

Swissklip

Toenail Clippers For Seniors.

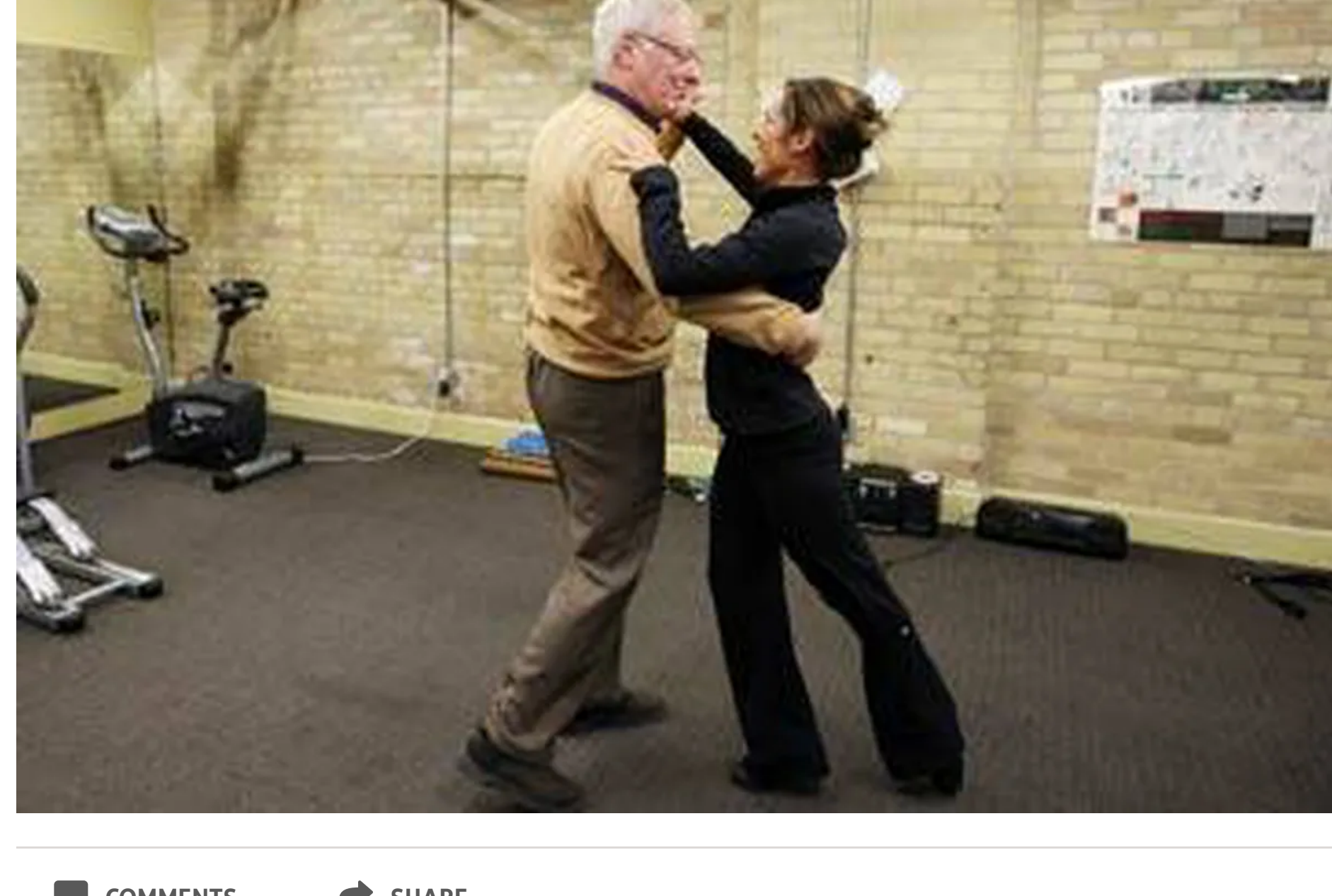
New extra wide jaw nail clipper cuts even the thickest toenails comfortably.

Open

Getting his groove back

SARAH HAMPSON >
PUBLISHED MARCH 3, 2008

This article was published more than 14 years ago. Some information may no longer be current.



