

The Healthy Habit

Focus the mind, strengthen the spirit, turn back the body clock.

I am a doctor, but I am not your doctor. This is education, not medical advice, and it is no substitute for talking with your own physician. There is no single right way to do any of it. Look for the principles.

Four habits: mind, body, food, sleep. Some of this is outside your control. Genetics, illness, injury and age set the starting point, and the only question is what you do from wherever you happen to be standing.

The cost of getting this wrong is not abstract. Inactivity, poor food and poor sleep run to roughly \$371,000 over a couple's lifetime, and that is before the part you cannot buy back. The trouble is that none of it announces itself. You cannot see inside, it happens slowly, and the first signals are indirect: you find yourself opting out of things that are physically demanding, you see yourself in a photograph, or a routine test comes back showing something has started to malfunction.

You need a reason first. Mine is to square the curve, meaning to live a long time and then decline fast, with as little disability at the end as possible. Not years added to your life so much as life added to your years. If you are not spending time on your health, the honest diagnosis is usually that your why is not strong enough yet.

1. Mental fitness

- Mental health is not the absence of mental illness. Not being depressed is not the same as being well adjusted, steady, resilient, at peace with yourself. So the real question is whether you can get more of it, and how.
- Most of the answer is the inner voice. It runs all day and decides how the world looks to you, and nobody ever taught you how to work with it. You picked up whatever habits you picked up, and because it is internal, nobody can see them, including you.
- You know this at the extremes. An unruly mind can be torture, and much of what people do with drink, drugs, and endless amusement is an attempt to turn the voice down.
- So what if you could get good at it. Ruminating about the past and worrying about the future are both useless, and both are skills you practice daily without meaning to. We pay attention to the contents of the mind and almost none to how it operates, which is like driving a car for forty years without ever opening the hood.
- Mindfulness is two things, and neither is exotic. **Come to the present.** People who report being fully present report being happier, and the more the mind time-travels the worse that gets. **Watch your own thoughts from outside.** We assume our thought habits are simply who we are, and we repeat them precisely because we never see them clearly.
- It feels like snorkeling. Still, hearing everything, judging nothing. Your thoughts are the fish: they arrive, they pass, and they are not you.
- **The daily devotional**, ten to twenty minutes, five days a week, straight after exercise. Music you find lifting. Then stillness: a quiet place, the breath, the body, and when the mind wanders you bring it back, which is the practice rather than a failure of it. Then prayer or meditation with a question, naming three specific things you are grateful for and asking what the needs in front of you are across each of your roles, with a pen nearby. Then ponder the day before it happens.

2. Physical fitness

- Your body is a high performance machine, and an expensive one, so the temptation is to keep it safe in the garage and take it out slowly on Sundays where people can see it. A car in the garage is safe. That is not what cars are for, and it is not what you are for either.
- **Use it or lose it, literally.** Muscle atrophies. Bone thins under disuse, and I see that on x-rays. Skin builds callus exactly where it is loaded. The body answers load, so removing load removes the body.
- **Comfort is what is killing us.** How we travel, work, get food, and play has been re-engineered to remove effort. There is an elevator to the gym. There are frictionless payments and participation trophies. We are no longer dying of scarcity and hardship, we are dying of excess and ease.
- Opposition is not an obstacle to the body, it is the mechanism. The sweat and the pounding heart and the sore muscles are the signal that strength is being built. Confusion and frustration work the same way for the mind. Exercise is work, which is exactly why people avoid it, and avoiding it is missing the point entirely.
- If you are over 50, stop assuming you have graduated from a hard workout. Reacquaint yourself with what a ten out of ten effort feels like. Discomfort is not a sign of failure, it is the signal that the adaptation is happening. Sweat, a pounding heart, and sore muscles are how you get stronger next time.

- **Exercise may be the single most potent medical intervention ever known.** If you keep one line from this, keep that one.

Then everyone asks the same thing: just tell me what to do. **The best exercise is the one you will actually do**, and the target is **25 minutes a day**. Broken up counts. Indoors counts. Five minutes, five times, counts. Take the easiest on-ramp: 2,500 steps, a beginner video or app, a class at the same hour daily, or your own program with aerobic work Monday, Wednesday and Friday and strength Tuesday and Thursday.

Push play. A recorded workout is the closest thing to a silver bullet I have found. It removes every excuse at once: no time, no equipment, no room, no idea what to do, raining, dark, traveling, do not want to be seen. A professional planned the rotation and it covers every muscle group. And it works with your psychology: no analysis paralysis, no decision to make, and a class on screen you find yourself keeping up with. It is a water slide. Sit down, and 25 minutes later you are sweating.

Around the sessions, stop engineering the last ounce of effort out of the day. Three flights or fewer, take the stairs. Park farther out. Mow your own lawn. Exercise snacks work: chair squats, wall push-ups, countertop planks, calf raises, stair climbs. Breaking up the sitting is a separate lever again: about five minutes of light walking every half hour cut the post-meal blood sugar rise by more than half and dropped systolic pressure several points, against sitting straight through. (Duran and colleagues, 2023.)

On the timescale: twelve years of this, tracked yearly by body composition scan, took 7 pounds of fat off me and put 13 on in muscle, and resting metabolism rose while I aged twelve years, because metabolism follows muscle. Twelve years, not overnight results.

