

HEALTH OR FITNESS

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In the last fifty years a radical change has taken place in how we move our bodies. From nature based movements we have emerged into an artificial movement culture.

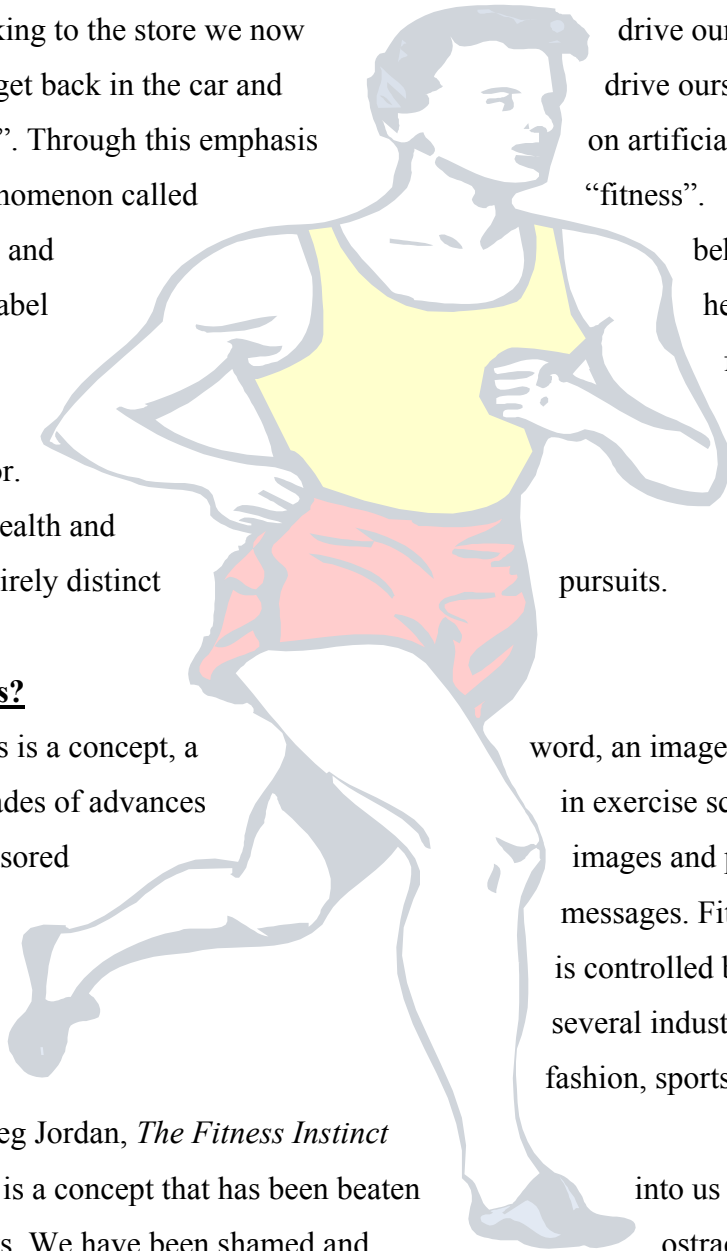
Instead of walking to the store we now drive our automobiles. From here we get back in the car and drive ourselves to the gym for a “workout”. Through this emphasis on artificial movement has emerged a phenomenon called “fitness”.

Culture and behavioral practices have come to label health and the newly arrived fitness model into the same category, as one united endeavor. The fact of the matter is that health and fitness are almost always two entirely distinct pursuits.

What is fitness?

“Fitness is a concept, a word, an image in the mind, shaped by decades of advances in exercise science along with corporate-sponsored images and publicly broadcast messages. Fitness as a cultural phenomenon is controlled by a cartel that includes several industries, among them beauty, fashion, sports, sporting goods, and media.” Peg Jordan, *The Fitness Instinct*

Fitness is a concept that has been beaten into us from our earliest of walking days. We have been shamed and ostracized if we are



fat. Fit people get the best mates and the best paying jobs, we are told. We have been cajoled into believing that to be fit is to be healthy. Unfortunately, the fitness myth is just that- a myth.

