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Getting in Shape

The why's and how's
of becoming a
healthier you.



Getting in Shape

The why's and how's of becoming a healthier you.



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Introduction

Doing What You Love

Find a workout that promises physical and spiritual results.

By Caryn Rivadeneira



I'm not the kind of person for whom the word exercise conjures up any kind of positive feelings. Except for a few periods in my life when I fell in love with a particular exercise video or fad, I've never related to my friends who go out of their way to squeeze in a run or spend free time swimming endless laps or doing countless reps of anything. But don't get me wrong: just because you'll never hear me say, "Let's go work out," doesn't mean I'd rather sit on a sofa than engage in any physical activity. Quite the contrary in fact! And that's what I love about "The Getting in Shape Guide." Many of the articles talk about ways to shape up while doing



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Doing What You Love

what you love. For me that means a daily brisk walk through our neighborhood with my kids or a weekly tap class—with other people's teenagers.

In reality, those walks and classes do a lot more than just get my heart rate up. While I may not be an exercise freak, I have found that engaging in physical activities I love help me experience a full-body joy that somehow always gets me praising God. I think it's because when I push myself physically, I experience God's strength and sustenance in ways that are sometimes hard to imagine in other areas of my life. The same God who keeps my legs moving and arms strong even as I tote one tired toddler and push another—with another seven blocks to home—can keep me going through the countless emotional hurdles that come my way.

Whatever your reason for coming to "The Getting in Shape Guide," you will find helpful tips and encouragement to help you make getting in shape more rewarding than you've ever found it—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Blessings,

Caryn Rivadeneira

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Getting in Shape" for a group study.



"Getting in Shape" can be used for individual or group study, but if you intend to lead a group study on this, some simple suggestions follow:

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternatively, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the "Thought Provokers" be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experience. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**

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A Novel Idea

I blended my love of books with my need for exercise.

By Nancy Tester



It's an icy January afternoon—way too cold for a sane person to take a walk outside. But I'm almost finished listening to a Christian audio book, a recording of *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis, and I won't let myself listen to it indoors. When I stopped yesterday, evil scientists had imprisoned Mark, the main character. Today he must make a choice—participate in their nasty plans or die.





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I look out the window and sigh. It might be cold, but I have to find out what happens. I lace up my walking shoes, load up the tape, and head out the door. Normally, the last thing I'd want to do is walk in winter weather. But today, I'm guided by sheer desperation. I'm a woman in the middle of a thriller.

In the past, I didn't like anything to do with exercise. I'm naturally good at things that involve a love of sitting. I like reading, writing, and libraries. It was a book, in fact, that led me back to Christianity from where I'd abandoned it as a child. After that, books from Christian authors formed a kind of second congregation for me. Their words corrected or encouraged me in all the changes God swept into my life: new attitudes, new habits, and a new perspective on the world.

One new perspective was my health. At 37, my lack of physical fitness had begun to alarm even me. Twenty years of smoking cigarettes and sitting on the couch made the slightest exertion difficult. I quit smoking, but getting out of the car still made me breathe hard, and I had trouble climbing the stairs in our house.

I knew I needed exercise, but every sport seemed either too hard or too boring. I couldn't run long enough to play tennis. I was bored when I tried to lift weights. I flailed around helplessly in an aerobics class. Was there a sport for someone who was really out of shape? Was there an exercise for someone who'd rather be reading? Finally, I prayed about it. God, this is hopeless, I confessed.





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One day I pulled up to our house and sat for a few minutes in the parked car, listening to an audio book of *Pride and Prejudice*. I didn't want to turn off the tape—but didn't want to spend the rest of the afternoon in the driveway, either.

I remembered watching my brother put on headphones before he jogged down the beach. I couldn't jog, but I could walk. I dug out a portable cassette player, popped in the tape, and tried going around the block with it. I listened to Mr. Darcy snub Elizabeth Bennett at a ball. Poor Elizabeth! I thought, heaving myself up a hill. She's too poor to ever marry! I headed down another side street, forgetting I was hot or that my legs were tired. And before Elizabeth had time to snub Mr. Darcy back, I'd walked two and a half miles.

Now audio books motivate me to get out the door for my daily 45-minute walk. Sometimes, if I'm in the middle of a good book, I'll pass my house and keep going an extra mile or two. It's not that I'm devoted to exercise; I want to find out who the murderer is!

Over the past eight years, I've listened to scores of books and have worn out two tape players. My energy level has increased gradually, and my body has grown stronger. Recently after an aerobics class, I sat for a few minutes in the car, astonished. Since when could I keep up with an exercise class? How did I, the person who dreaded workouts, ever get into reasonable shape? God gives us some miracles immediately; others can be seen only when we look back, after we've gone a few hundred miles.





