored and important place in our tribe. In our present society, however, the personal characteristics that are most admired are those associated with youth: Vitality, strength, a youthful appearance. In addition to the ambiguity of our place in modern society, there is the ambiguousness of our own expectations. With the increase in life span and improvements in preventive medicine and health care, in today's world, thankfully, we are still capable of physical activity and exertions far past the age when we have reached our physical prime. As we age, we are no longer willing to give up the pleasures of physical activity, nor should we be. However, it is difficult for us to maintain a clear perspective on just how much we can do. We do not have much in the way of role models. Our bodies and capabilities are constantly changing. We no longer have the same confidence in our physical ability. To feel apprehensive under such circumstances is not only understandable, it is to be expected. An individual experiences more apprehension the less confidence he has in his ability to perform successfully. When we find ourselves physically unable to do something we had no problem with before, when we are slower to react, when we can not rectify a mistake with the same alacrity, when we take longer to recover from an injury, we lose a clear sense of our capabilities and limitations. We lose confidences and thus we become apprehensive.

So how do we deal with this – with this loss of confidence and the resultant anxiety and fear? We can succumb and either give up altogether (possibly making excuses that help us save face), or perform at a level far below our actual capabilities; we can deny that any of this is happening and put up a brave but reckless front, truly endangering ourselves; or we can be realistic, see the situation for what it is and deal with it. We can learn our capabilities and limitations, set realistic goals, and rebuild confidence. We can learn new and different ways to do things and refine skills rather than relying on an ever declining strength.

One of the biggest obstacles to dealing with the limitations imposed by aging is our self esteem – our ego. If we believe that admitting we are not as strong, that we are less physically capable, that we are apprehensive is equal to admitting we are less of a person, then we are apt to deal with the realities of the situation far less effectively. There is no shame in being an older skier. As a matter of fact, there is much to be proud of. By involving ourselves in such a vigorous sport, we have placed ourselves within a minority of those in our age group. We are making a statement about what is possible for people our age. We are acting as role models.

To sum up: It is to be expected that as we get older, our confidence in our physical abilities will decrease and, quite likely, our anxiety and fear will increase. An instinct for self-preservation, after all, is natural and healthy. How we deal with this, then, is up to us. The most constructive way is to rebuild confidence by setting attainable goals and finding ways to perform that require less brute strength, relying more on skill and finesse.

With the right attitude we can enjoy a long skiing life and many happy turns.