Fitness is about looking good. When we practice fitness rarely are we practicing health. Instead, we are working on our body- to look a certain way. This is not necessarily health. Occasionally fitness will cross over into the health world. For instance, if you were obese and the extra weight was causing your heart to have to beat harder then engaging in a fitness practice would constitute as a health practice. But this is not the norm. Most often, when we are practicing fitness we are more closely aligned with the beauty and cosmetic industry then the world of health and wellness. While it may be important to include a fitness regime into your daily schedule it is primarily for appearance and not for general health.

When you go to the gym it is rare that you are working on your health. You are working on your body, or your body's appearance, and often ignoring what is going on inside the physical shell. Fitness is about how the outside looks. Health is more about how the inside functions.

There are two cornerstone beliefs about fitness. These beliefs are 1) that a hard body is a healthy body, and 2) an aerobically fit heart is a healthy heart. Unfortunately, both of these beliefs are myths and do not constitute much in regards to the world of health.

Myth # 1: A hard body is a healthy body

It is true that muscle is a fat burning machine. One of the goals in the fitness world is to create more muscle mass in order to consume more calories, including when one is at rest. But in order to achieve these appearance-based goals one often has to harden one's musculature into rigid and dense tissue. Hard muscles and dense fascia tissue are not healthy.

For a muscle to be healthy it needs to contract and to relax. A hypertonic muscle that does not relax is not the model of health. Hardened muscles tend to create hardened fascia tissue around them. These hardened tissues then dry out and become brittle, having a quality like that of beef jerky. Not only does fluid become minimized but energetic flow lessons through the surrounding fascia.

The myth that pervades the fitness industry is that strength and health are one in the same. It might seem ironic to consider this scenario. Usually one would consider a tight hamstring as a “bad” thing. Then why is it a “good” thing to have a tight chest muscle or a hardened abdominal area? While strength training may have some value in the world of health it has become far more mythological than practical.

Beneath those hardened abdominal muscles lie a host of internal organs gasping for air. Not only does one harden the outside of the torso with weight training but the inside becomes hard as well. Underneath that hard and inflated chest lies the heart and lungs. This wall of steel prevents adequate expansion of the chest and diminishes the breathing capacity.

The diaphragm and the heart are linked through a common connective tissue matrix. A natural belly will allow the diaphragm to expand and contract at will. This contraction tugs on the heart and massages the heart during respiration. A diaphragm that is locked in place by rigid abdominal muscles does not create the same massaging affect on the heart.

Hardening the body is consistent with the belief that an athlete is a warrior and in order to train for war one has to be hard and mighty. Unfortunately, war is most often within our own head but we continue to create a hard outer shell to defend ourselves from this imagined enemy. A culture that is obsessed with thinness attempts to create fat burning machines, not for health, but for cosmetic appearances. A culture that lives from a place of imagined fears from the head will create movement to armor the body to protect oneself, even though most of those fears are imagined.

Myth #2: An aerobically fit heart is a healthy heart

We jump, we run, we swim, we aerobicise. We watch our celebrities and fitness gurus who teach us how to climb our heart up to our target range to achieve our maximum health benefits. Sports medicine and a league of fitness trainers have beaten into us the belief that an aerobically fit heart makes for health. But this is not necessarily so.

When we place strain on our heart when performing aerobic exercise we help to create a stress response in the body. The body believes it is at war. When the stress

response is triggered our breathing becomes labored. Most often we breathe through our mouth, further exasperating the situation.

Referring to the research of Allan Douillard, Peg Jordan writes in *The Fitness Instinct*.

“Douillard knew that breathing through the mouth tends to inflate only the upper lobes of the lungs, which are connected to sympathetic nerve fibers, the branch of the nervous system that activates the fight-or-flight response. Breathing through your mouth prepares your body with adrenaline for an emergency response. Your pupils dilate, blood is shunted to your extremities, peripheral blood vessels expand, and so on. The problem with exercising at this level all of the time is that you are consistently dipping into a full-alarm state with every workout. If you work out every day, you undergo the ravages of adrenaline toxicity. One of the side effects, for example, is that cortisol (a form of adrenaline) coaxes “bad” LDL cholesterol onto the walls of the coronary arteries.”