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I admit I look a little odd when I'm listening to audio books. It's not the tape player attached to my jeans or the earphones around my head. It's because I forget I'm in public while I listen to a book. I shake my head. I talk back to the characters. I become oblivious to the neighbor trimming her hedges. "Don't marry him," I say as I go by. "He doesn't love you!" My neighbor smiles at me graciously, but she doesn't put down her hedge clippers, either.

I listen to mysteries, classics, biographies, and sermons, but the books I love most are audiotapes of Christian fiction. To me, these books feed both mind and soul, bringing the essential truths of Christianity to mind.

The only problem with this new "sport" lies in procuring the books. Unabridged Christian audio books are hard to find—and abridged books often are condensed so much, they don't make sense. Sometimes I find it best to buy a used edition of the audio book on the Internet. When I'm finished with the book, I donate it to my library. Later, it's satisfying to note other people have checked out the audio book.

I started listening to these books to distract me while I tried to get in shape. But when I finish the exercise, my mind feels as refreshed as my body. I put on the earphones and listen, and the Holy Spirit gently underlines what he wants me to hear.

The plots work like parables. When the characters pray, I remember to pray, too. They talk to God about their troubles, and I talk to him, too. The characters remind me of something I tend to forget in the confusion of everyday life: No matter what problems





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I'm walking with that day, God can be trusted to handle them all.

I listened to *The Lord of the Rings* in early spring, exercising in a chill landscape of cream-colored fields and bare trees. I scuffed along the road, disheartened. I was struggling to speak more honestly with those around me. Was it worth it? Did God even want me to be more real with other people? I turned on the tape. A few minutes later, I heard Gandalf recite a poem to Frodo. "All that is gold does not glitter," he said. "Not all who wander are lost." His words seemed like an answer from God. Sometimes what is gold—what God wants us to do—doesn't even seem attractive to us. Sometimes what is gold can only be seen through the eyes of God.

That summer I checked out *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and I walked the dusty roads near our house. We'd decided to move—a wrenching decision—and the landscape looked as unhappy as I felt. The fields were brown from lack of water, and the dirt road cracked under my feet. But as I listened to the main character, Pastor Stephen Kumalo, reach for God in his loss, I was comforted. God is powerful, the author seems to say. He turns our pain into new life.

I heard Father Tim face problems in *At Home in Mitford*. Father Tim prays about each situation, allowing God to touch his world. It reminded me of a problem in our house—one of our relatives searched daily, fruitlessly for a job. As time wore on, our sympathy for him had increased, but had our prayers increased, too? The book reminded me I needed to offer the only real help I could—prayer.





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Sometimes, these books remind me, our difficulties allow us to grow closer to God. In one of the greatest scenes ever written by C. S. Lewis, the evil forces in *That Hideous Strength* strip Mark of the false gods in his life—his career, his reputation, and his colleagues. But losing everything allows Mark the freedom to surrender to God. C. S. Lewis's words whisper in my ear as I walk under a landscape of icy branches and pale sky. Trust God in all difficulty, he seems to say. The darkest places allow us to see more of his light.

The characters transform during the course of each book, and I've changed a little bit, too. In place of my ruined body, God has given me strength and health. I breathe a little deeper, move a little easier, and step a little lighter since I've started walking. My spirit feels lighter, too. By walking with Christian audio books, I've found a closer walk with God.

Nancy Tester, a teacher and writer, lives in Arkansas.

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Reflect

- *Nancy found an unusual way of enjoying exercise. What things do you enjoy that could be combined with a form of exercise?*
- *She concludes her article by saying she's discovered a closer walk with God through exercise. How do you imagine you might grow closer to God through physical fitness?*
- *How have you experienced a closer walk with God as you exercised?*



Discovering a Healthier You

Ruth McGinnis offers tips to help you be balanced physically and spiritually.

By Amy M. Tatum



Does finding the motivation, energy, and extra minutes in a day to stay healthy seem impossible in this spread-yourself-too-thin world? You're probably thinking, How could I possibly have time to go to the gym between work, dinner, and my kids' soccer practice? And even if I had time, where would I start?



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To help you get on the right track to better health, certified personal trainer and professional musician Ruth McGinnis, author of *Living the Good Life* (Revell) and *Breathing Freely: Celebrating the Imperfect Life* (Revell), shared her expertise on how to take better care of yourself. And (surprise!) she even urges you not to feel guilty if you don't have time to hit the gym. Check out her practical tips to rejuvenate your vitality and live more abundantly starting today.

If you haven't been taking care of yourself, how on earth do you find the motivation to begin?

First of all, nobody can motivate another person. You have to have that inner desire for a healthier life. But one motivation that works for almost everyone is fear—the fear of losing your range of motion, the fear of high cholesterol or high blood pressure.

