

HEALTHY BODY, HEALTHY MIND

By Dennis Heath



Life is stressful at the top but being fit helps keep you there

Health and fitness may not be the primary requirement for success in business, but is more important as executives climb the corporate ladder to face more responsibility and increased stress. Being fit not only helps an executive feel more confident, it has other practical benefits. People who are physically fit generally have more energy, are mentally alert, better decision makers, cope better with the rigours of regular travel and are less prone to illness. Fitness helps the immune system work more efficiently to fight off infections, resulting in less time off work due to illness. Just as importantly, fitness helps the busy executive cope with stress.

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Stress can kill in its extreme form. If not kept in check the body's "fight or flight" mechanism kicks in as a primitive response to stressful situations. Senior managers can experience extreme stress at any time, but particularly in times of downsizing, mergers, or rapid business growth. A certain degree of adrenalin induced stress can be useful when under pressure. However, prolonged stress, if not dissipated, manifests itself in physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, insomnia, and persistent headaches. Psychological effects may include random anxiety attacks, irritability, mood swings and depression. All of which impact leadership effectiveness.

An ex-colleague, James, suffered a nervous breakdown (severe stress) and was admitted to a clinic for two-weeks of intensive rehabilitation. The treatment, aside from counselling, was deep relaxation sessions, alternated with vigorous exercise classes. He was not totally cured after the brief stay but made regular relaxation and exercise a way of life and continued to do so after his full recovery. He is now one of the most relaxed people I know, enjoying a successful career.

Exercise not only dissipates the harmful effects of adrenaline overload but also releases endorphins. Endorphins have four effects on the body and mind; they boost the immune system, relieve pain, reduce stress, and postpone the aging process. They are the body's very own "happy juice", inducing a relaxed state of mind and an increased ability to put work problems into perspective.

As an executive coach I focus on leadership performance and the most common excuse I hear from senior managers for not using exercise as a stress reliever is, "I don't have time". However, we all have the same amount of time. It's how we manage and prioritise time that counts. Getting up half an hour earlier to exercise, even if it's only to go for a brisk walk or swim before breakfast, does not take time from the normal working day. Similarly, evening TV time is easily converted into exercise time.

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No doubt working up a major sweat in a gym three or four times a week combined with a healthy diet is the best path to fitness. But for those that are resistant to more vigorous forms of fitness training, much can be achieved by making some small lifestyle adjustments. [Here are some simple ways for the busy executive to improve health, fitness and job performance without breaking out in a sweat:](#)

1. Walk quickly up stairs and escalators wherever possible instead of taking a lift or just standing on the moving stairway.
2. When arriving at your office car park, park your car the furthest possible distance away from the office entrance. Or if you take the bus to work and the weather is favourable, get off one stop early and walk the extra distance to the office. Those extra few metres every day can add up to several kilometres of walking exercise over a year.

3. When going out for business lunches avoid fried and fatty foods and stick to fruit juices to drink. If you feel you must join your business associate in an alcoholic drink, have just one glass of wine to be sociable. Don't be persuaded into drinking more or finishing the bottle. Skip dessert too.
4. One of the biggest perils of business life is high alcohol intake. When in a country where drinking after the working day is part of the culture, stay in control of the situation. Don't feel pressured into drinking more than you really want. Be aware that as well as giving you a hangover and hindering your job performance, beer, wine and spirits are superbly efficient waist expanders.
5. When it comes to losing weight, fad diets rarely work in the long run. Minor adjustments to eating habits however, produce long term benefits. We are all educated enough to know the difference between a healthy and unhealthy diet. A habit of simply eating smaller portions and avoiding heavy meals at night can produce dramatic improvements over time.
6. Proper sleep is essential to good job performance and stress avoidance. The average adult needs seven to eight hours of undisturbed, quality sleep to be fully functional. Before going to bed try doing some light reading that is not work related, to divert your mind from work issues. If your mattress is worn or uncomfortable it will deprive you of sleep and may lead to back or neck problems. Invest in a new orthopaedic one to wake up feeling refreshed and devoid of aches and pains.

The key to improving health and fitness, whatever your age, is to make these minor adjustments into permanent habits. You may find that as you become leaner and fitter you want to take more vigorous exercise, perhaps by engaging a personal trainer. Actually paying to get fit is a great motivator. When you are fit, you'll find your stress levels are lower; your energy quotient higher and your ability to function at executive level greatly increased. Your spouse or partner may also appreciate your new found zest.