

UP & DOWN
A Self-Care Article by Leslie Salmon, Certified Yoga Therapist
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I'm not talking about going up and down stairs — many of you are fully capable of that.

What I speak about is getting up and down from the floor.

As a Certified Yoga Therapist and Certified Anusara Yoga Teacher (with 25 years of experience), I ask clients and students to incorporate one thing into their daily activities:

“Get up and down from the floor two times every day.”

I could talk brain neuroplasticity, synapses, nerve impulses, neurotransmitters here, but the simple truth is that many people, as they age, stop getting down on the floor. (*I do understand there are those whose physical limitations keep them from this activity.*)

SOME GRIM FACTS:

- one in four Americans over the age of 65 will fall in the coming year,
- every 11 seconds, an older adult is treated in the ER for a fall,
- and every 15 minutes an older adult dies from a fall.

Falls are the most common cause of nonfatal trauma-related hospital admissions among older adults. (*Source: Fitzgerald Physical Therapy Assoc.*). \

When one falls (and has not practiced getting up and down from the floor), the first response is ‘**am I hurt? what can I do?**’. If the answer is ‘**I can’t get up**’, the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) goes into action, causing a release of adrenaline and other hormones which worsens the ‘**I can’t**’ (or anxiety/panic) response. If no one is around and no means of communication available, the person may lie for quite a while waiting and hoping for help to arrive.

WHY DO WE STOP GETTING DOWN TO THE FLOOR (on purpose)?

As we age, our joints, muscles and fascia stiffen. It may feel better to remain still and not challenge ourselves, limiting the tasks we ask of ourselves. Over time, we stop doing routine things - going up and down stairs, walking moderately

challenging hills, playing with our grandchildren and/or pets. The result? Getting up and down from the floor may become a thing of the past.

WHY DO WE GET 'STIFF'?

Fascia (the band of thin, fibrous connective tissue that wraps around and supports every structure in your body) requires movement and hydration in order to not tighten and restrict the movement of your muscles and tissues. It's important to keep fascia healthy by moving and stretching your body (*per Cleveland Clinic*). When one stops moving or moves in a repetitive pattern, overall fascia flexibility is affected. Remember 'motion is lotion'.

WHY GET UP AND DOWN TO THE FLOOR?

Balance, flexibility and strength are needed to get up and down from the floor. If one continues to move, to practice moving onto and up from the floor (whether using the assistance of a chair or other stable device), balance, strength and flexibility plus agility improve.

When I consider independent living, the ability to safely navigate the home environment speaks volumes. Losing this ability increases the risk of being severely injured; an injury that may continue to affect the quality of life for years to come.

And, July 2014 research from The European Journal of Preventive Cardiology found the ability to get up and down from the floor is a predictor of longevity in those ages 51-80. This tells me up/down may be part of living longer.

NOW WHAT?

I ask students to get up and down from the floor in order that the neural synapses remain in place to allow them to continue this activity and enjoy a more active life. A synapse is the point at which a nerve impulse passes from one neuron to another through the release of neurotransmitters, directing our bodies to do a specific action. When not used, synapses will atrophy (shrive) and die. Once a synapse is lost, so is the muscle it should move affected negatively. Step back to the years-old phrase: 'use it or lose it'.

Any stable device can help in moving to and from the floor, I just ask they DO IT. And, starting small is always a good road to the finish line, for example:

- Sitting and standing from a firm chair is a good place to start - strengthening leg muscles and improving balance.
- Moving on to small lunges with stable support nearby.

- Increasing the depth of the lunge, until perhaps a knee touches the floor and then push back up (always with support nearby).
- Finally, knee down place hands on the floor and sit onto the floor (a pillow for padding under your thigh and hip is always a good idea).

To get back up - reverse the process. After working slowly over a period of weeks, legs will have strengthened and balance improved enough to accomplish moving back to a lunge, raising the back knee, stepping in to stand up. Think strength, balance, flexibility and agility.

The instructions were easy to write and sound easy when read — and, if one hasn't been doing this regularly, it won't be (easy), but it is do-able.

Patience is a key factor when beginning to work on this skill. Slow, mindful movement will be your friend instead of momentum. One didn't get to this place in a day or two and reversal of habits takes time.

The good news is that our brains are ready to rebuild old, unused synapses. Remember the word 'neuroplasticity' - the ability of the brain to change and adapt in response to new experiences. Our brains won't get bigger or smarter, but we can build / rebuild old patterns.

All that to say we can DO IT.