When you're in your 40s, as I am, you start to realize maintenance is crucial. If you don't start maintaining the health you've already got, look out, because it doesn't get easier. Investing in your health isn't a luxury. Often I've found a woman with a husband and kids to care for feels guilty making that investment in herself. But when you start to lose muscle mass, gain weight, and feel tired all the time, you can't give something you don't have. Nobody benefits from a woman who doesn't take care of herself.

So how do you get started?

It's not easy, especially for women with small children and hectic lives. But the first big important step is getting enough sleep. Keeping regular sleeping hours is crucial, because the more disciplined things,





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such as eating right and exercising, are harder to implement if you're exhausted.

Go to bed at the same time every night and get up at about the same time every morning. That's a tried-and-true method for improving your sleep. The problem is, many of us get involved watching television, or suddenly have a spurt of energy to clean the kitchen at the end of the day. Those things distract the body from preparing itself for sleep. Look at the way you manage your hours, especially late in the day, and make wiser choices to help you get to bed earlier and to give yourself more time to wind down so you can sleep.

Any suggestions?

Turn off that television and computer! Artificial light from the computer stimulates your nervous system, so it makes it harder for you to fall asleep.

Some people take a bath or read; others turn down the phone ringer. Turn off bright lights and lower the noise level even for 30 minutes.

Our culture expects us to run ourselves ragged on an inhuman schedule. Lots of truly exhausted people still have trouble falling asleep because their mind's still going. Maybe they've worked hard mentally but haven't exerted their body all day, which makes it tough to get a good night's sleep.

Many of us sit all day at work. How can we exert ourselves more?

You have to look for opportunities to move around. For example, if you work on the second floor, use the stairs instead of the elevator. One of the greatest





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exercises for your backside is to go up stairs two at a time. By lifting your leg that much higher, you really engage your rear-end muscles. Over a period of time, the difference between taking the stairs versus taking the elevator has a significant impact on how much muscle you use and how many calories you burn. Building and maintaining muscle mass, especially later in life, is extremely important.

Also taking a 15-minute walk during your lunch hour or break time can have huge benefits. Even if you don't have time to change clothes and go to a gym, you still can accomplish something by just going out and walking. Grab a friend, and make it fun.

You're suggesting we change the way we think about an exercise regimen?

Exactly! A regimen doesn't mean you have to go to the gym or a weight-loss program to experience some benefits. Those things are great, but a regimen can be as simple as being aware of crucial areas—staying hydrated, getting sleep, being more active, eating right—and applying small steps daily to make a difference in your health.

Our generation grew up during the fitness revolution. We've been taught we need to have an ideal fitness regimen. But what's been lost in that message is that even if you don't have time to do an optimal fitness routine, there are still lots you can do every day to make a huge difference in your health. Integrating little spurts of activity during the day, even if it's just taking the stairs, helps.

Many health clubs today have terrific deals for women to help with exercise and motivation. Several offer





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free childcare. Try visiting different gyms to find the one right for you, or partner with a friend to exercise together.

One of my former clients, who wanted to feel more fit, didn't want to join a health club. Instead, she signed up for ice-skating lessons. She got regular exercise and worked all the muscles in her body—plus she loved it! Discovering something you love to do, even if it doesn't sound like a typical fitness routine, is a great way to maintain your motivation.

What if your energy wanes in the late afternoon or evening?

I know what you mean. At the end of the day, lots of women say to themselves, I should go on a walk before I have to start dinner, or do push-ups and crunches, but they feel too fatigued to do it. That's where you have to take a leap of faith and believe that making the effort actually will make you feel less tired and will help you sleep at night.

There's a mental game you can play to help get motivated. Think to yourself, I'm just going to put on my walking shoes. Then, after you do that, tell yourself, I'm just going to walk for five minutes because I'm so tired. Usually those five minutes turn into a 20-minute walk. I can't count the number of times I've done that for myself.

Also, being dehydrated can cause you to have low energy. Most people don't drink the eight to ten glasses of water they need daily. Always keep water with you so you're hydrating your body.





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Once a woman's motivated to live more healthily, where can she turn for encouragement to keep going?

Turn to Scripture for encouragement. Psalm 121:1-2 says, "I lift my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." That's my motto. I remind myself of all the things I can't control, and of who is in control.

Also, there are Scripture references that remind us God didn't design us to be couch potatoes. For example, Isaiah 40:31 says, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." God designed us with an incredible body. He designed us to thrive, to dig into our human resources and use them. That verse in Isaiah reminds me that investing in my physical well-being can be a spiritual pursuit.

How so?

When I'm too busy, it's hard for me to balance my spiritual life, to connect with God. That's why quiet time for reflection is monumentally important.

