

Integrating a Healthy Lifestyle with a Successful Career

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What is fitness?

Fitness is much, much more than body composition. Having low body fat is great, but there are plenty of skinny smokers out there. Physical fitness is about capabilities: it's about strength and stamina, it's about vitality and energy level, it's about an improved immune system and increased lifespan. It's about increasing the realm of possibilities in your life.

Here are some other benefits of improved physical fitness:

- increased sensory perception (vision and hearing, in particular)
- improved memory
- improved sex drive
- increased productivity
- better pay and faster advancement

What's the problem?

Why is physical fitness so elusive to us? It can be summed up in one word- inactivity. Whether you believe in evolution or creation or some combination of the two, we are not designed to be sedentary. Those organisms already abound. They're called plants. We eat them and use them for decoration. There once was a very sedentary animal known as the "giant sloth." We ate them, too, until there were no more left to eat. These are bad role models for us.

Our diets are also awful, and though what we eat is very important to our health, that is not as much of an issue as is our general lack of activity. Humanity has dealt with famine throughout our history, but only recently have we been faced with the health threat of the desk job. We have developed many defenses against a poor diet. In fact, these defenses are responsible for the poor long-term success of "weight loss dieting." We'll get to this later.

We are not so prepared to deal with inactivity. So, if you are going to make only one change in your life to improve your health, it should be to **MOVE MORE**.

The Cold, Hard Truths about Fitness

Before you commit yourself to suspending your disbelief for the next half hour, you must first understand the cold, hard truths about fitness:

- ***Physical fitness is a choice, not a right.*** Nobody “deserves” to be fit anymore than they “deserve” to be successful with their careers.
- ***There is no such thing as “maintenance.”*** We are either getting better or getting worse. Don’t start your fitness program with the expectation that one day you can stop.
 - You are always the “before” photo. How you look 8 weeks from now is determined by what you do today.
- ***There are no shortcuts.*** If you want to be in the best shape of your life, then you must work harder than you ever have before.

How do we improve our fitness and not lose our jobs?

When I was a management consultant, I was told on more than one occasion “you can’t be working hard enough if you’re in that good of shape.” Of course, this was only after I lost much of those 25 pounds.

Now, you all can tell that when they said “hard” enough, they really meant “long” enough with no thought given to productivity. But, before I start sounding like I’m bashing corporate America, let me emphasize that I am not saying that our bosses should change their expectations of us, nor do we reduce our commitment to the very careers that we, on a daily basis, accept BY CHOICE. Rather, the productivity increase we need comes from supplementing that commitment to our careers with a round-the-clock commitment to our fitness.

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Every little thing we do to consciously increase our fitness in synergy with the others. The fitter we get, the harder we can work out, and the better we want to eat. In other words, fitness has a momentum.

Here are some of those “little things” that can help to crank up that momentum:

- 1. Walk instead of ride.** You’ve heard this before. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Stop spending 15 minutes trying to find the closest parking spot everywhere you drive. This simple habit will help to kick your metabolism up throughout your day.
- 2. Get 10 minutes of real sunlight every day.** Smoke breaks don’t count. At a minimum, the body needs 10 minutes of sunlight every three days to produce enough Vitamin D to sustain itself. This may not sound like much of a challenge during the summer months, but when the days are shorter and we’re really busy, it’s easy for some of us to spend an entire week without making it into the sun. Of course, this isn’t the only reason to get outside during the day. The amount of sunlight we receive can have a direct impact on our mood and energy level. Alaskans get a tax dividend for a reason.
- 3. Maintain a regular sleep schedule, including weekends.** This will probably be the most unpopular thing I say today, but the truth of the matter is that *our bodies seek rhythm*. Have you ever walked by a music store in the mall only to find you’re walking in step with the beat? There’s an article in this month’s Discover magazine on how prolonged clapping invariably falls into a common rhythm. This tendency towards rhythm is so strong that we can’t help ourselves. It takes effort to avoid a rhythm, and sleep is no different. Without a healthy sleep pattern, your energy level and motivation will suffer.

