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95-year-old shares tricks of safe falling

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Elliott Royce takes practice falls at least five times every morning. He doesn't just practice; he preaches, too. He goes to assisted living centers, senior centers and community centers to talk about how to prevent serious injuries if you take a tumble.



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Elliott Royce estimates that he has fallen down at least 15,000 times over the past 10 years.

Royce, who is about six weeks shy of turning 96, falls on purpose at least five times every morning. "It's part of my morning routine," he said. "Just like shaving and brushing my teeth. I pull my air mattress out of the closet and practice safe falls."

He doesn't just practice; he preaches, too. He goes to assisted living centers, senior centers and community centers to talk about how to prevent serious injuries if you take a tumble. He offers himself as proof of how important it is for everyone — but especially seniors — to learn the technique.

"I have macular degeneration. I don't have any depth perception," he said. "But I'm an outdoors guy; I can't sit in my apartment all day because I'm afraid to leave it."

In the past decade or so, Royce has taken "seven real falls and has never gotten hurt," he said. "Sure, I got bruised, and I ended up with some aches and pains, but I didn't get any broken bones."

That's partly because he takes practice falls every day so that he'll react instinctively should he lose his balance.

"Once you start to fall, you don't have time to think about what to do," he said. "You're going to have about one second to figure it out, so you better have some plans."

Let's there be any doubt, Royce is not your typical 95-year-old. "Too many seniors have given up," he chides. Not him. For starters, he takes an hourlong trampoline class three times a week.

"He came in here 3½ years ago and said his goal was to still be on the trampoline when he turns 100," said Pat Henderson, his coach and the owner of Minnesota Twisters in Edina, where the previous oldest client was 85. "I think he's going to make it."

Royce thinks he's going to make it, too.

"I've always been an active person," said Royce, who ran a health and beauty wholesale business until he retired in his mid-70s. "I'm not a couch potato."

Daughter Cindy Royce confirmed that assessment. The family has long gotten used to him announcing his next conquest.

"It's always something," she said. "He started playing the viola da gamba — the baroque cello. And then he decided that he wanted to learn how to juggle. He even entered a race where you had to go a mile while juggling."

Her father chimed in with a laugh: "I was the last one to finish, but I won my age division — because I was the only one in it."

Even while poking fun at himself, he exudes a can-do attitude.

"Show them how you can jump rope," Henderson urged, tossing Royce a rope while he was bouncing on a trampoline. Without a second's hesitation, he nonchalantly obliged.

"He likes a challenge," said Cindy Royce, who is no slouch herself. In her late 50s, she takes the trampoline lessons with her dad.

In addition to being good exercise, the trampoline training dovetails nicely with his safe-falling program. "It works his core muscles and sharpens his body awareness and control," Henderson said.

Not to mention honing his sense of balance: "If you can learn to walk on an unsteady surface like a trampoline, you can walk on anything," Royce said.

But one of the trampoline's biggest payoffs is that it got him used to falling.

"It's the fear of falling that makes people stick out their arms to try to catch themselves, and that's what causes the broken wrists and arms," he said. "The more you fall, the more you overcome the fear of falling."

Three things to remember

"The secret to falling safely is three words: bend, twist, roll," he said.

As you start to fall, bend your knees in the direction you are falling and twist at the waist, turning your shoulders away from the fall. That will change the point of impact. Instead of one spot on your hip taking the entire brunt of the fall, the force will be spread out along the length of your leg, thigh and pelvis. When you hit the ground, roll to further dissipate the force of the impact.

That's what he practices each morning by standing next to an air mattress and falling onto it. He advises beginners to start from their knees until they're comfortable with the "roll" part of the procedure. It also will help them regain comfort with being on the floor.

"Most seniors haven't been on the floor for 10 years," he said. "Seniors think the floor is scary. It's not. Watch kids; they sit on the floor all the time. And our forefathers used to sit on the ground."