A lot of times, I'll make a concentrated effort to pray for the concerns of my heart, then stop and listen to God. It's interesting to be present with God without an agenda. Being open to receive comfort or an answer or direction takes time.

But I'm just like everybody else—I wake up in the morning with expectations for the day. I know I'll have challenges in terms of time management, and disappointments in areas I can't control. I went through a process of relinquishing control before I felt as though I could surrender to God. I'm trying to make that





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leap from my will be done to thy will every day. Every morning I get up, surrender my schedule to God, and try to celebrate each day.

That's tough to do in our culture.

When I turn on the television and see people who've had the benefit of a make-up artist, hair stylist, special lighting, or cosmetic surgery, I realize our culture has lured us into believing people with outer beauty have it all together. What we really need are role models to share that there's beauty in the aging process. We read about the celebrity culture and the amount of time they devote to looking perfect. We need to be reminded how very empty that is. In the process, they're losing time they could be investing in other areas of life, such as relationships. And ultimately, we fight a losing battle with aging. Your body's going to change, and your skin's going to get bigger than your body. You're not supposed to look 20 when you're 50.

But we can make choices to stay healthy.

Yes. A healthy lifestyle is a lifetime pursuit. It's not something you just get one day and have forever. Put a healthy lifestyle together in a way that works for you, and don't feel bombarded by the messages from the fitness world, infomercial world, and talk-show world.

My message isn't a thrilling, cutting-edge breakthrough. It's not the kind of regimen that's going to make headline news because it's simply a reassuring message that the basics have worked and continue to work. That's why I love the ice-skating story so much. When I heard about that woman's workout routine, I thought, Good for you for finding something that's a passion for you.





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We each have a better idea of what's good for us than we give ourselves credit for. And pop culture is largely to blame for that, because we have these insidious messages always coming at us to tell us we're not thin enough, not young enough, not rich enough, not organized enough. Martha Stewart makes me break out in hives. She should see my kitchen floor—it's always a mess!

But there's so much freedom in being able to see the beauty and uniqueness of your own life and body. Investing in your well-being is investing in your life. Putting on a pair of shoes and going for a walk is a wonderful way to make you feel healthier. But to be able to practice being who you are and celebrate your unique gifts—to be able to discern what matters and what doesn't, and to be committed to a meaningful life—that's what life's all about.

For more information about Ruth and healthier living, check out Ruth's website at www.ruthmcginnis.com.

Amy Tatum is a former assistant editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

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Reflect

- *Ruth says a key component to being healthy is getting enough sleep. How important to you is getting enough rest? How can you adjust your activities to allow more time for sleep?*
- *How might getting more sleep actually give you more time for exercise?*
- *Ruth also talks about not looking at exercise as a grueling regiment, but instead exercising by doing something you love. What physical activities do you enjoy that could be part of your workout?*



Tips for Getting Fit

6 things you can do daily to impact your well-being.

By Ruth McGinnis and Amy Tatum



1. Avoid falling for fitness revolution hype.

Between unrealistic body types, skimpy clothing, and all the machines purporting to keep you fit, there are many reasons to feel discouraged. Observe fitness industry images with detachment; remind yourself the best reason to exercise is to stay healthy, and you already have everything you need to be physically active.

2. Keep track of your efforts. Record your activity so you can fine-tune your approach to exercise by discovering what works for you. Another benefit: It's motivating to see results from the efforts you make toward better health.



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3. Make deals with yourself. When you don't have the desire to tackle a 20-minute walk, give yourself permission to do five minutes, and let yourself off the hook. Usually a five-minute walk will turn into 20 minutes. Getting started is the most important step toward physical activity as a way of life.

4. Find a fitness professional. It's possible to hire a qualified trainer without breaking the bank. Most can design a safe and effective exercise program for you, work with you for a few sessions, then follow up when needed. Try to find a fitness professional with certification from ACSM (the American College of Sports Medicine), NASM (the National Academy of Sports Medicine), ACE (American Council on Exercise), or another nationally recognized fitness trainer organization.

5. Make exercise enjoyable. Choose an activity you look forward to doing; otherwise, it won't become a consistent part of your life. For me, running with my sister or my dog is always more compelling than running alone.

6. Give yourself permission to start over. When it comes to exercise, nothing's more defeating than an all-or-nothing attitude. Remind yourself, I can negotiate my goals and my good intentions as often as necessary.

For more information about Ruth and healthier living, check out Ruth's website at www.ruthmcginnis.com. Amy Tatum is a former assistant editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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Tips for Getting Fit

This article first appeared in the September/October 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *The first tip is about avoiding the hype surrounding exercise. In what ways have you fallen prey to the gadgets and hoopla in the exercise industry?*
- *By giving yourself permission to start over, what new goals can you set for yourself?*



Flex Appeal

10 reasons to squeeze a little strength training into your life.

