

EXERCISE

by

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Every moment of every day is an opportunity to help yourself be healthier. Right now, while reading this, what are you doing that may affect your well-being? Is your back hurting because you are too lazy to change your position and take care of your posture? Are your eyes tired because the light you are reading in is too little or too much? Are your lungs polluted because you or someone in the room with you is smoking? The questions are endless and so are your chances to find ways of being a healthier person. You may never be perfect, but that should not be an impediment to your seeking change, for you might become better than you are now. Even if you only think you can make a small change in your behavior, this is motive enough to change, as a slight improvement may be all the edge you need to become well and stay healthy. Also, if you keep making little changes, they can add up to big changes and improve your confidence in making even more improvements in your life. We can never be sure when we will be put to the test, but the better we take care of ourselves now, the more likely we are to be strong when it counts.

It is hard to say how much change is enough, for there seems to always be more ways to improve oneself. I would not suggest that anyone try to become Wonder Woman or Superman, as given what those two do for a living I am not at all sure that they lead very healthy lifestyles. Instead, seek to be the best you can within the limits with which you were born. For example, I am creating the best essay on exercise I am capable of writing. After all, it is for my satisfaction as much as it is meant to help anyone else. This may seem a bit selfish, but selfishness is really self-interest, which is the basis of both self esteem and motivation for making changes we need to stay healthy.

One of the ways we can and should be selfish in improving our health is by performing regular daily exercise. As with sleep, many of us do not get enough exercise in our daily routine. Exercise provides us with multiple health benefits by increasing our metabolic rate and giving our internal components the opportunity to perform at their peak. Everything from our intestines to our arm and leg muscles benefit from exercise, and lack of a proper daily workout denies them the chance to be their best. We, as the sum of our individual organ systems, are only as strong as the weakest component within us. Therefore, what helps our parts helps us, and daily exercise helps to keep us and our pieces at our best.

While there are many reasons to exercise, the best one is to safeguard your health. Many people

who exercise today are gym addicts who pump themselves up for looks and sexual gratification. Day after day you can find them in sleek, modernly designed gymnasiums and athletic clubs, sweating over iron weights hour after hour. Their workout is not driven by health concerns, but by vanity, and some even do unhealthy things like injecting steroids to reach their goal. Though big muscles may be attractive to some, there are health risks associated with excessive muscle mass. Your heart takes on the added strain of pumping oxygen to your overload of muscle, your back and posture are taxed by the excess weight you carry each day, and this mass requires constant maintenance or it begins to be replaced by fat in a matter of months. In addition, if you use steroids to artificially increase your bulk, then you are liable to a further spectrum of problems ranging from mood swings, acne, and testicular atrophy, to liver dysfunction, congestive heart failure and malignant tumors. Though personal appearance can be an important part of self esteem, and exercise can improve one's looks, vanity is often far more expensive than it is worth.

One reason for exercising is to increase peak performance and, thereby, improve daily performance. These two activities are integrally linked, with our daily abilities never greater than our peak. Through regular workouts, we can raise the ceiling on our peak abilities and thus broaden the horizons of our daily activities. If we hope to function effectively in our daily routines, then exercise is the key to peak fitness which permits us to adequately perform routine activities. For example, consider people working in a two story building which has one office on each floor but no elevator. If once each day these people must travel between the offices, then climbing a flight of stairs is a daily performance required of them. Yet, not all these people may be equally fit to perform this task every day. Those lacking adequate health will find it difficult to climb and descend the stairs when needed, becoming exhausted and slowing down in their other activities. However, if they began an exercise program to improve their ability to climb stairs, they could overcome this problem. By working out and training to climb one, then two, then three flights of stairs comfortably, they could increase their peak ability. Once this peak surpassed their daily requirements, they would then be in proper shape to climb the stairs at work each day without draining themselves of energy needed for other tasks. If they can climb three flights when exercising, then they should have no problem climbing one flight at work. Exercise allows us to optimize our abilities so as to improve our capacity to perform our daily activities.

In addition to improving our peak and daily performances, exercise raises our heart rate and increases the flow of blood in our bodies. Blood brings nutrition to and removes waste from our cells. Cells produce the things we need to sustain our lives, and they demand a constant input of raw materials from which to construct these goods. They also create a constant output of waste which must be carted away. If the raw materials are not continually brought to our cells, then they cannot make the things we need. In addition, if waste is not quickly removed from our cells, then it rapidly accumulates to toxic levels which can harm or even kill us. Therefore, blood has a two fold job to do, both parts being essential to our survival. It is a job which must be performed for each of the trillions of cells inside of us. For this reason blood must go everywhere within us. There are, in fact, so many different places blood travels to do its job, that if you placed all of the blood vessels in your body - every artery, vein and capillary - end to end, they would stretch over sixty thousand miles and could wrap nearly two and a half times around our planet at the equator.

When working out, our heart pumps quicker and our blood flows faster. The more we exercise the heart on a regular basis, the better we are prepared to pump our blood to everywhere it must go. Curiously, the most common time for people to have heart attacks is not in the evening after a stressful day of work, but in the early morning hours after getting out of bed. It is not the amount of stress in daily life that will burn out our pump, but how rapidly we move between the different levels of stress in our day's routine. If these transitions from one stress level to another are done slowly enough, then the heart has time to adjust to the increased pumping demands being placed on it. If, however, we are not physically fit and attempt to jump too rapidly into heightened activities, then our pump may fail to support us and our lives. Sadly, some people are so out of shape that the simple task of awakening and starting their day is enough to kill them:

they lack proper conditioning to transition from sleep to being awake. Yet, this can be avoided with regular exercise to maintain and improve the heart's ability to pump blood for thousands of miles throughout our bodies.

