



# If You Really Want to Feel Better!

By **Jim Dineen**

*After 25 years as a manager, consultant, salesman, trainer and presenter, Jim's consulting business was starting to flourish. It was then that he was struck with a truly life changing experience, kidney disease. After losing his business, his savings, and almost his life, he realized that his physical health was much more important than he'd ever thought. Jim has seen much in his life and his experiences have given him a unique look at what life can and often does offer. He served with the U.S. Army Infantry in Viet Nam, worked as a manager and leader of people in a successful human resource career, survived three years on dialysis, eight major surgeries, having his abdominal cavity drained over 25 times and a life-saving kidney transplant. He's a husband, father, "papaw" and avid exerciser, writer, author, and professional retiree. Jim knows life and how to tell a story with his own background as reference material. What he knows more than all of this is that everyone has a story and that story should be told. This short story is about how exercise helped save Jim's life.*

"If you're looking for that overall, feel good article that solves your problems and cures your ills, including

kidney disease, please keep moving. This is probably not the article for you. However, if a little work, a little pain, and the feeling of being on top of the world, in charge of yourself and what is going on with you, is of some interest, stay here. This might be interesting!

Have you ever had one of those days where you just feel like you've been in a gang fight and the gang won? You know, your body aches all over and you're just worn out from everything you've done that day. That's how I feel right now, only I know exactly why my body is hurting this way. My legs are tired, my arms are weak, my chest aches and my back is pounding as though I've been digging ditches all day. I've just come home from the gym and I ache all over. I feel fantastic! You may be wondering if I'm crazy or at least a little wacky. Possibly both but more importantly, I'm like this every day because I do this to myself. I love to exercise!

Kidney disease and its countless complications is a daunting illness to deal with. When I was diagnosed in 1998, I was a pretty active man for my age. At 52, I loved to play racquet ball, golf, run, and take long

# Really Feel

walks and anything else that made me feel alive. My dog and I would walk for miles and then come home to a 30-minute game of catch. I was never a great athlete, but I loved to play the game. Just the thrill of participating was all I really needed. It was always exhilarating and I seemed to respond to physical activity. I have found that this feeling I get from exercise or activity of any kind, would serve me well over the years.

When kidney disease was first thrust upon me it was like a kick in the face. I'm one of those patients who got completely caught off guard by this new challenge.

I had no symptoms, wasn't overweight, had never been diagnosed with diabetes and my blood pressure had never been a major problem. I was pretty active and I had actually never heard the term nephrology. Oh, how things can change.

As a new patient, I traveled through all of the emotional and physical stages that any kidney patient experiences; denial, anger, shock and so on. In the first two years following my diagnosis, I went through at least 6 surgeries, gained and lost a minimum 150 pounds of fluid, was informed I had contracted liver disease on top of my kidney problems, had my abdominal cavity drained



at least thirty times, lost my ability to walk, and, for about a three-month period of time, would take almost thirty minutes each night to get to my bed on the second floor of my house. Throughout all of this, I reminded myself of everything I'd learned about sports. It really is how you play the game, not if you always win.

My first hurdle was to understand my problem and how it was affecting my body and could continue to affect me. I delved into kidney disease research, learning where it came from and how to get rid of it. That last problem became a big one as I learned you just don't get rid of it. As my understanding increased and my health decreased, I looked back at what had worked for me in the past. What gave me peace? What helped me relax and cope with life's issues? What kept my belief system in order and how did things turn out when I accomplished various milestones? The answer was always exercise.

Early in my illness, my muscle mass was severely impacted by both the disease and the drugs I was taking to control it. I had regularly exercised and could, just prior to my illness, lift weights for an hour and a half and then enjoy a good 30-minute work out on a tread mill. Within seven

months of my early treatment regimen, I was lucky to curl soup cans as this was all my arms could handle. I eventually gave up on the lifting completely since I could no longer walk. My muscles atrophied a great deal, and if I got on the floor to play with my dog, it would take me 15-20 minutes to get back up and I usually had to hold on to something to accomplish this. I had to try and I had to believe and so, I did. Soup cans grew to be bean cans

that turned into ½ gallons of water. My stairs became my built-in home gym. My wife began to help me learn to walk again, 5-10 feet at a time. It took three months for me to reach a point where I could walk a block from my house and get home again, in an hour.

I ultimately ended up on dialysis and returned to my gym, 3 years after my journey started. I had gone to the same gym for over 6 years and knew everyone there. Nobody recognized me for weeks. I had changed in so many ways. Many fellow patients ask me why I so strongly believe in exercise as part of my regimen and I simply tell them where I was and where I am today. I just celebrated my 13-





year anniversary with my transplant and I go to the gym a minimum of four days a week. I walk at least a mile every day and although I'll never lift the kind of weight I did before, I can do pretty well for my "condition". Someone said age may have some bearing on this, but I try not to factor that into the equation. I might start believing it. I love sports but I'm not a good spectator. Now, what I mean is I can watch a good football game for only so long or get excited about golf for just short periods and I must do something. There's nothing wrong with my attention span. I just like to participate in life, not watch. It's pretty much the attitude I've followed throughout my challenge with kidney disease. I remember thinking when I was diagnosed that if this disease was going to take anything from me, it wasn't going to be my ability to try or my capacity to believe I could win. I was going to stay in control.

You don't have to be a professional athlete to live and love the benefits of exercise. Maybe your only exercise is walking or running or simply climbing the steps regularly instead of taking an elevator. Swimming is a wonderful exercise if you're fortunate enough to have access to a pool. I strongly encourage you to exercise to the very best of your ability. Talk with your doctor and, if necessary, hire a trainer. Look on the internet or go to the library and find out what will work for you and, whatever it is you find, you will feel better.

Do a little soul searching? Examine your own situation and ask a few questions.

- Would I like to feel better?

- Would I like to look better?
- How would it feel to have less stress in my life, especially related to my illness?
- What physical and mental goals would I like to achieve in the short and long term?
- Do I know my lab numbers and am I willing to track them if I start exercising? Make a log of your weight, blood pressure, cholesterol readings, blood counts, etc. It can be exciting to watch those numbers steadily improve.
- Write down your exercise program and keep track of your progress. Your soup cans can turn into 10 lb. or 20 lb. weights in no time at all. It's not the weight that matters but the progress.
- Ask yourself every day: Am I trying and do I believe exercise is helping me?

When I was a young man, actually just a boy, my parents taught me two important lessons; I can do anything I'm willing to work for and I must believe with all my heart I can do it. When I think about exercise, I remember mom and dad's advice. Until I try something and believe it will work for me, I'll never know the results. This thinking has taken me a long way in my battle with kidney disease. And sometimes a little pain makes life a whole lot more enjoyable.

Most importantly, look in the mirror each morning and ask yourself, "Am I willing to TRY and do I BELIEVE I can do it"? If the answer isn't yes, go find a soup can!

**How do you know if you haven't tried?**