

## Ross' Precision Health & Fitness Newsletter

### Issue #9 – 4/1/2007 – Attitude and Long-Term Success

Welcome to the April edition of my newsletter. The last few issues have focused on getting back to basics and discussing the foundations of any good health and fitness program (goals, stretching, etc.). This month will follow the same trend, but in a little different way. Instead of addressing a specific health and fitness component, I want to discuss something that influences every aspect of your program: attitude.

Your attitude towards health and fitness conveys a lot about your views toward exercise, nutrition, and generally living a healthy lifestyle. In addition your attitude can provide some important information about how likely you are to remain consistent with your positive habits and ultimately reach your goals. There is not one best attitude for everyone, but some attitudes are more likely to enhance your success, while others may hinder it.

Some of the most telling information can be learned by asking 2 basic questions. The first question is: “Why do you want to eat healthy and exercise?” This question is essentially about determining your motivation for living a healthy lifestyle. Answers typically come in the form of important goals, such as wanting to reach a certain waist/dress size, or general statements, such as wanting to live a long and healthy life.

Few answers are unquestionably bad, but some are certainly more positive than others. The best answers involve a long-term outlook or demonstrate an integration of eating healthy and exercising into everyday life. When health and fitness is viewed as a part of you lifestyle instead of just a means to reach your goals, your chance of long-term success increases greatly.

This brings us to the second question: “What will you do after you achieve your current goals?” This is probably the more important question of the two, because it helps identify attitudes that are detrimental to long-term success. Any answers involving plans to maintain or improve upon previous successes are beneficial. On the other hand, answers suggesting a stoppage of the behaviors responsible for achieving your goals or a lack of thought about the future may be causes for concern.

These varying responses often separate people who incorporate health and fitness into their lifestyle from those who force themselves to exercise and eat healthy just to achieve specific goals. The real difference is some people realize that exercise and healthy eating will always be required to some degree, while others view them as temporary requirements. It should come as no surprise that people who view exercise and nutrition as important parts of their everyday life have the best long-term results.

People who view eating healthy and exercising as unpleasant necessities typically only have short-term success, if they have any at all. This type of thinking is representative of a general attitude that I refer to as an “adversarial relationship with health and fitness.” This includes any people who do not want to have healthy habits, but know they need to for any number of reasons. These adversarial relationships vary from mild to severe, but should be avoided at all costs, because they almost always result in frustration and failure.

Negative attitudes towards eating healthy or exercising commonly involve individuals who focus on a small number of goals (usually related to appearance) and their desire for success provides the motivation for continuing positive health and fitness behaviors. This doesn't sound too bad, but these actions are usually accompanied by the belief that reaching the goals will be the endpoint to their health and fitness struggles or solve all their problems.

Unfortunately there are a number of problems with this approach to success. Most notably, when people don't want to exercise or eat healthy, the longer they persist, the more their dislike increases and the harder it becomes to continue the beneficial behaviors. If the desire for improvement is strong enough to withstand this dislike, they may achieve their goals, but then the source of motivation is gone and success is often short lived. This is usually followed by a return to previous habits which means a return to previously undesired results.

While the above description concerns more serious adversarial health and fitness relationships and I assume anyone who consistently reads my newsletter does not think this way, it is still important to be aware of the dramatic effect attitude can have on your long-term results. In addition, almost everyone experiences some form of these feelings, such as not wanting to exercise or wanting to eat poorly for a day or weekend. The important thing is to be aware of your behaviors and not allow negative feelings to accumulate over time.

From a practical standpoint, it is a good idea to take a step back every once in a while and examine your attitude towards health and fitness. Compare your current attitude, behaviors, and motivation to those from a few months or a year ago. Changes in attitude generally occur over a long period of time and it is much easier to reverse a decline in attitude when it is just beginning.

Some common things to watch out for include looking for excuses to avoid exercising or consistently decreasing the intensity (challenge) of your workouts. When these actions are accompanied by justifications or thoughts to convince yourself that you are doing well enough, chances are your workouts will become less productive, results will soon suffer, and attitude will eventually decline as well.

