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Chapter Eleven

Exercise For Good

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then,
is not
an act, but a habit.”
–Aristotle

Ever noticed how difficult a new activity, such as shooting baskets, seems when you first start? You have to concentrate on every movement and think about external factors, from how you hold the ball, to lining it up with the rim and releasing it into motion, how much push to use, how high to launch the ball and on it goes. Each shot you practice is an adjustment until you start making baskets. Now your body and mind have made the connections and associations necessary for you to successfully make a basket. Eventually, with enough practice, you step up to the line and many of the things you had to think of while you were

learning are now automatic, so you are quickly able to fire off a swish into the basket. Your body and mind had to learn together and create a harmonious interchange in order to accomplish the task of making a basket. Your automatic familiar thoughts and actions have created a habit that supports making baskets.

Including exercise in your lifestyle requires developing habits that support exercise. How can you expect to consistently achieve a goal or a desired outcome until you establish the habit or habits that will support it? Creating an exercise lifestyle starts with understanding what a habit is and how a habit is formed. A habit is a familiar practiced behavior that supports an end-result. The familiar practiced behavior, the part you can control and the part where you take action steps and practice is the process, what is often referred to as your journey. Paying attention to and working with the process affects the end-result. An end-result or outcome simply happens because of your attention to the process. In other words, the outcome you achieve is a direct result of the behaviors you integrate. Your habits become the determinants of your outcomes.

Each time you engage in exercise, you are practicing an exercise behavior (process) that has many different end-results (product). Possible end-results from exercising, such as improved health, improved feelings of wellness, improved fitness, improved musculature or weight maintenance require a familiar practiced behavior (habit) of exercising to support them. You create a habit that

influences the end-result or desired outcome. You would never set out to do the end-result. Have you ever heard of anyone going out to do a little wellness today? How about going to the gym to do fifteen minutes of health? Or how about setting out to do a little weight maintenance? You would state that you are going to the gym to do some exercising to support your weight maintenance. The idea is to get familiar with focusing on the steps (process) or rather the behavior necessary to support and thus create a lifetime exercise habit. Whatever you do repeatedly in action and thought creates a familiar neurological path in your brain. That path becomes easier to follow each time you take it, just like making baskets when learning basketball.

Breaking through a habit barrier or eliminating an undesirable habit begins with creating a new desirable habit. When adding a new behavior or habit to your lifestyle, allow for a transition period when the old habit and the new desirable habit exist in your life side by side. Habits, whether desirable or undesirable, are meeting a need. Until you develop an alternate way to get your need met with a new habit, leave the old habit in place. Dropping a habit without having an alternative to meet your need creates stress for the body. You have removed something familiar and supportive of a need without providing another form of support. Eventually the undesirable habit will recede from your experience as you come to practice the new behavior more often. Develop what you like; engage in it and eventually what does not serve you fades away. You will choose the

undesirable habit less as you choose what serves you more. It is easier to let go of the old behaviors that no longer serve you when you have something clearly defined and readily available to choose. Thus, letting go of the old, just happens.

Create choice for yourself by adding behaviors to choose from and once a habit is formed from practice, it becomes easy to choose. When habits no longer serve you, create choice by integrating a new behavior to form a new habit. Without a new habit to choose from, your only choice is to engage in your current habit or to stop choosing it. Oftentimes we will drop a habit only to pick it up again because it appears to be our only choice. Let's say, a habit that you may desire to move away from is the habit of watching television. Create a desirable habit, such as exercise, that you enjoy and that benefits your body both psychologically and physically. The more desirable habits you create and choose from, the more likely you are to move away from the undesirable habit. You now have an option to exercise or to watch television. Prior to that, the only choice was to watch television or not.

You must have a choice of habits or you will always choose the same one over and over again. For example, you are holding a red ball in your hands; you set it down at your feet. You want to play, and the only option is to pick up the red ball you just set down, so you end up picking up the same red ball you just set down. Adding a different ball, perhaps a green one allows you choice. Now you can choose to pick up either the red or green

ball to play with. Having two or more different colored balls to choose from gives you choice. Having only one ball to choose from can be discouraging and create feelings of being trapped with no choice. This can lead to not wanting to play at all if the same ball you are bored with is the only one to choose from. Having a choice creates a sense of freedom and empowerment. Remember, you always have the option to choose the habit you are already familiar with, but you can only choose a new habit after you have practiced a behavior to create it. In order to have a choice, you must first create options to choose from. Once you have choice, whatever you repeatedly choose in thought and behavior becomes a habit.

