

Step aboard 'the unloader'

Physical therapy facility uses reduced weight to increase motion

BY ANDY TAYLOR-FABE
Record-Eagle staff writer

The "unloader" looks like a combination between a treadmill, a circus trapeze and a parachute vest.

It may look a little strange, but physical therapist Rex Holden says the unloader is the key to rehab for many people living with injuries.

Accelerated Mobility Physical Therapy, Holden's Traverse City physical therapy and sports training business, has only a few pieces of equipment.

The centerpiece is the unloader (or "unweighter"), which artificially changes the user's weight so people with injuries can perform normal exercise.

"It's like traction, but you can exercise while you get it," Holden said.

Normally, between 20 and 50 percent of a person's body weight is taken off for exercise on the machine, depending on the severity of the injury.

Onlee Bowden, 48, has been living with a herniated disk in her back for about five years.

"(The unloader) started making me feel like I wasn't an injured person," she said.

Bowden was considering surgery to try to correct her back problem before she started coming to work with Holden.

"I could only spend a few hours a day not lying down," Bowden said. "Now, I can handle a regular workload — the pain is still there, but it's not constant."

The unloader does more than just take the weight off, Bowden said.

"When you have an injury, the rest of your body guards it," she said, adding that walking on the unloader allows the body to move freely in ways it usually can't.

"At first, I thought it was just the placebo effect," she said.

Holden said walking on the machine retrains your nervous system.

Sally Guzowski, 51, said walking on the unloader has made her walking less robotic. In June, she fell down some stairs breaking vertebrae in her neck and damaging her spinal cord. After spending six weeks in the hospital and learning how to walk again, Guzowski started physical therapy.

"I've gained some trust in my legs and muscles," she said.

The other use for the unloader is as a training device for athletes looking to push their bodies to the next level.

"It teaches you how to explode with energy," Holden said.

Holden demonstrated the unloader, taking off some of his weight, jumping on to the moving treadmill at a furious pace for a few steps, then jumping in the air and straddling the treadmill to stop.

"It gets the nervous system to where it has never been before," he said.

Some people find the unloader a little disorienting the first time they try it, Holden said, but by the second or third time, they like it.

Accelerated Mobility Physical Therapy and Fast Fitness Sports Training opened in October but will host an open house Jan. 23. Holden is also offering a discount for sessions throughout January.

Holden said that while the cost is considerable (about \$50 per session), physical therapy is often covered by insurance for a couple of months.

For more information on the unloader, call 932-9014.



Record-Eagle/Tyler Sipe

Onlee Bowden of Traverse City begins her physical therapy exercise on an "unloading" or "unweighting" machine with assistance from physical therapist Rex Holden at Accelerated Mobility Physical Therapy in Traverse City.

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Good vibrations

Another unusual tool at Accelerated Mobility Physical Therapy is the vibration plate, which vibrates at different levels as people stand on it, do exercises or lift weights.

"It recruits more muscle fibers," said owner Rex Holden. "It super-stimulates the nervous system."

You have to constantly make adjustments on the platform and always stand on front of feet. (If you put weight on your heels, you can feel the vibration in your teeth, which is not a pleasant sensation.)