By Joanna Bloss



Practically every woman I know wants to lose 10 pounds. But a few years ago, that was a drop in the bucket for me. One marriage, five pregnancies, and a host of health problems added up to more excess weight than I cared to carry. So I decided to start exercising and eating less. I dutifully donned my walking shoes and watched every morsel of food I ate.

Before long, I became discouraged. Sure, walking paid off in terms of sleeping better and having more energy. But the numbers on my scale hardly budged. And that's where I really wanted to see results.



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Just when I was ready to give up, my friend Rochelle invited me to her weight-lifting class at our local YMCA. Out of desperation, I agreed to give it a shot. That first Tuesday morning, I dragged myself out of bed at 5:30 a.m. and wondered what on earth I'd gotten myself into.

But I stayed faithful. A few weeks later, when I looked in the mirror, I saw a long-lost friend—my waist! After a few more weeks, I was sure my thighs looked more defined. Before I knew it, the needle on my bathroom scale actually moved!

Since that time, I've learned a lot about strength training—in fact, a year after I began attending, I became the instructor of that early-morning weight-lifting class.

If your to-do list is as long as mine, you're not eager to add one more thing to it. Yet I've found 10 good reasons why strength training's worth a second look.

1. Maximum calorie burn.

The truth is, the only way to lose weight is to burn more calories than you consume. Frankly, you can't afford not to strength train. The reason's simple: As you build muscle and lose fat, your body burns calories more efficiently. Why? Because muscle tissue burns calories faster than fat tissue. This means you'll burn more calories—even while you're sleeping—and lose weight faster than you would if you did no strength training at all.

2. More muscle, less fat.

One study shows that over a two-month period, women who add two weekly strength-training





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sessions to their cardiovascular activities (such as walking) gain an average of two pounds of muscle and lose four pounds of fat. Increased muscle and decreased fat mean that even if your scale doesn't change, your shape does. Your muscles become firmer and more toned.

3. Everyday brawn.

Hauling groceries, climbing stairs with mountains of laundry, pushing a heavy vacuum ... sometimes you feel as though you're competing in a triathlon rather than doing housework! Lifting weights increases your endurance so the activities you do every day won't be as taxing.

4. Osteoporosis fighter.

Osteoporosis is a debilitating disease that makes people more susceptible to bone fractures, especially those of the hip, spine, and wrist. According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, ten million Americans suffer from this disease—and eight million of them are women.

Thankfully, you can fight osteoporosis. One of your primary weapons is strength training, along with a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, and weight-bearing cardiovascular exercise such as walking or jogging.

5. Disease preventer.

You've probably heard the alarming statistics: 65 percent of Americans are overweight or obese. In fact, the Surgeon General recently predicted that in the next few years, obesity-related illnesses will become the number-one cause of preventable death in the U.S.





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Exercise is one thing we can do to reverse this trend. Studies show strength training in particular helps lower blood pressure and "bad" cholesterol levels, as well as minimizes some risks associated with Type 2 diabetes. It also may help prevent certain types of cancer.

6. Less back pain, better posture.

Four out of five people experience lower back pain at some point in their adult lives. Weight training strengthens and tones abdominal and back muscles, making them strong and flexible, thereby decreasing your risk of injury and pain.

Incidentally, have you checked your posture lately? Did you know that correct posture actually can make you look thinner? Try this simple experiment: Stand sideways in front of a mirror with your worst posture (think grumpy teenager). Shoulders rounded, spine slumped. Not pretty.

Now, take a deep breath and stand tall with your chin level, stomach in, and shoulders comfortable. You look thinner, don't you?

Strength training can improve your posture in the same way it alleviates lower back pain—by strengthening core muscles—making you look thinner and more graceful than you already are.

7. Depression lifter.

After struggling with depression for several years, I asked my physician if I could do anything besides take medication to alleviate my symptoms. He told me exercise was the best thing I could do. I later learned a study conducted by Duke University researchers





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discovered 30 minutes of exercise a day, three times a week, was as effective as an antidepressant in relieving depression symptoms.

While you always should consult a physician if you feel depressed, remember, something as simple as exercise may help keep those symptoms at bay.

8. Improved sleep, increased energy.

Not only is exercise a natural antidepressant, it's also a valuable weapon to fight insomnia. People who exercise fall asleep more quickly, sleep more deeply, awaken less often, and sleep longer than those who don't. And better sleep at night means more energy during the day. Who couldn't use more of that?

9. Confidence builder.

When I first started out, there were women in my class who had lifted weights for years, and others who, like me, were inexperienced. I didn't feel self-conscious about being a beginner, as I've sometimes felt with starting other exercise programs. I appreciated the fact that while we did the same exercises, I used lighter weights while the advanced participants made their routines more challenging with heavier weights.