Time to break a sweat.

At some point, integrating a healthy lifestyle with a successful career means scheduling time to work out, literally. Your workout time should make it into your official Stephen Covey “7 Habits” calendar and have the same importance as any other appointment.

Here are three scheduling tips to help make that happen:

- 1. Work out first thing in the morning, before other demands upon your time have a chance to get in the way.** It is way too easy to skip the gym after a long and hectic day at work, whether it was a good day or a bad day. We just want to get home, eat, and decompress. Exercising first, on the other hand, not only ensures that we get our activity in for the day, but it also better prepares us to take on the challenges that we may face the rest of the day.

2. Take advantage of weekends and other days off as opportunities to exercise.

While your ideal Sunday afternoon may be spent sitting on a couch watching football, that does not preclude you from getting a 30 minute run in, for example.

3. Involve your family and friends. This is the ultimate in productivity improvements. We can socialize and share our lives with those we care about while improving our health at the same time.

What do I do once I make the time?

Anything at all that will allow you to maintain an elevated heartrate. We can discuss whether running is better than swimming is better than cycling for improving fitness ad nauseam, but that doesn't matter. You must pick something that you will be able to do consistently without getting bored or discouraged. You can run in almost any weather, even when you travel. Fast walking is great if you can push yourself enough to get that heartrate up. Swimming, cycling, rollerblading- these are all great choices.

A lot of emphasis is placed on target heartrates and the "fat burning zone." Well, it turns out that there is an easy rule of thumb that requires no heartrate measurement at all, called the "conversational pace." Our cardiovascular training should be easy enough that we can hold a conversation with someone but *hard* enough that we don't want to. That will put you in the range that allows the greatest demand placed upon your cardiovascular system without fatiguing yourself so fast that you don't really get much accomplished.

The Surgeon General recommends exercising for 30 minutes at least three times per week. I call that a good start. If you want to really see a change, five times per week is a better goal. Because of the way our bodies respond to exercise, working out more frequently for less time is better than working out less frequently for more time, if you're forced to make such a choice.

What about weights?

Our understanding about the importance of strength training has greatly increased in the last decade. It turns out that weights are important for everyone, not just bodybuilders and teenage boys. Strength training provides the best stimulus for increasing our muscle mass, which is what burns most of the calories that we consume. Build more muscles, and you will burn more calories every second of every day, even when you are eating nachos at happy hour.

A common statement made by new clients is “I don’t want to get too big.” Well, that’s just not going to happen by accident. You will have plenty of warning before you bulk up. Believe it or not, you can add a lot of muscle mass without significantly increasing the diameter of the largest part of the muscle, and I can go into greater detail afterwards for those interested.

Strength training also builds strong bones. Lifting weights causes our bones to bend- they’re not rigid at all. This bending stimulates them to lay down more bone matrix and absorb more minerals, including calcium. This is important for everyone, not just women. You can take all of the calcium supplements you want, you can eat chalk, but your body won’t absorb it without the proper stimulus. So, for optimal health, you should incorporate strength training into your schedule, as well.

Weight training does not require a 30,000 sq. ft. fitness facility, although there are many advantages to joining a gym when one is available. First, a greater variety of exercises can be performed in a dedicated fitness facility. Second, we are a social animal, motivated to perform our best when surrounded by our peers. Lifting in the presence of others usually pushes us to work harder than we would on our own. Third, getting out of the house reduces the chance you’ll quit before the work is done.

Regardless of where you choose to train, the fundamentals stay the same.

The Importance of Proper Form

I have included references to several books that will tell you exactly what you can do to strengthen your body, so I won’t take the time to cover that here. That said, the next time you are in a gym, observe how others perform various exercises and do your best not to look like they do. In a gym with over 3,500 members, I’ve seen fewer than 10 who really know what they’re doing without receiving training from me or my company. It’s not that the proper form for strength training exercises is that elusive- books devoted to this topic fill the shelves of every bookstore. Rather, the “more is better” mentality is as prevalent in the gym as it is on the typical monster truck. Most use too much weight for too many sets, requiring that they use a ridiculous amount of body English if they even manage to move the weight around their bodies rather than the other way around.

