

# I HAVE GAINED WEIGHT, ADDING FAT AROUND GOD KNOWS WHERE

*Sakura (84) from Tokyo (Japan), retired, lives alone in an apartment complex*

## STAND ON ONE LEG

I have been taking a strength training class at a certain place. You cannot just go there to join the program. You need to be referred by someone. In my case, a friend of mine, who was a college professor, invited me to join. I have been taking the class for about 15 years, every Saturday, and it really works. Now, I can do sit-ups and stand on one leg. At first, that class felt a bit strange. When we think about exercise, we tend to imagine something fun, where people move their bodies along with music. This program is quite different, with no music. But the program has been effective. I have built muscle strength, and I can walk faster now.

## AT MY OWN PACE

If I hadn't join a healthy exercise group, I think I never would have realized how hard it is to walk slowly. I was surprised when I lost my balance just walking slowly with an exercise that puts my feet in a net. If I walk at my own pace, I should be able to do it better. But when a trainer sets a pace, it becomes more difficult to follow it, especially for older people. I fell before I joined this group, and my legs were not working well. So, I'm glad I've joined the group.

## PRACTICING AT HOME

The strength training program is now closed, unfortunately. In that training, I need to squeeze my muscle. I put a towel between my knees and press it inside. It helps strengthen my inner thighs. When you become older, you need to go to the restroom frequently. But you can prevent incontinence by squeezing your inner thigh muscles, whether you are a man or a woman. The instructor also gave me that kind of information. So, while I was at home, I did some of what I had learned in the class.

## SOY MILK IS MY ANCHOR

I like shopping. It also motivates me to walk. So, I walk to stores that are further from my home if their prices are lower even by 10 yen (equivalent to 10 US cents). When I was young, I would never do that because I did not have time. I often buy soy milk with a label saying, "For people worried about cholesterol." It usually costs about 200 yen at most stores. But at one of the supermarkets near the station, you can get it cheaper. So, I walk 15 minutes to go there. I also told some of my neighbors and exercise group members about it, and they seemed so glad to hear and started going to that store. Since soy milk is liquid, it is quite heavy. But because I am unsteady on my feet, that heavy liquid helps stabilize my body. I carry it over my shoulder, which serves as an anchor when I walk. One of my neighbors said, "Why don't you have the store deliver it to your house?" But the supermarket near my apartment charges me about 400 yen for delivery, quite expensive, unless I spend 4,000 yen or more. Since I am greedy and determined to save money.

## I KEEP MY MASK ON

Everyone is now worried about masks, and I always keep it on. I am a very obedient person. I do what other people tell me to do, maybe because I worked at companies for a long time. So I also take precautions to avoid the '3Cs' (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings), and I wear a new mask every day. Well, sometimes I wear a cloth mask and wash it. But I always keep it on. I add an extra piece of gauze to the mask and change it every day. I was very thorough about mask-wearing even when people were not paying much attention to it.

## A TIMETABLE TO STAY ORGANIZED

Even now, I try my best to go shopping, to make sure I walk. I usually take a walk in the morning. Then I prepare and have lunch, take a nap, and go shopping in the afternoon. Why do I have this routine? Because I need a timetable to stay organized. Otherwise, I would be lazy all day. That is my personality. But sometimes I need to break this rule, going somewhere like hospitals. So the timetable doesn't always work, but I try my best to follow it.

## NEXT TO A HOSPITAL

I live next to a hospital that takes COVID patients. When I watch TV, I sometimes see the image of the backdoor of the hospital, where a car is bringing a COVID patient. The hospital has two buildings, and they seem to use the older one for COVID patients, not the new one. So, when I was at the hospital and waiting for my medicine, I saw a sign by the reception desk, saying that we didn't need to worry because the COVID patients were in the other building and receiving care from specialized doctors. They take thorough measures for disinfection too. So I don't think the coronavirus is floating around.

## SYMPATHY FOR THE DOCTORS

Before the COVID outbreak, I went to the hospital once a month. But now, I go there every three months, making an appointment beforehand, because there are too many patients. Doctors must be exhausted with all those patients. I don't think they even have time for lunch. I usually make an appointment for a 9 a.m. slot. But by the time I finish seeing the doctor and wait for my medicine, it would be around 1 p.m. already. They also have emergency patients without an appointment. So, I really feel sorry for those doctors.

## SMALL TALK TO PREVENT DEMENTIA

A friend of mine, who is around my age, is also unsteady when she walks. When I felt well, we would go downtown together, me carrying her things, and enjoy lunch, movies, and talking. But we don't do that at all now because she says she cannot walk well. But she's got a shopping cart for seniors. So she now carries it to everywhere, using it as a cane. Another friend of mine lived alone and got dementia. She is two years younger than me, and worked until the retirement age. I started noticing that something was wrong with her, and she told me over the phone that she had dementia. So, even small talk seems essential. Otherwise, you may develop dementia.

## KEEPING ARTICLES

Since I stay at home most of the time, I have been tidying up my apartment, sorting out old items. When I see information or an article I like in a newspaper or a flyer, I always cut it out and save it. And those pieces of paper keep piling up because I never throw them away. I am not proud of this habit of mine. I keep them because I think they are useful, but it takes such a long time to read all of them. I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but I have cardboard boxes piled up in my apartment. When I told this to a friend of mine, she said, "You'll keep doing the same thing, so why don't you just throw them away?" But I did save those because I thought they were useful, so I think I may regret it if I didn't read them... So I can't help reading them while I sort them out, and it takes forever to clean them up. My desk is a mess now.

## TIME GOES FAST

When I read a newspaper, I like to read the whole thing, from front to back. Naturally, it takes a long time to read it. When I get a morning paper and find an interesting title, I start reading it, and an hour has passed before I know it. I am a little concerned about how fast time goes by because I still have so many other things I like to do. Well, as long as I'm alive and well, I like to do so many things.

## PRACTICING HARMONICA

I've been practicing harmonica for a long time. But since I have Sjögren's syndrome, my body cannot generate saliva as much as it should. It is hard to play harmonica when you don't have enough saliva. I told my doctor about it, and I still take Chinese herbal medicine to

solve that problem. It really works. I take that medicine every time before I go to the harmonica class, so I can play as well as other people.

## ADDING FAT AROUND GOD KNOWS WHERE

I have gained weight, 5 kg, adding fat around God knows where. I cannot button up my dresses or hook up my pants. In my days, we didn't have elastic waist pants, they had hooks instead. So, no matter how hard I try, I just cannot hook up my pants. Because I have elastic waist pants for exercise, I now wear them all the time. Since I haven't gone out to buy clothes for a while, I have nothing I can wear. All my clothes are too old or too small for me. When I was young, we would wear pants only when we play sports. I also have many suits because I was an office worker. But they are now too short and out of style. I hear people now wear longer suits. So, I feel embarrassed to wear something out of date, and I should buy something new. But I cannot go shopping. So I just wear these old clothes.

## MAKING MY OWN CLOTHES

I don't have clothes to wear now, but I do have a lot of fabric at home. I took sewing classes when I was young, so I used to make all my clothes. All my friends wear new stylish clothes while I keep wearing old ones that don't even fit. When I'm sewing, I can concentrate. I just think about nothing but the image of the finished work, and my hands keep moving, maybe because I love doing it. So, I think I may start sewing again. From now on, I may restart what I learned when I was young, remembering the old days.

*Sakura's story was shared with us by [International Longevity Center \(ILC\) Japan](#) – 国際長寿センター, member of the ILC Global Alliance, an international federation researching and advocating the vitality and the societal and economical position of older people. In the Netherlands, the ILC network is represented by Leyden Academy.*