Royce isn't the only one who thinks that learning how to fall safely is important. A recent demonstration he gave at the Sabes Jewish Community Center in St. Louis Park drew about 125 seniors, most of them from the neighborhood. Lyudmyla Petrenko, director of the JCC's Active Adults program that hosted his visit, was excited about his presentation.

"The reality is that seniors will fall," she said. "We want them to be prepared for it."

A steep learning curve

Falls account for 20 percent of hospital visits by seniors and 40 percent of the nursing home admissions. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, falls are the leading cause of injury among people 65 and older. Those injuries include broken bones (hips, arms, legs, hands and spines), as well as being the most common cause of traumatic brain injuries in seniors.

Royce became aware of these statistics when he moved into a senior living facility 10 years ago.

"I learned right away that people fall in a senior home, and then the 911 truck has to come help pick them up," he said. "I figured, as long as I'm going to fall, why not learn how not to get hurt?"

He searched the Internet for a class on falling but couldn't find one. "Everyone's afraid of getting sued," he said. "As soon as you mention falling, lawyers come running."

He eventually stumbled on a gymnastics school in Hawaii that offered a weeklong class covering various aspects of tumbling, including how to fall without getting hurt.

"It was the only place in the country that would teach it," he said. He doesn't recall how much the class cost, but he does remember how much he paid for his plane ticket. "\$665, but it was money well-spent."

Despite all the time he spends practicing falling, the best way to avoid an injury from falls is not to fall in the first place, he said. He devotes much of his presentations to lecturing on preventing falls. He's very moved by them.

"When I moved into my new apartment, there was one grab bar in the bathroom," he said. "Now there are six. Any place you are going to stand for a while — by the sink to brush your teeth, for instance — put in a grab bar."

He also suggests that men sit down on the toilet to urinate. "Nobody wants to talk about this, but why do we have to be so macho and insist on standing?" he said. "As we get older, standing gets harder." He added with a wink: "And if we sit, our wives will appreciate it, too."

Royce believes learning how to fall safely isn't just for the elderly. He's made sure that everyone in his family knows how to do it. In fact, he's so excited about the benefits of trampoline class that most of the family — five children, 10 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren — have showed up at one time or another to take the class with him.

Counting spouses, "I've got 30 people in my family," he said. "That number's not that impressive; a lot of people have more. But here's the deal: All 30 of us are still talking to each other."

He laughed before heading back for another session on the trampoline. "I've got my health, and I've got my family," he announced. "I'm rich."

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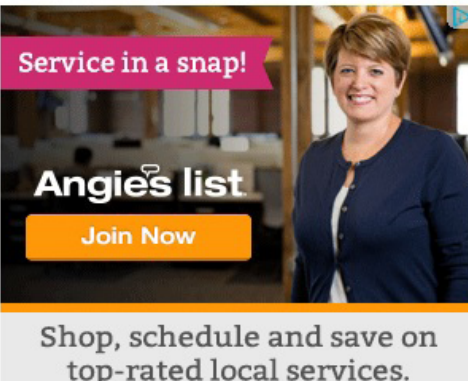


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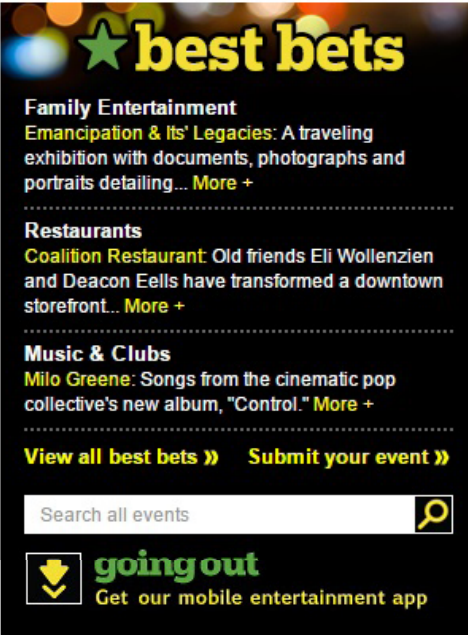


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