As I became more comfortable with the various exercises, I gradually increased the weight I lifted. I never felt singled out as a beginner, and with every class my confidence grew along with my strength.

10. Spiritual formation.

The health benefits are obvious. However, you may wonder if God really cares whether or not we lift weights.





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I believe he does. In 2 Corinthians 7:1, the apostle Paul says, "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

When I seek to glorify God in weight lifting, it becomes a holy activity. This act of discipline demonstrates my desire to take good care of the earthly body with which he's entrusted me.

I've also found the strength-training class I teach is a wonderful place in which to share my faith. Over the years I've become friends with women I wouldn't otherwise have an opportunity to know. I've been able to pray for Kristi, who had breast cancer, and take meals to my friend Holly when she had a baby. I've had the joy of sharing my testimony in the classroom and prayed with one student when she felt defeated by her past.

Whether you want to fight osteoporosis, ease lower back pain, or just burn a few more calories every day, you'll find strength training is a wise investment of your precious time and energy. Give it a shot. Before long you'll be wondering why you didn't start sooner.

Joanna Bloss is a fitness instructor and certified personal trainer.

This article first appeared in the September/October 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





Reflect

- *What's your impression of strength training and/or weight lifting as an exercise?*
- *If you currently don't strength train, which of these 10 points offers the most compelling reason to start? Why?*



Getting Ready to Pump You Up!



You don't have to be a body-builder to succeed at strength training.

By Joanna Bloss

Talk to your physician first.

While most people can begin strength training without a problem, see your doctor if you have any health concerns, particularly if you're over 50 or pregnant, or have high blood pressure, heart disease, or diabetes.

Get accurate information.

Take time to learn about strength training from a trustworthy source; a local health club or YMCA is a great place to begin. Or read *Weight Training for Dummies*, 2nd Edition, by Liz Neporent & Suzanne Schlosberg (Wiley Publishing, Inc.).



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A little can mean a lot.

You don't need to invest in expensive home-gym equipment or a health-club membership to reap strength-training benefits. You can work your upper body (biceps, triceps, shoulders, chest, and back) with soup cans, which weigh about one pound each. Squats, lunges, stomach crunches, and push-ups can be done at home without equipment. If you do three sets of eight repetitions of these four simple exercises three times a week, you should see results in as little as eight weeks.

Go slow.

If you do too much too soon, you'll pay for it with unbearably sore muscles over the next several days. A little soreness is okay, but start slow. Once you learn the basics and gain confidence, you can proceed to a more advanced level. Also allow 48 hours of recovery time between strength-training sessions. Never lift more than three times a week per muscle group.

Include cardio.

Your heart and lungs, as well as your muscles, will thank you if you treat them to generous doses of aerobic exercise.

Consult a professional.

Most health clubs have staff available to teach you how to use weight machines. Take time to learn proper technique to avoid injury. Consider hiring a certified personal trainer who can teach you the correct form for each exercise and offer a





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personalized fitness plan for you. Check out www.acefitness.org, the American Council on Exercise website that provides guidelines for finding a reputable trainer as well as other resources.

Joanna Bloss is a fitness instructor and certified personal trainer.

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Reflect

- *What excuses have you used to avoid strength training?*
- *How do these tips help debunk your excuses?*
- *How might these tips help you get off on the right foot, so to speak?*



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Get Together to Get in Shape

How to strengthen your abs as well as your relationships.

By Jim Killam



You there. Yeah, you. Flopped on the couch, watching some workout show on Lifetime. Telling your husband, "Y'know, we oughta get in shape one of these days."

Your body is a temple, and the Philistines have moved in. You feel tired most of the time. Maybe you've put on a few pounds. You know this, of course, but any thought of getting physically fit merely reminds you of how busy you already are. Exercise? Only if you could quit your job.

Ten-hut!





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What if we told you some ways to get more exercise, feel better, improve your communication as husband and wife, and maybe even improve your spiritual life?

What if you didn't have to buy the "Abs of Granite" video, or some exercise contraption that looks like a medieval torture device? What if it took less time than you probably spend watching tv in a week? What if we threw in a set of Ginsu knives?

Here's a hint—one you won't hear from some celebrity hawking the Ultra Gut Buster. Get a pen. You should write this down.

Walk.

For starters, it's that simple. About three times a week (and a bit more if your goal is weight loss), put on some good shoes and walk at a brisk pace.

Think more about posture than speed at first, advises Susie Kania, an exercise physiologist and program director at Cooper Wellness Center in Dallas.

"Just start out with a time you're both comfortable with—maybe 15, 20, 30 minutes," she says. "Add to that after a week or two, and just make it a part of your routine—maybe three to five times per week."