COMMENTS SHARE

When Andy Barrie met Sarah Robichaud in the spring last year, the CBC Radio personality had not yet gone public with his Parkinson's disease. He and his wife, Mary, had moved into a downtown Toronto loft, and he had inquired if there was a personal trainer who worked in the building's gym.

"I am totally pathetic at exercise," says the 63-year-old journalist with a laugh. But he had been told that some physical therapy would help with the progressive neurodegenerative disease that presents a variety of symptoms, but most commonly affects mobility.

Ms. Robichaud's name was suggested.

They set up an appointment to meet in the gym a few days later. He asked if she knew very much about the disease. She said she was aware that actor Michael J. Fox has it; that Muhammad Ali does as well. But that was all. Mr. Barrie then handed her some books on the subject.

"I started researching," she says. A former dancer and choreographer, Ms. Robichaud suggested regular exercises to help with core stability and overall muscle strengthening, but soon introduced Mr. Barrie to ballroom dancing - everything from the tango to the waltz - in an effort to increase the fluidity of his movement.

At first, he was skeptical.

Ms. Robichaud, however, is not a person who is easily discouraged. Determined to find out more about how to help her client, and why dancing is beneficial, she travelled to New York to attend a workshop at the Mark Morris Dance Group in which trained dancers develop customized routines for patients with Parkinson's.

"It was the most moving weekend of my life," she says, noting the happiness of the participants, some of whom used walkers. "Dance is about joy and emotions. It's social. This is a disease that can make you feel undignified and often causes people to stay indoors."

Mr. Barrie acquiesced to her enthusiasm. Now, he is a passionate convert. His weekly one-hour dance therapy sessions with Ms. Robichaud are the "only time I am unaware of my Parkinson's limitations."

In addition to her work with individual clients, Ms. Robichaud is starting a free weekly dance session in Toronto for Parkinson's patients. "This is my chance to give back," says the 32-year-old mother of one. "It's charity. I've always wanted to help people, and I'm realizing more and more that there is a real need for this."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

Get Your Free Assessment.

LEARN MORE

BELLYWOOD CLINIC CANADA

This is a story of transformation - for Ms. Robichaud and her career, for Mr. Barrie's acceptance of the disease, and for many neurologists who have come away from Ms. Robichaud's presentations with new insights about how to help their Parkinson's patients.

"It is a revelation," says Keith Meloff, a neurologist at Toronto's Baycrest centre, who watched Ms. Robichaud discuss the merits of dance therapy and show clips of sessions at an international video-teleconference in Toronto last week. "There's almost a transcendence that comes over these [patients] and they become startled and surprised by their capacities that she releases through dance and music. There is more going on here than merely entertainment," Dr. Meloff says. "Not all solutions to Parkinson's reside in a bottle of pills."

Parkinson's affects about 100,000 people in Canada, according to Parkinson Society Canada. But that number is only an estimate as the disease, which is caused by a decline in dopamine, a chemical that carries signals between the nerves in the brain, is notoriously difficult to diagnose. Tremors, lack of balance, fatigue, stiffness, freezing (or difficulty initiating movement), depression, slowness of speech, constipation and handwriting problems are some of the effects, but there is no test for the disease, and each patient can exhibit different combinations of the symptoms, which can come and go.

Mr. Barrie says he was in denial for a long time. "For me, at this stage, the main problem is just walking. I do what is called the Parkinson's shuffle, taking shorter steps than I used to. And my writing was getting scribbled. But I was going to work. I was functioning. If I couldn't walk as fast, I thought, 'Well, that's okay.' People probably thought I had a back problem."

Tiffany Chow, a neurologist at Baycrest who has worked closely with Ms. Robichaud, explains that Parkinson's "makes you feel like you have fallen into a vat of slippery mud. You're falling slowly. You can't go anywhere fast. You have difficulty initiating movement. There's a sense that you are going faster than your body."

Dancing to music helps Parkinson's patients on several levels, "getting movement going through the back door of the brain," Dr. Chow explains. There are several triggers that can initiate movement and bypass the pathways in the brain affected by the lack of dopamine, she explains.