Healthy Diet vs. Dieting

OK. So I said that increasing our activity was most important, but we can still have a great impact on our health by eating better. Notice that I did not say “by eating less.” We need to distinguish the difference between having a healthy diet and dieting. A

healthy diet provides us with the fuel to power our bodies and the nutrients to keep them healthy. Dieting, on the other hand, is a method of inducing a caloric deficit through the restriction of calories, and this restriction is often severe.

All weight loss diets have several effects that are contrary to a long-term improvement in fitness. Severely restricting your calories will:

- lower your metabolism
- result in cannibalization of muscle tissue
- decrease your bone density
- lower your immune function
- decrease your energy level
- increase your sensitivity to outside stress

Exercise has the exact opposite effect for every point I just listed. Plus, it will result in the same loss of fat. So, weight loss is a long term goal, completed through healthy eating and an increased metabolism from exercise.

Basic Nutrition Guidelines

What constitutes healthy eating? In the state of North Carolina, only a licensed nutritionist can tell you exactly what you should eat, but I can share with you some helpful guidelines that will point you in the right direction.

- 1. Drink more water.** Water is an essential nutrient. It is responsible for the breakdown of fat into forms that your muscles can use for fuel. It also transports other nutrients throughout your body and aids in the removal of metabolic waste. A good rule of thumb is that you should drink enough water so that your urine is nearly clear all day long. If you pee only once each day and it comes out in neon yellow chunks, you're dehydrated. Just think of your repeated trips to the bathroom as opportunities to get your heartrate up throughout the day.
- 2. Eat breakfast.** It doesn't have to be big, just a bagel or two or a bowl of oatmeal. You deplete your energy stores in your liver and muscles as you sleep. You need to replenish these stores to get the most out of your morning, whether you're working out right away or not. If you don't eat breakfast, your body will lower your resting metabolism to conserve what energy it has left. In other words, you'll burn fewer calories throughout your morning. Plus, you may find yourself famished by lunch time, causing you to overeat to compensate. Breakfast helps to balance your caloric intake across the hours you are active in the day.

3. Eat less fat. Don't try to *eliminate* fat from your diet, because fat is an essential nutrient. Instead, try to limit the percentage of calories you eat in a day to less than 30% of your total intake. Not every bite of food must meet this limit. If your breakfast consists of bagels and coffee, your lunch may consist of a sandwich with oil and vinegar dressing.

Read the nutrition information for the food you eat. By law, you will find this on all pre-packaged food, and all fast food restaurants have this information if you ask. It should list the total calories for each serving and the grams of fat. Multiply the number of fat grams by 10, and if the number is less than one third of the total calories, you're eating relatively healthfully.

4. Eat more colors. Diversity of diet is important to avoiding any long-term deficits in nutrition, and it turns out that the color of our food is a good proxy for the type of nutrition it contains. By eating a greater variety of colors each day, we help ourselves to increase the range of nutrients that we get from food rather than pills.

5. Plan your portions. Plan your next meal and its portion before you sit down to eat. Once you're finished with what you originally planned to eat, stop eating. You may feel hungry at first, but you will eventually feel satiated once your stomach has begun to digest your meal. It can take twenty minutes or more for your appetite to shut off after eating enough calories.

6. Don't be a "restrained eater." In other words, nothing should be entirely off limits. If you love pepperoni pizza, make sure you eat pepperoni pizza every now and then, just not every day. Restrained eaters will expend a lot of mental and emotional energy avoiding foods that would otherwise satisfy them. Eventually, they will cheat and then suffer from the "what the hell" phenomenon, where for the rest of the day, they binge on every junky food they see because "what the hell, I already screwed up my diet for the day."

Sir Isaac Newton said it best:

"A body at rest tends to stay at rest. A body in motion, tends to stay in motion."

Which one are you...