Work your way up to at least 30 minutes each time. Short, quick strides will quicken your pace, Kania says. How fast should you go? Researchers suggest that fit adults should be able to walk about two miles in 30 minutes.

As you develop this habit, you'll also look forward to breaking away from life's little distractions and enjoying one-on-one time with your spouse.





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Jim Maxwell, author of the book *Body and Soul: Walking with God to Total Health* (New Hope Publishers), says that's an often overlooked exercise benefit for couples.

"Remember the old saying, 'The family that prays together stays together?' Another one that's equally valid is 'The couple that walks together talks together,'" Maxwell says.

"Just going for a long walk alone gives you time for spiritual reflection and prayer," he adds. "Going for a long walk with your spouse gives you a great deal of time just for one-on-one talk without interruptions. You can share, you can communicate, and that builds a real closeness."

Stormie Omartian, author of the best-selling book *The Power of a Praying Wife* (Harvest House) and several fitness videos, has seen her own 27-year marriage benefit as she and her husband, Michael, exercise regularly.

"You relate to each other better and you relate to the world better when you're in shape—and you feel better," Omartian says. "It just gives you a high when you're feeling healthy. You're much more prone to have a sense of joy and anticipation about life and about each other."

Get Real

Still with us? Or are you are snickering and saying to each other, "Yeah, right. We'll just put the kids up for adoption and retire early so we can exercise."





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Put the phone down. Kids or not, demanding jobs or not, you find time every week for other important tasks, right?

"It's got to be a priority, or it's not going to happen," says Jim Angel, chair of the exercise science and sports medicine department at Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama. "It's like your quiet time or prayer. Unless it's a priority, you're going to find a hundred other things that will take its place."

"Take your date book and make an appointment with yourselves and write it in there," he adds. "And, unless there's an emergency, that's what you're going to be doing at that particular point in time. You don't make other appointments then; you don't schedule other things in."

Along with the added accountability, keeping a date book can bring a sense of satisfaction. "At the end of each week you can look back and see if you're staying on track and doing what you want to do," Kania says.

If you have young children, there are several options: Use jog strollers and take the kids with you. Buy a treadmill. Pay a baby sitter, or join a fitness center that offers child care. If all of those prove too expensive, take turns walking. That may not be the ultimate communication builder, but at least it gives you a shared experience as you improve your fitness.

What about Paul?

Some of you by now have reached for a Bible, being careful not to strain anything, and found 1 Timothy 4:8—"For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."





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Which begs the question: Won't we slip spiritually if we spend all this time exercising when we could be praying? Omartian has discovered the opposite.

"What we've found true for us and a lot of people is, when you're physically disciplined, you find it easier to be spiritually disciplined," she says. "One affects the other. When I am really taking care of myself and exercising and eating right and doing all the things I know to do, I am much more prone to be spiritually disciplined as far as spending time with the Lord and in the Word.

"You feel better. You can get up early and spend time with the Lord. You're not dragging. It makes such a difference to have that kind of energy to plan your life out."

It's all about finding a balance, Omartian believes. Of course the spiritual side is more important.

"But you can't neglect the physical either, because it really affects who you are here on earth," she says. "It affects the time you spend with your family and with your friends and with people you minister to. I look at taking care of my body as part of what I do for the Lord."

Maxwell maintains that you can accomplish both physical and spiritual disciplines at once. His book focuses on using fitness walking as a way of finding time with God.

"I'll take a Scripture verse, something that's good to reflect on," he says. "I put them on cards. When I get ready to go walk in the morning I pick up a card. As I start walking I read that verse and just start reflecting





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on what it means. Thinking through that and reflecting on it is a natural stepping stone into prayer."

Other mornings are less formal. "I'll just start walking and say, 'Good morning, God,' and off we go."

Join the Club

So we've established that walking's great, physically and maybe even spiritually. But maybe you live in an area where it just isn't practical.

Maybe it bores you. Or maybe you want something more vigorous. There are more forms of exercise than one person could ever try. The key, Kania says, is to find something you enjoy doing that gives you the benefit you want: increased strength or flexibility, weight loss, or just a general sense of feeling better. If you absolutely hate to run, you won't stick with a running program, no matter how good it is for you.

If you want to lift weights, do aerobics, or use sophisticated exercise equipment, fitness centers are great because trainers will help you make sure you're doing the exercises correctly and safely. And, a fitness center may give you the motivation and discipline you can't find at home. Ask anyone who's ever bought an exercise contraption off of a tv infomercial and then put it in a garage sale three months later.

"They could probably invest that money in a good fitness club and have better adherence to a program," Angel says. "If you've paid your membership dues, you're more likely to do it than if you're just going to go out and walk on your own. It varies by person, but I think most people need to be in some sort of a structured program."





