



Learning the Ropes

“We were all shocked, except our granddaughters. They just said, “OK,” in unison,” says Weaver. By throwing down the gauntlet—not only to the girls, but to himself—there was no option to back out. So he buckled into a climbing harness and started climbing, grabbing onto the color-coded plastic handholds and footholds on the wall.

The funny thing is, Weaver was terrified of heights.

“I would never have tried it if I hadn’t been so unwilling to chicken out in front of my granddaughters after my reckless dare,” he says. But, by the time the REI staffer holding his rope had belayed him safely to the floor, Weaver’s fear turned into a flood of exhilaration and accomplishment.

Once a niche pursuit, rock climbing has become all the rage, culminating in the sport making its debut on the world stage at the Tokyo Olympics last summer. In recent years, TV shows like *American Ninja Warrior* and documentaries like *The Dawn Wall* and *Free Solo* have raised the profile of climbing and made celebrities out of some amazing elite climbers. One of the most famous is Alex Honnold, who in 2017 ascended the 2,900-foot sheer rock face of Yosemite National Park’s El Capitan without any ropes.

Stupendous feats like Honnold’s, and the lightning-quick speed-climbing competitions from the Olympics (worth a watch on YouTube), can make rock climbing seem like the exclusive domain of the near-superhuman. That’s why it can be surprising to learn that almost anybody can enjoy a version of this adrenaline-pumping activity.



Indoor rock climbing, in a gym with proper safety equipment, is the very opposite of death defying. In fact, it's a wonderful activity for almost anybody, young or old.

Safe Thrills

Indoor rock climbing is very safe. In fact, the injury rate for participants in indoor climbing gyms stands at less than 1 percent of activities like tennis, basketball, and bicycling.

Researchers in Germany, tracking 515,337 climbing gym visits over five years (participants aged eight to 80), recorded only 0.020 injuries per thousand hours of participation, according to the journal *Wilderness & Environmental Medicine*. That's a significantly lower rate of injury than for many common activities, such as running (which had 3.6 injuries per thousand participation hours), training in a gym (3.1), bicycling (2.0), or even walking (1.2), according to the *International Journal of Sports Medicine*.

In particular, top-rope climbing is even safer, registering only 0.005 injuries per thousand hours in the German study. In this climbing style, common for beginner and intermediate-level climbers in gyms, the climber's harness is roped through an anchor at the top of the route and then through one or more carabiners to the *belayer* (the person who holds the rope). If the climber should fall, the belayer can easily stop the fall with the rope system.

Indoor rock climbing is a fun and interactive activity that provides an excellent path to wellness for older adults. Here's a look at more of the health benefits of rock climbing.

Non-repetitive Exercise

A safe yet challenging activity that's easy on the joints, rock climbing offers mental and physical stimulation through the need for continual problem solving in a variety of situations. Lifting weights, participating in aerobics classes, or going to the gym can all get old and routine. Not so with rock climbing.

“There are so many reasons why people fall off a fitness routine, and boredom is one of them. But climbing appeals to the child in you,” says Jon Meyer, chief technology officer at CAPTRUST, who has been an avid indoor rock climber for about eight years. “It's like climbing on the jungle gym, a more adult version of the playground.”

As your skills improve, it never gets boring because the routes are often changed around, and there's always another challenge to try.

Strengthening

Climbing builds total body endurance, flexibility, and core strength. Many rock climbers who stick with it find that as their overall strength improves, many of the aches and pains associated with aging start



to slip away.

Adam Cork, 41, started rock climbing five years ago as a fun couples activity to do with his wife, Ericka. They both fell in love with climbing and find it makes them more adventurous. Before climbing, he was sometimes plagued by sciatica from an old sports injury that frequently had him in physical therapy.

“I had sciatic pain running down my leg for years,” says Cork, a project manager in institutional client services with CAPTRUST. “In climbing, you use your upper body to take the weight off your back. You’re always moving your core. With the amount of core work involved, I cured my back with climbing.”

Fall Prevention

Balance and center-of-gravity awareness is a major part of climbing. “Climbers get a lot of very effective balancing practice right at the edge of their ability to balance. They also gain significant core, hip flexor, and leg strength, all of which help to prevent falls in their everyday life,” says Weaver.

Cognitive Workout

Standing at the bottom of the route and looking up, climbers face a mental puzzle of figuring out how to approach the handholds, and which is the best way to go.

“People think rock climbing is not an intellectual sport, but it becomes an obsession. How do I move my body to solve this puzzle?” says Cork.

“It’s cognitively relaxing,” says Meyer, 53. “All you can think about is the wall, the spatial relationships, and putting your body in different positions.”

Social Benefits

Conquering challenges in the company of others is a quick route to new friendships, especially considering the powerful trust that builds between a climber and a belayer. Climbing is also a rare activity that is naturally intergenerational.



“A benefit for older people is just being around a bunch of twentysomethings who are climbing,” says Meyer. “To have a conversation and drink up the energy of younger people is a real positive.”

For Weaver, at the time he scaled the REI climbing tower, he was not in good physical shape. He was overweight, plagued by asthma, and had swollen finger joints. Although he had been trying to get healthier, he found it too boring to work out with weights or gym machines.



But his rock-climbing experience was different. After the rush he felt, Weaver pushed aside his fear of heights and signed up for a beginner class at a climbing gym. Unlike other exercises, climbing was engaging and motivating. He met other people. He had so much fun that he kept at it and soon began trying more difficult climbs.

Life Changing

The more he climbed, the better he got. The more weight he lost, the stronger he got and the more his joint strength improved. He ended up 60 pounds lighter, with strong fingers that were free from pain and a resting heart rate that was down to 60, from 80 in previous years. Endurance, balance, and flexibility all greatly improved.

Weaver says discovering indoor rock climbing changed his life for the better, and he was inspired to share the gift. He has encouraged and taught many other older adults to try the sport. As something of a climbing evangelist, he enjoys being there to witness the transformation that occurs when people, especially formerly sedentary people, get into an activity they never imagined themselves trying.

“In a sudden adrenaline-fueled rush, they realize that they still possess surprising reserves of power and courage. It’s hard to overstate how powerful and emotional this is for folks between 50 and 80 years old who may have never had a similar experience,” says Weaver.

For thrill seekers of any age, trying an unusual and new activity especially something that makes you feel a little bit of fear can add something to your spirit that wasn’t there before.

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