In addition, when we are in a stress response muscles in our body will constrict. Organs consist of smooth muscle fibers and will contract just as easily as skeletal muscle found in a bicep. The heart is one such organ. Under a stress response, like aerobic activity, the heart is actually tightening up. In addition, arteries, consisting of smooth muscle fibers, will also constrict. The arteries leading into the heart narrow when aerobic exercise is performed.

Uffe Ravnskov, M.D., Ph. D., writes about this phenomenon in *The Cholesterol Myths*. “Artery walls are surrounded by smooth muscle cells. When such cells contract, the artery narrows. When they relax, it widens. Various factors may stimulate the smooth muscle cells of the coronary arteries to contract including mental stress, anxiety, exposure to cold and even a sustained hand grip.” Aerobic exercise is this stress that causes the smooth muscle cells to constrict.

One would think that we would learn our lessons after witnessing many who have died while in pursuit of the aerobic myth. For instance, Florence Griffith Joyner, at one time the faster woman on earth, died of heart complications. Jim Fixx, the author of *The Compete Book of Running*, died of a heart attack at age 52, while running. He had atherosclerosis, (hardening of his arteries) in three of his coronary arteries. Peg Jordan writes in *The Fitness Instinct*,

“When I was a cardiac care nurse, for example, I knew a 40-year-old runner who surpassed every one of those guidelines. He followed a heart-healthy diet, even sprinkling lecithin (a fat emulsifier) on his breakfast cereal. He had the blood pressure of a teenager. He had no family history of heart disease or any other identifiable risk factors. Thus, when he dropped dead from a sudden heart attack, it made me question the value of the numbers game.”

We have been taught to believe that a low resting heart rate is the eternal sign of health in our culture. This mathematical formula has lulled us into believing that the lower the number the healthier we are.

The beliefs that we have about health can often be traced back to our childhoods. We had heroes and role models who demonstrated these beliefs for us. Often we take on those beliefs without ever questioning their impact on us.

Fitness Questionnaire

1. Where did you learn about fitness?
2. What is your belief about fitness?
3. How do you feel while practicing fitness?
4. Who were your role models?
5. What does fitness provide for you?
6. What are the side affects of a fitness routine?
7. How do you feel when you cannot practice your routine?
8. Why are you practicing fitness?
9. How often are you practicing fitness?
10. What are your fitness goals?

Aerobic exercise is not the panacea that it was once thought to be. Movement is important in our health. But how we move is even more important. A body that consistently moves under the code of stress will suffer from the affects of stress. Weight training and aerobic activity have become a mainstay of our lives. Unfortunately, these myths have become institutionalized in our culture. When we begin to question their real impact we may be alarmed at the results.

What is health?

The health of an individual is often linked to the health of a culture. Beliefs and behaviors are transmuted throughout a culture through the stories and myths that we tell. We often claim that we are healthy if we are free of pain. But health is much more than this.

Health can be determined by the flow of all the individual systems of the body. When one is blocked or backed up there is a good possibility that disease or illness will take place. When looking at health we need to consider how open these systems are.

There are twelve primary body systems. Each one will function independently, yet have an influence on the other systems. When considering health we need to examine the functioning of all of these systems.

The Twelve Body Systems

1. **Cardiovascular System**

Circulates oxygen to each and every cell by the pumping of the heart and the flow of blood through arteries and veins

2. **Lymphatic System**

Assists the veins in draining fluid back to the heart as well as carrying away waste products

3. **Respiratory System**

Allows for the exchange of oxygen into the lungs and removal of carbon dioxide back to the atmosphere

4. **Digestive System**

This system takes food from the outside and converts it to usable fuel while eliminating waste products from the body

5. **Urinary System**

Elimination of water and fluid waste components from the body

6. **Reproductive System**

Consists of organs and glands to enable the species to reproduce itself

7. Integument System

Layers of skin to provide protection from elements in the external world

8. Endocrine System

Provides needed stimulation to corresponding glands to function efficiently

9. Nervous System

Vast system of nerve branches that begin in the brain and lead to pathways ending at organs and muscles

10. CRANIAL SACRAL System*****

This fluid system begins in the brain and encircles the entire spinal cord. Cranial sacral fluid pulses out the center of the brain and flows to the far reaches of the tailbone where it recirculates back to the brain. This system is accepted by Western medicine but is poorly understood under the Western medical model.

