



LUKENOTES

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The Softer Side Of Fitness

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A client once explained to me that he did a triathlon (three -event work-out) every time he went to the gym: the sauna, the steam room, and the whirlpool. While he thought he was making a joke, I actually commended him on his efforts because he had made a commitment to do something that was good for his body, and he used a variety of treatments. Today's world has given us the idea that it is always better to do something than nothing, to produce more in less time, and to have more: options, memory, and bigger/faster cars to name a few. We are not very often rewarded or feel good about less activity.

Experts tell Americans that we are not getting enough sleep or vacation, that "driving while fatigued" is a greater problem than drunk driving, that we are eating fast food more often than we are sitting down for a leisurely meal, that fatigue could be a cause of weight gain, and that our children are over-scheduled, over-stimulated and do not have enough "down time." Trends in fitness have mirrored this move toward frenetic activity. The "24 Hour" fitness center is one of the fastest-growing chains in the country. Gyms are implementing workouts with names like "The Sargeant's Program," "ABS Blast," "Cardio SLAM," and "Boot Camp." Personal training services are in high demand, and clients boast that their trainers are "killing them and they can't walk for days" after a strenuous workout.

Among all this push to "increase" there are some voices of dissent. Pilates and Yoga classes are piquing interest, many gyms are adding massage services, and trainers are trying to incorporate better breathing and recovery practices in their clients. I have learned from my clients, however, that there is a resistance associated with partaking in these alternative forms of exercise. I frequently hear: "Will this burn calories?" "But I don't feel like I am working," "I AM breathing," "I don't feel anything," and "Things keep rushing through my mind and I can't relax."

The ability of the body and mind to relax is actually just as important as developing strength, endurance, flexibility and balance. Relaxation is an essential element in fitness that allows our bodies to make some changes. This is the time where our body recovers, takes stock of what it needs, and begins to rebuild. When we continuously overload our bodies with a full schedule, work, exercise, and "getting stuff done," we never allow our systems to relax. A fitness plan must be well-rounded enough to give the body a chance to benefit. However, because emphasis has been given to the excitation side of fitness, teaching our bodies how to calm down has received less attention. When I educate clients about caring for their bodies, I describe a

continuum in which what we do in our daily life is the center of the scale. Excitation exercises increase the stress put on the body through activities such as running, biking, sports, and weightlifting. This phase includes anything that increases our stress responses, our heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, sweating, core body heat, and muscle activity. These excitation activities teach our bodies how to handle stress without becoming injured. On the other end of the continuum are the relaxation exercises. These include anything that decreases our stress responses, e.g., lowers heart rate, breath rate, blood pressure, sweating and muscle activity, and increases temperature at the extremities. This phase includes meditation, feldenkrais, biofeedback training, massage, tai chi, certain aspects of pilates and yoga, stretching, and breath training. These types of activities deactivate the body, promoting muscle relaxation, proper breathing patterns, and healing.

Balance is important in everything we do. However, most people try to balance only their excitation exercise. Cross training or training variety (for example, swimming, biking and running on alternate days) is one way to balance excitation exercise. By changing the way we stress our cardiovascular or strength systems, we decrease overwork injuries, but this is not the same as giving the body destressing exercises. The human body needs recovery time.

Sometimes a body works hard even without excitation exercise. If a person's daily activities are stressful and tiring (yes, sitting all day is tiring), the body is getting over stressed in this situation as well. There are a myriad symptoms that are related to an over-stressed body. Physical symptoms include headaches, skin problems, general fatigue, sleep disturbances, hair loss, jaw or neck and shoulder tension, high blood pressure, asthma, irregular heart beat, chest pain, low back pain, shallow breathing, cold hands/feet, digestion problems, and/or frequent colds. Emotional symptoms are also seen with over stress: nervousness, moodiness, irritability, frustration, memory problems, decreased concentration, and phobias. Finally, behaviors that may result from over stress include isolation from social activities, over- sensitivity, road rage, overreaction, and increased argumentation.

The importance of recovery time is noted across all levels of fitness. The harder one stresses the limits of physical fitness, the more recovery activities are needed for that body to be healthy. Doing activities that are physically comfortable is a good place to start!

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