The emotional memory of music can help. Ms. Robichaud also uses images, asking patients to grab an imaginary butterfly rather than simply commanding them to raise their arms. The mirroring effect of dancing with a partner allows for easier movement. So does rhythm.

Mr. Barrie often counts out military-like rhythms silently to himself when he is walking to facilitate smooth movement. "Sometimes I sing *O Canada* to myself," he says jovially. "That helps. It has a perfect rhythm," he offers as he sings a few bars to demonstrate.

Doctors are aware that exercise can help, but as Dr. Meloff says, "particularly in the case of neurologists, they are so overwhelmed with the basic medical needs [of Parkinson's patients] the complications of their medications and other issues, that they rarely have time to consider what goes on in their outside lives." A suitable recreational activity is often difficult for many patients to find because they are afraid of falling. Gyms can be intimidating for the elderly.

But none of this enthusiasm for Parkinson's dance therapy would be present without Ms. Robichaud, many of the neurologists say. Her free community-outreach dance session is the first of its kind in Canada, according to Parkinson Society Canada.

"If anyone can do this, Sarah can," Dr. Chow says. "She is mesmerizing. She has that golden light. You want to be in the room with her. Patients focus on her and start to think, 'I'm moving like her.'"

Dr. Meloff adds: "She's like Barack Obama. She is charismatic. People follow her. She has a gifted way of engaging people and teaching them and motivating them."

Ms. Robichaud says she just feels lucky to be able to make others feel good about themselves, which is the goal of any personal trainer. "I had no idea I would be generating this kind of attention from the medical world."

Several doctors believe that research into the effects of dance therapy should get under way. But even without medical proof of its benefits, patients know that dance is a function from the disease, which is a constant companion.

"I haven't been depressed," says Mr. Barrie, who has written about his struggles with depression in the past. "I would call it a distraction. It's harder to stop thinking about. I'm not thinking about it when I am working or out to dinner with friends, but as soon as I get up it's there," he says. "I don't know what's in my future. There are people who lose their speech. What I do is talk."

"Parkinson's is not a pleasure trip," he continues. "So it's nice to be involved in something as a result of the disease that is fun. [Dancing] loosens you up in your body and in your brain. You can get tight in both places."

For information, go to SarahRobichaud.com. On April 17 at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto she is holding a fundraiser, *Dancing with Canadian Celebs*, in support of her charitable work.

Sign up for the Health & Wellness Newsletter

Keep up to date on the latest nutrition news and dietary advice, fitness tips and wellness trends.

SIGN UP

Follow Sarah Hampson on Twitter: @Hampsonwifes

Report an error

Editorial code of conduct

Comment

READ OR POST COMMENTS

Trending

What's the difference between OAS and CPP?

Frito-Lay hikes prices again, as grocers warn more food price increases to come

Everything isn't broken. The government is

ANDREW COYNE

Canadian sniper in Ukraine describes Russians' stubborn advance in Bakhmut

How a Toronto daycare was thrown into turmoil after it was bought by a corporate chain

What can treat Parkinson's?

Diminished Blood Flow, Leading to Dysfunctional Dopamine Producing Neurons?

Zhittya Genesis Medicine

Open

Take a Break

Check your horoscope to learn how the stars align for you today.



Switch gears. Give your brain a workout and do today's Daily Cryptic Crossword.



Scoop a new vibe in the numbers and do today's Daily Sudoku.

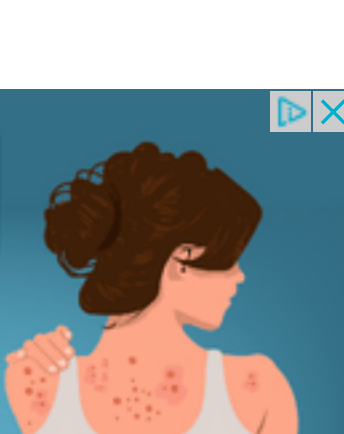


Kick back with the Daily Universal Crossword.



4 Signs That a Liver Disease May Be Developing

See The Signs Here



ROTITA

Is PD treatment viable?

Diminished Blood Flow, Leading to Dysfunctional Dopamine Producing Neurons?

Zhittya Genesis Medicine

Open