While our heart likes us to get exercise, things that infect us do not. Viruses and bacteria tend to be very sensitive to their surroundings and thrive best in a stable environment. In particular, most organisms which cause us disease prefer the climate provided by our bodies at rest. Slight variations in any of the components of this climate are often sufficient enough to stop or stunt their growth and disease producing capacities. Temperature, in particular, can be a crucial factor in this climate, and small daily alterations in our body's temperature can help limit the ability of viruses and bacteria to replicate and cause disease. Exercise is an effective way of producing heat in our bodies and safely raising our temperature for short periods of time. Done on a regular daily basis, it can make our bodies an unpleasant place for infective organisms to grow. As it does not take a lot of exercise to accomplish this, the average person should seek to do a modest workout every day, producing a continuous, comfortable sweat for twenty to thirty minutes.

The exact amount of exercise we need each day varies from person to person, however, everyone needs exercise on a daily basis. Often I hear about programs that claim you can workout three times a week and produce abdominal muscles like those of a professional wrestler, or buttocks that resemble steel bowling balls. This may sound all well and good, but our goal is not to over exaggerate the features of our bodies, just to maintain and refine them. For this reason I stress the need for doing exercise every day, rather than condensing workouts into a few sessions each week. I have been confronted by people who come up with excuse after excuse for why they cannot possibly set aside the time to exercise each and every day: they work too late, their children have to be picked up from school, they cannot afford to join a gym, etcetera, etcetera. In general it all boils down to not enough time and not enough money. However, though their excuses may all be true, when they finally keel over one day drinking that morning cup of coffee, then they will wish they had found a way to establish a daily workout routine.

It does not have to cost a lot or take a lot to exercise properly. You do not have to belong to a gym, and you do not have to buy a bunch of fancy and expensive equipment for your home. Your body is the most incredible piece of machinery you could ever have. Nothing people have ever made compares to your physical complexity. Your body has the capacity to grow, maintain, repair and, with the help of another body, even reproduce. If you take good care of it, it can provide you with years of reliable service for a century or more. I know of no cars, airplanes, computer systems or any other inventions which can make this claim. Between your head and toes you possess most of what is required for good exercise.

My favorite exercise, yoga, is an ancient and diverse art form which can be performed indoors and outdoors. It combines meditation and stretching, with some types centered more upon the spiritual aspect while others focus primarily on the physical aspect. Yoga requires little in the way of space, and is a great way to spend part or all of your exercise time. Do not be misled into thinking yoga is all about sitting around and chanting. Depending on the type you choose to do, yoga can effectively work your body as well as your mind. You can also combine push-ups, abdominal crunches and other simple exercises with yoga to create a fuller and more varied workout routine.

Outside sports such as walking, bicycling, and swimming are effective activities which can also be valuable components of your workout menu. Before I go on, though, a word of caution. While it is possible to break your nose during the descent of a push-up, or pull a muscle doing too aggressive a stretch, both these are relatively worry free types of exercise. Conversely, though you might drown while swimming, fall

down a flight of steps while walking, or even get hit by a car when bicycling, for the most part these too are safe ways to workout. There are, however, two forms of outdoor exercise which I do not recommend for the average adult: running or jogging. While they can be excellent forms of exercise for your entire, most people do not have access to appropriate tracks for running or jogging. The average person, therefore, must practice on either concrete sidewalks or hard street pavement, and this is harmful for the following reason.

When we are born, our bones are not completely hardened with calcium deposits. A good portion is still comprised of soft cartilage, which makes the overall bone much softer and more flexible than those of adults. It also permits our bones to grow with us as we get taller, until sometime in our late teens to early twenties when we reach our full height. At this point our bones completely calcify and harden so that we stop growing. Until then, these softer bones give us the bounce and resiliency to withstand the jolts and jars of youth. However, once they harden, we lose the hundreds of cartilaginous shock absorbers our bones once had, and we are less able to withstand the pounding activities we did when younger. This is why a child may be carefree about bouncing down a staircase on its bottom, while few adults would savor doing this. It is also why adult runners frequently suffer impact injuries to their spines, hips, knees and feet, even though they may have run when teenagers without any such problems. While it is possible for many adults to safely enjoy running and jogging, even on concrete or pavement, the associated complaints are so common that I seldom recommend these exercises. Given the other options at our disposal, I prefer to recommend activities which are just as beneficial, yet less likely to cause pain or injury.

Once we understand the benefits of exercise, how important it can be to our health, how inexpensive proper exercise can really be, and how accessible it is in both our homes and just outside or front doors, the only thing left to complete our workout program is time. It is not hard to get people to see the importance of exercise, to realize they need to do it, and to understand they can afford it. Yet, unfortunately, the time factor is something which is difficult to resolve. It comes down to a matter of priorities. If it is more important for you to watch television, go out drinking, or hang around doing nothing, then you will always have an excuse not to exercise. However, if working out becomes an important enough priority to you, then you will find the time each day to become and stay physically fit. Though it does take some, it need not take a lot of time each day to workout and create a better and healthier body for you to live in

Take the time to workout each day and you will play an active role in your well-being. It is not as important what you do, as it is that you do something. There are plenty of good books out there to help you construct your own personal routine. In addition, take a class or two in different activities, so as to broaden your perspectives and experiences with various forms of exercise. Community centers often offer these classes at a nominal fee. Let your workout be something which grows and changes with you, thus keeping vital and interesting. Finally, do not feel intimidated by or obligated to any one way of working out. Pick and choose from the smorgasbord of activities those parts you like best, thereby making your exercise unique, beneficial and enjoyable to you. It is a process of discovery in which you can constantly find new and better ways of getting the most from and for yourself.