3. Balanced nutrition

- **You cannot outrun a bad diet.** Exercise is necessary and it is not sufficient. Every upgrade on a high performance car is wasted if you put mud in the tank.
- Food is fuel, and I do not think most of us believe it. For years I pretended not to understand the link between what I ate and how my body worked. You cannot see inside, so you assume you are getting away with it. It is compound interest running in reverse.
- **Three levers**, the same three any medicine has: drug, dose, and frequency. **What** you eat, **how much**, and **how often**. The diet wars are almost entirely about the first. Ask what share of yesterday was carbohydrate, or how many calories you ate, then ask whether you ate at all. Only one of the three is easy to answer, which is a hint about where to start.
- Whole foods first, emphasize protein, and **add rather than subtract**. Watch anything promising a quick fix. This is an identity change and it will feel slow.
- Ultra-processed food crowds everything else out, and you eat more calories of it. If every single thing you eat is delicious, that is a clue. The problem is not that carbohydrate is bad, it is that hyperpalatable food makes you eat too much of it.
- Look at where the calories actually come from before you argue about macros. The ordinary American diet is dominated by ultra-processed food, and its trick is crowding rather than poisoning: the palatable thing takes the place on the plate that something else would have had, and you eat more of it besides.
- **Displace it in steps:** one meal a week, then one day a week, then Monday, Wednesday and Friday, then weekdays, then six days in seven with a splurge day. Start meals with water and with the whole food on the plate. Your grandmother was right about not eating dessert first.
- **Fasting is food rest.** Every other animal lives with feast and famine, and bears do not eat all winter. We carry the machinery for switching fuel sources, which is what fat is for, and a fasted state begins around twelve hours. Are we really the only mammal that cannot miss a meal?
- Eat mindfully, which mostly means slowly and without a screen, so that the signals arrive before the plate is empty.
- The practical list: crave foods out of the house, share the big portions, do not drink your calories, nuts within reach, pack your own lunch.

None of the four habits survives contact with a bad week unless it has a fallback, so decide the fallbacks now rather than at the moment you need them. No ten minutes for the devotional? Take three: one minute of music, one of stillness, one of prayer or reflection. Cannot get outside? Push play at home. Only ten minutes? Take the ten. Eating out? Protein and vegetables, skip the bread basket. Blew a meal? The next meal is back on plan, not next Monday. To bed late? Keep the same wake time and do not sleep in. The rule underneath all of them is the same: **never miss twice**.

4. Recovery and sleep

- Compare the three. You can go weeks without exercise, days without food, and about twenty hours without sleep. That ranking tells you something.

- Imagine reporting on us from outside. They lapse routinely into something resembling a coma, the body helpless, the mind full of bizarre hallucinations. It consumes a third of their lives and they have no idea why.
- Nearly every species does it anyway, at enormous cost, because you cannot gather food or protect your young while unconscious. As one pioneer of sleep research put it, if sleep does not serve an absolutely vital function then it is the biggest mistake evolution ever made. (Allan Rechtschaffen.) Two adults in three still fail to get the recommended amount, and the World Health Organization calls it an epidemic.
- Short sleep is associated with weakened immunity, cardiovascular disease, more food craving, disrupted blood sugar, worse mood, and higher dementia risk.
- **The sleep ritual:** a set bedtime you actually keep, an eight hour window, no caffeine within eight hours of bed, no exercise within four, a dark and cool and quiet room with no screens, and a wind-down you repeat. Avoid sleep aids.

Making any of the four stick

The eight levers from the first session apply here directly, and it is worth seeing them attached to something concrete.

- **Why:** independence at eighty starts with today's 25 minutes.
- **Fresh start:** reset tomorrow morning, or at the next meal. Not next Monday.
- **Make it easy:** start at ten minutes and add five a week. Swap one food a week, beginning with what you drink.
- **Decision engineering:** same place, same hour. Do not keep it in the house. Charge the phone in another room.
- **Accountability:** walk with a friend, share the streak, keep the same bedtime as your partner.
- **Temptation bundle:** save the documentary or the audiobook for those 25 minutes and nothing else.
- **Momentum:** check the box daily, and never miss two in a row.
- **Trust the process:** if it feels repetitive and boring, you are doing it right. Progress does not require perfection.

TRY THIS

- Put the morning ritual on tomorrow's calendar: move, then be still.
- Pick one on-ramp and do 25 minutes tomorrow.
- Displace one ultra-processed meal this week.
- Set an alarm for bedtime, not only for waking.
- Teach one person something from this.

Our bodies are our gardens, and our wills are our gardeners. (Shakespeare, who put it in the mouth of a villain, and was right anyway.)

Resources

Free workout video

- HASfit, with senior and beginner modifications
- Yoga with Adriene, gentle mobility and balance
- Walk at Home, indoor walking
- Fitness Blender, filter by time and impact
- Heather Robertson, programs using dumbbells

Paid, if you want a program

- Apple Fitness+, Peloton, and BODi all run beginner series and free trials.
- On Medicare, check SilverSneakers, Renew Active and Silver&Fit before you pay for a gym. A membership is often already included.
- For stillness: Waking Up, Calm, Headspace. Three minutes is enough to start.

Referenced in this session

- Duran and colleagues, 2023, on breaking up sitting.
- Allan Rechtschaffen, on sleep and the biggest mistake evolution ever made.
- William Shakespeare, on bodies as gardens.

Reading

- *Outlive*, Peter Attia. The case for squaring the curve, at length.
- *Why We Sleep*, Matthew Walker. What the missing hours actually cost.
- *In Defense of Food*, Michael Pollan. On what happened to the food supply.
- *10% Happier*, Dan Harris. Mindfulness for people who find the idea embarrassing.

Theme: health. From my course *Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise*. The companion sessions are on daily habits, money, and continued learning.