Future focus, which is created in the imagination, can interfere with the development of your new habit because it lacks the support of a practiced behavior. Your imagination creates a mental space that is vulnerable to choosing old, undesirable habits. A mental space is a gap between where you are and a place in the future where you desire to be. Old habits that no longer serve you can slip in between you and your goals, especially when those goals are far removed from you somewhere off in the future. You may fill the mental space by indulging in activities that undermine, sabotage or contradict your desired outcomes. What fills the gap of future focus is a short-term goal that brings your focus back to where you are.

Be conscious of old habits that may throw you out of alignment with your intention or goal(s).

Behaviors you have practiced never truly go away. You have replaced them with new behaviors; so don't be surprised if old undesirable patterns of behavior creep back into your exercise reality. There are times when I let old behaviors kick in. It's like throwing a wrench in the cog; my whole exercise vision sometimes blows up. One of my biggest wrenches comes out when I miss a day of exercise. I get busy, use that as an excuse and choose to eliminate exercise from my day. I have an old habit of being inflexible with my schedule and choosing work over personal care. Now I've got the ball rolling for feeling guilty and being a failure. Throw in a second day of focus on failure, and a goal I don't meet and now I have the perfect recipe for inactivity. This scenario may last a few days, weeks or even months. I see myself as what I am practicing, which looks like failure, no exercise and no balance between work and personal time. I have created a downward spiral by picking up old habits.

You must stay open and flexible when moving along your exercise path. Let your exercise habits always include the wisdom of your awareness, and the flexibility of your vision. How will you know when to change, add to, adjust or modify your routine? When you feel like procrastinating, become bored or disinterested, when it isn't fun or you are not feeling good feelings, it is time to make a change. Integrating new behaviors always involves internal and external change. Relapse or a downward spiral is an opportunity to discover how you handle change.

What is your perception of “two steps back” or “falling off the bandwagon?” Are you floundering in a sea of circumstance that has the appearance of loss of control or, are you looking for a way to shift your perspective and view your circumstances from another vantage point? What do you tell yourself during times of change?

By observing your response to circumstances, you empower yourself with the direction to your solutions for spiraling upwards again and creating habits you enjoy which foster success. What is the secret to starting an upward spiral? Choose to align your exercise vision, goal(s) and intention(s) with your behavior choices. In other words, your choice of action is aligned with your internal process. You are building an exercise lifestyle habit comprised of your thoughts, beliefs, intentions, emotions and actions. These habits contribute to the continual focus on and attraction of more of the same.

No habit would be complete without a shift in consciousness. A behavior is not sustainable, unless it is accompanied by a shift in consciousness to support it. Your awareness of your own choices will create the foundation for shifting your consciousness to one focused on and supportive of your new habit. Start by observing the way you practice. You may need to reacquaint yourself with what practice looks like. Sometimes we are so far removed from integrating a new behavior that perhaps we forget what that process looks like. Also, we have become so skilled at what we already know, that we may have the expectation that the

same skill level will apply to whatever we pick up. Having that expectation can lead to quickly dropping or giving up on a new activity or behavior, especially if it is accompanied by feelings of “not good enough” or “can’t get it right”, etc. Remind yourself what practice looked like for you. Observe what your practice pattern for integrating new behaviors is. Did you ride a bike perfectly the first time? Did you stay standing the first time you were on skates? How many baskets did you shoot before you made consistent free throws? How many pogo jumps did you do in a row on your pogo stick when you first started out?

Oh, how time distorts my memory. My memory of integrating new behaviors was one of ease. I seem to have forgotten all the practice time I put in to learn the things I did when I was younger. Seems I was in for a reminder of the reality of my abilities to integrate new activities. As it stands, I am comfortable with my abilities to perform what I’ve already integrated from long ago. I found myself reluctant to start something new because I found that I was not doing so well with integrating a new activity, whereas, all my old behaviors were already very easy to choose. The problem was that I didn’t like the results I was getting with the behaviors I had already successfully integrated years before. When I started new healthy behaviors, I noticed that I would start the behavior for a few weeks, and then I would stop and pick it up again a few weeks later. I was practicing the integration of a new behavior. Think of it like shooting baskets. You make one, then you miss,

then you make some more, then you miss. The point is, each time I stopped my new behavior, it was simply a miss and I turned around and gave it another shot. You are practicing a behavior exercise, and that requires practice to adapt. That is how you begin the process for integrating exercise for good...practice, practice, practice and then you practice again.

“He that has energy enough to root out a
vice should go
further, and try to plant a virtue in its place.”
–Charles Caleb Colton

Get to Know Yourself

Write down one new exercise habit you would like to integrate.

Clarify what that looks and feels like.

What does your practice pattern look like?

Write out what took place when you successfully integrated a new behavior.

What intention is your habit aligned with?

What behavior will you begin to practice today?

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