It is very important to note that people going through this process may not even realize they are putting less effort into maintaining their healthy lifestyle. They often think they are working as hard as always, even though their actions would suggest otherwise. Their perception ends up being that working out and eating healthy are less effective, which results in a declining attitude and a lack of motivation to continue the healthy behaviors, thus reducing them even further.

If you find yourself not wanting to exercise and skipping one or two workouts, make it a priority not to skip your next workout and make sure it is a challenging session. One appropriately challenging session is worth more (in terms of results) than two or three easy or half-hearted sessions and the more days you have between challenging workouts, the more difficult it will be to get back in the habit. As a side note, not every workout needs to be difficult, but your overall weekly or monthly intensity should still be challenging.

For example, a couple weeks ago I intended to do a moderately challenging workout on Wednesday, but I was battling allergies and my energy level was low. After warming-up for my workout I realized that I did not have enough energy to complete the workout that I had planned, so I did an easy workout instead. As a result, I planned a challenging high-intensity workout for Saturday and ensured I had enough rest and time to complete the workout. I ended up having a great workout that put me back on track for the following week.

Another good preventative measure is to keep an exercise journal. It does not have to be incredibly detailed, but it should include at least the date, type, duration, and difficulty of all of your workouts. Also make a note every day that you don't do any exercise. This is a great way to spot overall declines in exercise and realizing you have not worked out for a number of days should help motivate you to exercise in the near future.

These adversarial relationships and attitude changes not only affect exercise routines, but they can have a significant impact on your nutrition habits as well. Unfortunately the nutritional effects are quite diverse and can vary greatly from person to person. As a result, I will focus on a few of the common problems people encounter.

Perhaps the best sign of potential nutrition related problems is an increase in frequency of cravings. Generally when people eat healthier their cravings decrease, but if this reverses something is usually wrong with the overall nutritional program. Probably the main cause of increasing cravings is eating the same foods too frequently and not having enough variety. If this happens, look for different recipes, use different spices or flavorings, or eat some different foods altogether.

Another sign of a declining attitude towards healthy eating is a lack of meal planning. Healthy eating always involves planning, such as preparing food/meals in advance or bringing healthy foods during times when only unhealthy options may be available (work, traveling, etc.). When motivation decreases, less effort will be used for meal planning and people are often left trying to find the best option from a list of unhealthy food options. Of course the best course of action is to be prepared and avoid the unhealthy options altogether.

The last nutrition issue I will cover is something I describe as "choosing the unhealthiest healthy option." This is one of the more subtle problems, but it can have a severe effect on results. People often think of foods as either healthy or unhealthy, but it is better to think of them on a continuum from unhealthy to healthy with foods containing positive and negative attributes somewhere in the middle. A good nutritional program should have a majority of foods that fall towards the healthy end of the spectrum with as few unhealthy ones as possible.

When people lose the motivation to eat well, they often replace some of the healthiest foods with foods that are not quite as healthy. Even though these foods are still better than unhealthy foods, the overall quality and effectiveness of the nutritional program will decline. The problem is not eating less healthy for a day or two, but the subtle and consistent decline of eating habits over time. These nutrition changes can be difficult to notice and as with exercise it can be a good idea to keep a journal describing what, when, and how much you eat and drink.

Each of the above attitude related exercise and nutrition issues can drastically impact your motivation, results, and long-term success. Therefore it is important to realize these changes are occurring and stop them before they become chronic problems. Since these changes are often very subtle and may even go unnoticed, simply being aware of variations in your health and fitness routine is one of the best ways to avoid problems that could sabotage your efforts.

By the way, I don't want you to feel as though you have to be excited about exercising and eating well or find them enjoyable, but they should also not be thought of as burdens or undesirable tasks. Having said that, everyone has occasions when they want to skip a workout or eat unhealthy foods. That is fine every once in a while, but make sure it does not become a habit.

