Coach and Volunteer Guide to Understanding Parkinson's

Parkinson's is a neurological condition that affects people differently. It can affect movement, balance, coordination, speech, energy levels and the ability to initiate movement.
There is no single "Parkinson's player". Abilities and symptoms can vary considerably between individuals and may change during a session.
Our role is not to treat Parkinson's. Our role is to provide a safe, inclusive and enjoyable pickleball experience.

1. How to communicate

DO:

✓ Introduce yourself and use the participant's name
✓ Give short, clear instructions
✓ Demonstrate rather than give lengthy explanations
✓ Give one instruction at a time
✓ Allow extra time for the participant to respond or move
✓ Encourage rather than criticise
✓ Ask how the participant would like to be supported
✓ Speak directly to the participant, not just their carer

TRY:

"Watch me."
Demonstrate.
"Now you have a go."
Avoid rushing someone because they haven't responded immediately.

2. Movement and Balance

Participants may experience:

- Slower movement
- Smaller steps
- Reduced arm swing
- Stiffness
- Tremor
- Difficulty changing direction
- Balance problems
- Difficulty starting or stopping movement

Coaching adaptations

- Reduce the playing area
- Keep participants close to the net
- Use gentle feeds
- Allow participants to remain in one position
- Avoid unnecessary rapid changes of direction
- Give plenty of space around each participant
- Have chairs available

Seated pickleball is a positive adaptation – not a failure.

3. Freezing

Some people with Parkinson's experience freezing, where their feet can temporarily feel as though they are "stuck", particularly when starting, stopping or changing direction.

If this happens:

- STOP → STAY CALM → GIVE TIME
- Do not pull or push the participant.
- Use a simple cue if they find this helpful, such as:
- "Take your time."
- "Step towards me."
- "Let's take one step together."
- Follow the participant's established strategies where these are known.
- If they appear unsafe, stop the activity and offer appropriate support.

4. Fatigue

Fatigue can be a significant symptom of Parkinson's.

✓ Build in regular rest periods
✓ Encourage participants to take a break whenever they need one
✓ Provide seating and water
✓ Avoid judging effort or participation
✓ Keep activities short and varied

Quality of participation is more important than quantity.

5. Tremor and coordination

Tremor or reduced coordination does not mean someone cannot play pickleball.

Adapt the activity:

- Use gentle ball feeds
- Allow catching before progressing to hitting
- Reduce the distance
- Use larger targets
- Allow the participant to stabilise themselves before playing
- Consider seated activities

Celebrate contact with the ball – not perfect technique.

6. Medication and daily variation

Some people experience periods when their medication is working well ("on" periods) and times when symptoms are more noticeable ("off" periods).

A participant may therefore perform differently from one session to another – or during the same session.

Do not make assumptions.

If appropriate, ask:

"How are you feeling today?"

Let the participant decide how much they want to do.

Volunteers should never advise participants about changing medication or medication timing.

7. If someone becomes unsteady or falls

Stay calm.

If they become unsteady:

- Stop the activity
- Give them time to regain balance
- Offer a chair
- Ask how you can help
- Follow the participant's normal support arrangements
- IF SOMEONE FALLS
- Do not automatically try to lift them
- Keep them comfortable and reassure them
- Alert the lead coach/first aider
- Follow the club's first-aid and emergency procedures
- Seek medical assistance where appropriate

8. Confidence and dignity
Never assume a participant needs help simply because they have Parkinson's.
Ask first.
Try:

- "Would you like a hand?"
- "Would you like to try it seated?"
- "Would you like to take a break?"
- Give people choices and allow them to remain as independent as possible.

The Golden Rule
ADAPT THE GAME – DON'T LIMIT THE PERSON

The same activity can be modified by changing:
DISTANCE • SPEED • BALL FEED • COURT SIZE • POSITION • SEATED/STANDING

The objective is to create success, enjoyment and connection.

OUR AIM
MOVE • CONNECT • ENJOY • BELONG

Every participant should leave feeling:
"I was welcomed, I was able to participate, and I'd like to come back."

Coach and Volunteer Reminder

- Be patient.
- Be positive.
- Give people time.
- Adapt the activity.
- Respect independence.
- Celebrate participation.

This guide is intended as practical guidance for pickleball sessions. It does not replace medical advice, physiotherapy advice, first-aid training, safeguarding procedures or an individual's established care/support plan.

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