

FEATURES

Fitness Therapy Hawaii provides specialized programs and equipment for clients with Parkinson's disease

By [Pat Gee](#) • Oct. 30, 2022

Seven years ago, Victor Preciado noticed his left hand started shaking and his arm didn't swing as freely when he walked.

He found himself losing strength and coordination doing ordinary things in daily life. He struggled to stick his hand into his pocket, brush his teeth and get out of his truck; eventually, he stopped playing golf.

"Everything got harder to do," Preciado said.

He was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in his late 50s, an incurable neurodegenerative disease that research has shown is the fastest-growing neurological disorder in the world.

He was still able to continue his job as a roofer but worked more slowly, and his boss always sent someone else to work with him on the roof as a precaution.

A little over a year ago, Preciado, now 65, started a comprehensive fitness-cognitive program. Part of that vigorous regime includes boxing with a trainer, something he never got to try before but now enjoys.

The program was developed by George Ma, whose father succumbed to the disease years ago. As a personal trainer and sports instructor for over two decades, Ma opened a new gym in August, Fitness Therapy Hawaii, focused 100% on helping people with Parkinson's. His business partner Rick Wacker and head trainer Glen Higa both have the disease, and he's been working with them on developing the program for the past five years.

Ma said their message to people with Parkinson's is: "There is a place for you to get better, there's hope."

What distinguishes their gym and program from others is that Ma and Higa are both Parkinson Wellness Recovery certified fitness therapists. They offer specialized treatment no other gym offers, they said.

The program is tailored to each client's highly varied symptoms, and all are required to provide a physician's clearance form. Programs may include moderate to vigorous levels of cardiovascular and cognitive exercises, strength training and flexibility/balance exercises, or yoga. An essential part of the program is re-training the brain with targeted practice to learn a new skill or relearn an old one.

"It's built for Parkinson's, by people with Parkinson's," Ma said.

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Although he doesn't have the disease, Ma said it is never far from his mind, and he wants to make people who come to the gym

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Fitness Therapy Hawaii is located where the former Fit for Life gym was in Nimitz Center, where Ma began working with his Parkinson's clients. Everything in the new gym, from the extra-cushioned flooring to the bathroom design, was renovated with these clients in mind. State-of-the-art equipment, including 10 different computerized machines, was chosen to accommodate all ages and levels of physical condition, including those using walkers and wheelchairs.

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For instance, the Keiser functional and strength training machine includes a pulley system that can support the weight of a client who is prone to falling, and they gain confidence in making certain moves without fear, Ma said.

Most of the medical-grade equipment, such as the treadmill and elliptical machines, can be adjusted low to the ground to make it easier to mount, and grab bars support the clients' weight as they get on, among other considerations. Data is digitally recorded and analyzed, and clients are hooked up to heart monitors shown on a computer board and personal apps that Ma can read outside the gym.

The Smartfit neurocognitive machine — where the client participates in punching and kicking workouts — is designed to build cognitive skills and develop coordination between the brain and the body. It tracks data on a client's speed, power and movement that can be analyzed later and shared with a person's doctor.

Preciado enjoys actually sparring with Higa the old-school way, with boxing gloves, as they move around the floor as a way to boost his cognition and fitness simultaneously. He can do the same drills on the Smartfit machine, but he says it's more fun doing the real thing. As the simplest example of a drill, each kind of punch is assigned a number, and Higa calls out the numbers in varying sequences to train Preciado's memory.

Preciado works with Higa twice a week. He credits the exercise with enabling him to still do his job with MRC Roofing, though he continues to have occasional tremors and is on medication.

"It's the best thing I did so far," he said. "I'm better off now than I was a year ago. ... I'm still climbing ladders, I still walk on pitched roofs, I'm still climbing attics." Everyday skills like bathing and dressing are far easier, and he can run again.

Higa, who was encouraged to become a certified trainer by Ma, was diagnosed in 2018 at age 48. Those who are diagnosed before age 50 technically have "young-onset" Parkinson's disease and retain the designation no matter what their age. With about 8,000 people in Hawaii afflicted with the disease, most are diagnosed when much older because the symptoms mimic other disorders and are associated with common aging traits, he said.

"The benefit of being diagnosed when you're young (below 50 years) is it gives you the opportunity to fight it and fight it hard," Higa said.

Before he met Ma in 2019, Higa was a successful sales executive who had tried various exercises, which weren't very effective.

"I went from stage 2 to stage 1 all because of the programs George had built. ... Now I'm a full-time trainer, helping people live their best lives," he said. Parkinson's disease has five stages, with stage 5 being the most advanced.

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Staying active

Higa has been working out with Natasha Heath, 58, for a little over a year. She started noticing symptoms eight years ago but wasn't medically diagnosed until two years later, at age 52, when her condition worsened.

Heath, an elementary school teacher and avid tennis player, said she felt weakness all on her right side, manifesting in a frozen shoulder, a slight tremor in her hand, and some muscle twitches. When she was first diagnosed, she wasn't alarmed or frightened.

"I'm more of a person who practices acceptance. So I'm more like, Parkinson's: What do I do now?" she said. "I kept living the life that I normally lived. But I just got weaker and weaker, that was the problem.

"I was at a point where I could barely do the housework, I could barely cook, had trouble getting into the shower."

Her first experience with medications had been dismal, with side effects so horrible she quit taking them. Around 2019 she reached out to the renowned Mayo Clinic and found a neurologist who prescribed the right dose of medication for her.

She met Higa through a support group of the Hawaii Parkinson Association. In addition to private workouts, she attends a group session at the gym and plays tennis three times a week. She also found a good physical therapist, and 15 minutes of daily meditation helped tremendously.

"So working out and being on the right medicine basically got me to almost where I was prediagnosis," she said.

Ma said he wants to encourage younger people like Heath, often in the prime of their lives, to start exercising at the gym. He calls them "the lost generation," because quite often they are shocked into denial and go into hiding after they do some research and learn that the life expectancy of Parkinson's patients averages 10 to 15 years.

"It's life-shattering. We have clients think about committing suicide," Ma said.

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His business partner, Wacker, explained that often people try to hide their tremors by putting their hands in their pockets, or find other ways to conceal their Parkinson's symptoms.

"They end up what George calls, 'going into the closet,' or hiding because a lot of times in the workplace if people find out, people worry about what's going to happen to their employment.

"What we're trying to do is make people feel comfortable acknowledging they have Parkinson's, but you can fight against the progression of the symptoms with the exercise programs George has put together. Don't go into the closet; come out and feel like you're doing what you can." Wacker said.

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Wacker, diagnosed at age 53 in 2015, had first sought out Ma five years ago for kickboxing lessons to combat his symptoms. (Ma is also a kickboxing and jujitsu instructor.) Their business relationship developed from there. Every client who works out regularly has been able to maintain functions or taken back those previously lost, said Wacker.

Ma said unfortunately, the exercise programs are not covered by medical insurance, “but we’re working on that.” One-on-one training sessions are \$150 for 50 minutes, and group rates are \$25 per session; rates vary according to individualized programs, and for seven or 12-week courses.

Fitness Therapy Hawaii

1130 N. Nimitz Highway, A-140

Private gym hours: 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays; 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays; 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays.

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