

Tailored physical therapy helps people with Parkinson's

A suspected case of [Parkinson's disease](#) took some freedoms away from Irene Vaught.

The 74-year-old found it harder to write, watch her grandchildren's sports and just get around her St. Joseph, Illinois, home.

"I had dizziness. I would come to a step and freeze. My body would be stiff," Vaught recalls.

But a bigger frustration came in an unlikely venue.

Vaught and her husband have a favorite dinner spot at a buffet restaurant in Urbana, Illinois, around 20 minutes from their home. Heavy chairs and a thick carpet made the simple task of sitting down at the table difficult.

But it's not as bad anymore.

"It's such an accomplishment. It just makes me feel so good that I can do something on my own," Vaught says.

Since July of 2022, Vaught has benefitted from the [LSVT BIG® program](#), a physical therapy program tailored to people diagnosed with Parkinson's or who have symptoms of the disease. Her therapist at [OSF HealthCare Heart of Mary Medical Center](#) in Urbana, Caitlin Cleveland, is the only licensed occupational therapist in the Urbana area certified in the program.

Cleveland says Parkinson's is a progressive decline in fine motor function - small muscle movements like grabbing an object - and gross motor function - large muscle movements like sitting and standing. Speech may also be slow or quiet.

The LSVT BIG program is four, one-hour sessions per week for four weeks. Physical activity like walking and stretching is paired with brain sharpeners like writing and moving toy blocks from one bin to another. Patients focus on amplifying, intensifying and calibrating their movement in order to regain control of tasks that are important to them.

"Because patients tend to do smaller and slower movements, they're not used to the intensity of what a normal step or reach would look like," Cleveland says. "So we're really trying to override that with the intensity and effort of a normal movement."

For Vaught, Cleveland mimicked that tricky restaurant maneuver.

"I put some leg weights on a chair and simulated it," Cleveland says. "We would work on her walking up to the chair, pulling it out, sitting and scooting forward."

LSVT BIG® participants should continue the exercises at home. Family and caregivers can also get involved.

"To see patients regain independence and confidence in their own ability is awesome," Cleveland says.

"Sometimes I feel like I need more help. So when I go to see Caitlin, she just makes me feel so good. If I'm not putting out as much [energy] as I should, she makes me put it out," Vaught says with a smile.

Learn more

Check with your primary care provider or neurologist to see if the LSVT BIG program is offered at an OSF HealthCare hospital near you. Learn more about neurological therapy on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).