



LUKENOTES

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Make Some Resolutions To Your Resolutions

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As a physical therapist and fitness professional, I dread January. After a month of celebrating and socializing over appetizers, mashed potatoes, and cookies in cold weather and crowded malls, our bodies are overfed, under-exercised and in desperate need of a little break and re-direction. So, what do we do? We sit down and write out our goals for the new year.

These goals usually include some pretty big ticket items: lose weight, quit smoking, get in shape, tone up, eat better, or maybe even run a marathon. By the end of January, half of our resolvers are back on the couch with the popcorn and the other half are filling up physical therapy clinics with their wonderful intentions and over-zealous pursuits. Resulting injuries are more than nuisances. They can mistakenly give the message that we are "too old" to exercise, that when I try to get in shape, "I hurt myself." There is a better way. Actually, an easier and more comfortable way! You may think that I am the only trainer shouting "Take it easy!" Actually, the new fitness mantra is "De-stress." I would like to suggest some resolutions for the over-exerciser and under-exerciser alike.

First, take a deep breath, close your eyes and say to yourself "I am a tortoise, slow and steady." Fitness is much more than just exercise or diet. Fitness encompasses all the ways we do or do not take care of our bodies, including the clothing/shoes we wear, the amount of sleep we get, the food we eat as well as when and how much we eat, the way we sit at our desk to work, the hours we put in without a break, how we maintain relationships with people or activities that sap our energy and feed into our bad habits, talking down to ourselves, or not giving ourselves proper credit for good health habits. If we examine the periphery of our fitness behaviors, we will find some very easy things to change. Take January to find and decrease your "loopholes." Get 8 hours daily of sleep this month. Replace any exercise shoe that is more than one year old (yes, I mean it). Look at your personal fitness pyramid: cardiovascular, strength, endurance, flexibility, balance, and relaxation, and decide on two areas on which to focus.

Second, slow she goes. Now, even slower and so slow you feel your eyelids drooping. Again, I'm not kidding. I now recommend 10-20 minutes of relaxation daily before starting someone on an exercise plan. Studies have shown a regular nap is tied to a healthier heart, and that stress is as significant a factor, as any lack of exercise in most disease cases. By taking some time out of each day to become quiet, we allow our breath and our bodies to separate from the stress of the day. As a result, we break the tension cycle that increases

stress hormone production, fat production, blood pressure, and the muscle tension that help to create headaches, back pain, knee pain, and keeps us awake at night. The body uses this “down time” to actually create the healthy changes that exercise promotes. It is your own personal reset button. So find a quiet spot, turn on some classical music, and take some deep breaths. For those of you who find this stressful—and you know who you are— keep trying. It will get better.

Third, pay attention to your posture. As I walk around fitness facilities, I often cringe at the positions people put themselves in, as they attempt to use heavy equipment. Several body therapies train people to get out of poor postural habits: Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, Pilates, Tai Chi, and Yoga. Research has shown gains in height with correct form in these disciplines. Correct posture can decrease neck, back, hip and knee pain. Posture also helps with balance, coordination, reaction time, and strengthens those elusive “core” muscles everyone talks about. Place a sticker on your shirt sleeve and every time you see the sticker, give yourself a posture check: Head tall but chin slightly down, belly off your waistband, feet firmly planted and evenly bearing weight. Check yourself sitting, standing, and moving. Be especially aware of how you sit at a computer, in a car, and how you walk. As you become more aware of your poor habits, you can begin to correct them. And don’t stop checking your posture when you get to the gym! Think tall and symmetrical and stop holding on to that treadmill. The good news is that good posture burns more calories and the bad news is that you might get a little sore from sitting up straight.

Fourth, give yourself a big hand for your GAINS: more productive sleep, more energy, better mood, more control in your life, more strength, flexibility, balance, and deeper breath. Make this year about fitness, not just about weight loss. Every day praise yourself for what you did, not what you did not do. Research has shown that a positive outlook on fitness behavior creates greater fitness changes, even when activities are the same.

Fifth, allow yourself to do something physically new. Get a friend and take a group class at your gym or go biking, swimming, hiking, dancing. Even pool and shuffle board are positive ways to get moving. Every time your body does something it isn’t used to doing, it creates new neural (brain) connections and wakes up muscle fibers it wasn’t using, and this is very good!

Finally, instead of five resolutions for January, take out your calendar and write down one achievable goal for each month of the year. Make this a year of small goals and resist the temptation to do too much. Ignore your failures, celebrate your successes and BE the turtle.

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