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## BALANCE

The word “balance” brings to mind the image of a scale, or a see-saw with a child, short legs dangling, perched at each end. Balance implies stability, steadiness, even stasis, yet the slightest weight shift on either side will upset it. To regain balance on a see-saw once it has been upset the children must readjust their body positions, and this is not a simple operation. It requires complex coordination between mind and body so that all the senses and body parts involved work together to re-establish equilibrium.

In the January 8 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, Siddhartha Mukherjee, writing about his father’s death, speaks of the enormous effort and incredibly complex systems required to maintain the apparent constancy of a human body functioning normally. He describes the frantic effort of doctors in a New Delhi ICU, where his father was taken after a fall, to re-establish balance in his body when his brain could no longer provide the coordination required to maintain equilibrium. Instruments constantly measured blood pressure, temperature, pulse, salt and fluid levels, but, says Mukherjee, “What we didn’t measure – couldn’t measure -- was how hard his body was working to bestill these values, how much ‘unnatural vigilance’ was required to keep things steady.”,

So, although balance may look effortless, it is not. Though we may hope and strive for balance in many aspects of our lives, we usually find ourselves a little off kilter here, a bit off-center there, and the effort to keep from, as we say, “falling apart” can be exhausting.

Evans, my 86 year old husband, has dementia. He doesn’t have extreme memory issues, and he can seem quite normal and sharp at times, but then suddenly he’s like a two or three year old, unable to comprehend how a simple tool – something he’s used easily for decades -- works.

This situation is hard for Evans, but also for me and for others, especially the son who's been asked to take on responsibility for his father's rental business. Evans has always had total confidence in his abilities and intelligence, so it's hard for him to let go, but he more or less realizes he's no longer able to make rational decisions. He is literally, physically, off balance much of the time, but this is only an outward symptom of what must be happening in his psyche. The inner struggle between awareness of loss and acceptance of dependence must be constant, terrifying and exhausting. And for those of us close to him, the uncertainty about what he can and can't do or understand, which changes almost from day to day, is very disorienting. For caretakers and loved ones of people suffering from dementia, the struggle to find the right balance between respect, empathy, frustration and grief can be extremely stressful.

For all of us, life is a daily balancing act. No matter how sure and steady a person may seem, behind the calm surface lie innumerable tensions – between work and play, duty and pleasure, activity and rest, and so many more. We teeter totter on the seesaws of our lives, nerves, muscles, mind and body struggling mightily to maintain a steady balance until one day it all ends in complete stasis.