11. Body Electric System*****

This is a system of energetic pathways that works through the bodies' fascia network. This network transports bioelectrical energy to each cell. Not formally recognized by the Western Medical Community. (See Dr. Robert O. Becker, M.D., *The Body Electric*, or James L. Oschman, *Energy Medicine*.)

12. Emotional System*****

Emotions flow through the body like rivers of water. Emotions are forms of energy designed to shake us, stir us, and, like a faucet, flow out of us. While their existence is acknowledged by Western Medicine this body system is poorly understood, and, has almost no value.

In a cultured obsessed with appearance we have been convinced that big muscles and flat stomachs are the ideal of health. Nothing could be more wrong. When your glandular system functions fully and your urinary system is flowing well then you have obtained a more modest degree of health. Much of our current beliefs about health actually prevent this from happening.

For instance, tight abdominal muscles restrict our diaphragm, (the central muscle involved in respiration) and squeeze the abdominal cavity tightly. Any organ or gland beneath these hardened muscles will suffer the consequences of hardness and tightness. The flow coming and going to these organs will be diminished.

An emotional system that allows one to cry at will or express anger in a healthy manner will be far healthier than hundreds of laps run around a track every evening after work. Along with the twelve body systems one might consider twenty-one points of health. Within these twenty-one points one begins to focus on one's health.

The Twenty-one Points of Health

1. Cardiovascular System
2. Strength and Tone
3. Balance
4. Flexibility
5. Coordination
6. Spinal Flexibility
7. Respiration
8. Rest
9. Relaxation
10. Digestion
11. Sexuality
12. Emotional Wisdom
13. Communication
14. Relationship Wisdom
15. Lymphatic Clearing
16. Body Electric System
17. Urinary Clearing
18. Glandular and Organ Functioning
19. Twisting
20. Nutrition
21. Addiction Wisdom

Health can be reflected in individuals' needs and lifestyle. For instance, a 70-year old woman does not necessarily need 17-inch biceps to be healthy. Learning to balance so as not to fall and break a hip would be a far more beneficial health practice for someone like this. For many practicing Kegel exercises to balance the pelvic floor would be a far greater health practice than jumping on a machine to tighten up the abdominal area. Practicing how to breathe more deeply and efficiently is a much more pronounced healthy practice than adding muscle mass to one's chest. Engaging in vision improvement exercises to balance the muscles surrounding the eyes and maintain healthy vision would be far more of a health practice than seeing how big you can make your calf muscles.

Imagine what it might be like to spend just as much time working on our health as we do on our body. When we “workout”, “get in shape”, and “get fit” we are seldom practicing health at all. A “fitness routine” performed three days a week may make you feel better in your clothes but might not be doing much for your over all health.

Unfortunately, fitness is used as a healing remedy when it is primarily designed for cosmetic purposes. For instances, many people diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis are recommended by their health care provider to engage in a fitness program. This is the one of the last things they ought to be doing. A person with Multiple Sclerosis is most likely suffering from a tightened neck and shoulder area, creating an environment for the connective tissue that surrounds the nerves that emerge from the neck area to weaken and dissolve. A fitness routine only helps to create more tension within the connective tissue leading to more connective tissue damage. A health practice emphasizing gentle expansive movement would be far more beneficial in this case than a fitness practice.

In another instance, someone suffering from a breathing disorder like pulmonary fibrosis is often encouraged to enter into a rehab program where they are taught how to lift weights to tighten their chest even more and perform abdominal exercises to shorten up an already tightened abdominal cavity. The breath has no hope of returning to normal under the guidance of a fitness practice like this. A health practice would be far more beneficial focusing on how to breathe.

The beliefs and practices of fitness are institutionalized as normal. The primary emphasis of fitness is to look good. Most often fitness routines are far from health. While

it may be important to feel good by looking good this type of practice falls far short of achieving health. It is important to move our body frequently to obtain optimal health. But how and why we move is even more important. Health and fitness are two entirely different concepts that should remain clear and distinct.

Resources

The Fitness Instinct, Peg Jordan, 1999, Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pennsylvania

The Cholesterol Myths, Uffe Ravnskov, M.D., Ph.D. , 2000, New Trends Publishing, Washington, DC