As for my personal approach to staying positive, when I feel my attitude start to decline, I think about how much better I feel during the times when I consistently workout and eat healthy. The realization that slacking off now will end up causing me unnecessary pain and frustration in the future is a definite year-round motivator. If you have not done so already, I encourage you to find your own approach for maintaining a positive attitude. This will go a long way in helping to make long-term success a reality for you as well.

This was only supposed to be an intro, but I kept thinking of more information I wanted to include, so it basically ended up turning into an article. Anyway, time for the tips.

## Health and Fitness Tips and Words of Wisdom

This section contains assorted information I have shared repeatedly over the years. Some of this may not be new to you, but it never hurts to revisit important information to keep it fresh in your mind. On that note, here we go:

**1. Be Skeptical of Food Labels** – If you see 1 or 2 unhealthy ingredients when you are reading a food label, chances are there will be more. The other undesirable ingredients could be those unfamiliar or hard to pronounce words or they can be hidden under blanket terms such as “natural flavors.” Ingredients that are natural or derived from natural sources can still be unhealthy.

**2. Don't Ignore Aches and Pains** – This should be common sense, but all too often people try to ignore or work through aches and pains instead of taking measures to address them directly. Acute minor aches and pains, such as stiffness from sleeping the wrong way, may go away without intervention (although stretching is recommended), but anything that occurs with any level of frequency or consistency should be addressed.

Minor aches and pains have a way of turning into chronic problems that become very difficult to fix. Once this occurs, it generally requires daily rehab (strengthening and stretching) for a prolonged period of time before the issue is resolved. Pay attention to how your body feels and make it a priority to fix any aches and pains before they become problems that affect your everyday life.

**3. Evaluate Your Progress** – One of the easiest and best ways to evaluate your overall health and fitness program is simply by examining how you feel on an average day. If your exercise routine is going well, you should not feel run down, fatigued, excessively sore, stiff, or weak. Working out too little or too much can cause any of these issues to occur.

Poor eating habits can also cause exacerbate any of the above issues and cause additional problems as well. Poor food choices can cause drastic energy level changes (crashing), make you feel sluggish throughout the day, lower your immune system, delay recovery from exercise, increase headaches, and much more. If you experience any of these symptoms frequently, chances are something in your program can be changed to improve how you feel.

**4. Get Enough Sleep** – This is one thing people know they should do, but it seems as though more and more people don't get as much sleep as they need. The truth is a lack of sleep will negatively affect virtually every aspect of health and fitness including fat loss, energy, strength, immune system function, stress, mood, etc. So make it a priority to get as much sleep as your body needs.

**5. Do Your Best, But Don't Obsess** – This is one of my personal favorites, because it has to do with focusing on the big picture. Technically, the stricter you are about not cheating on your exercise and nutrition, the better results you will experience. However, this does not take into account additional variables that affect your results, such as mental fatigue and stress.

Too much stress or mental fatigue can lead to burnout, lack of motivation, and an abundance of undesired physiological changes over time. Most notably, high levels of stress and mental fatigue can make it almost impossible to lose fat. In addition, they also lead to decreases in energy, performance, motivation, flexibility, and even long-term health.

If you get to the point where you are stressing about every aspect of your program, such as what you should have to eat at a restaurant or how much time you should spend exercising, you may be doing more harm than good. This approach, while full of good intentions, often increases mental fatigue and chances of burnout. Sometimes decreasing your exercise or not worrying about what you are eating can actually be the best thing for improving success. Just remember always to pay attention to your body and take it easy when you feel stressed or overly fatigued.

## WRAP UP:

That's it for the April issue, Next month I will focus on exercise by discussing one of the most important components of any effective resistance training program. This topic is very important to me and is a fundamental part of my training as well as any training program I implement. Those of you who train with me may already know what I am referring to, but for everyone else, let me say this is one basic component, is frequently the difference between an effective workout and wasted energy.

So until the next issue, take care and have a great month,

Ross