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If your goals or athletic abilities as husband and wife differ significantly, a fitness center might be a good choice, Kania adds. For instance, one partner can use cardiovascular equipment while the other does strength training. You're still spending time together, but the exercise is geared to each individual.

All of which isn't to say that the two of you can't develop and maintain a structured exercise program at home, be it walking or something more advanced. Just know that the experts warn that you'll need to develop good discipline together if you're going to stick with it.

This Is not a Competition ... Is it?

Be aware, too, of one potential side effect from exercising together: It may stir competitive juices. Depending on your attitude and abilities, that either can be a real de-motivator or a fun part of your routine.

Greg and Beth Froese of suburban Chicago have been running together since before they were married 11 years ago. She's a doctor; he's an accountant.

Friends might call what they do racing ... even as they've taken to running separately more since the birth of their third child.

"Even though some people might see that as adversarial, actually it's been kind of fun to have a tiny bit of competition here and there," Beth says. "You always sort of egg each other on a little bit, and that's fun."

If one runs a certain distance in a certain time, the other soon hears about it. "I can stick with him on the distance," Beth says. "It's the time that he can usually get me on."





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The friendly competition even extends to the treadmill that the couple purchased recently for their basement, so they could keep running throughout the harsh Midwestern winters.

"Even though we obviously can't run on the treadmill at the same time," Greg says, "it's easy for me to come up and report how many calories I had just burned and what my total distance was. So then Beth goes marching down and I can hear her trucking away down there."

Kania agrees that exercising as husband and wife fosters accountability, if not out-and-out competition. "It just makes it a lot easier to keep your program going," she says. "If you know your spouse is doing their exercises that day, you're going to be more likely to do yours, too."

Remember that as your exercise intensity increases, the communication between spouses decreases. Heartfelt conversations between soulmates generally don't occur while swimming or kickboxing. That's okay if your primary goal is fitness. Just don't set false expectations. If your priority is communicating, then your best choice may be walking—at a pace quick enough to benefit you both physically, but not so quick that you can't carry on a conversation.

Finally, Angel reminds, don't expect more from an exercise program than it can yield. "Exercise is a good short-term stress reliever," he says, "but if there's a stressor, it doesn't solve that stressor. If it's something in the marriage, it can be discussed at that time in a neutral arena, so to speak. Generally, you





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don't walk outside and yell at each other. So it can be a time of controlled disagreement."

And maybe it puts you on the road (literally) to resolving issues, small or large, that threaten your intimacy with each other. Exercise can be a great relief valve.

"When we are exercising," Beth Froese says, "I think it makes our marriage experience a little richer, because it gives us more to talk about. When we don't have it, I don't think our marriage suffers per se, but it's just a fun thing to share. We develop some memories and some good experiences together."

There. Feel motivated? Turn off the TV and talk with your spouse, today, about the most realistic way to get fit together. Then do it. Don't make us get the Gut Buster.

Jim Killam lives in Poplar Grove, Illinois, and teaches journalism at Northern Illinois University.

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Reflect

- *What's been your experience with exercising with another person? Has it helped your relationship?*
- *Jim lays out that simply walking may be the best exercise for growing a relationship. Who could you exercise with, and how would you like to see that relationship improve by exercising together?*





Seven Commandments of Exercise

An expert weighs in.

By Susie Kania and Jim Killam

1. Know thyself. If you're starting from nothing, get a physical exam first. Especially if you're a woman over fifty or a man over forty. And don't worry if things go slowly at first. Everybody starts at a different level.

2. Thou shalt not wear wingtips. If you're going to walk, wear quality shoes. "People don't always see that as important and they'll go out and walk in whatever they have. ... If your feet and legs hurt, then it's hard to exercise."



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3. Throw off everything that hinders. Don't carry hand weights when you walk. "That has a tendency to throw off the biomechanics and you might end up getting injured. I recommend doing strength training at a separate time."

4. Rome didn't lose 25 pounds in a day. "You're not going to accomplish in two weeks what you've undone in the last two years." Start slowly and progress slowly, so you can exercise without hurting yourself. "If you get an injury when you're starting an exercise program, that's very discouraging. You'll get frustrated and probably won't do anything again for a while."

5. Thou shalt try something new. "Put some variety in your exercise program. Vary your exercises or classes. Try new things—cycling, kickboxing, whatever. Make it enjoyable so you look forward to it."

6. Thou shalt kick it up a notch. "As you progress and get more fit, you need to continue to challenge yourself, so that you don't get in a rut." In other words, your body gets used to the level you're at. Until you reach your desired plateau, keep challenging yourself—slowly but surely.

7. Flee the elevator. "Look for opportunities for activity as you go throughout each day. Look for the hard way to do things instead of the easy way." In other words, take the stairs. Park farther away from the office.

Susie Kania works at the Cooper Wellness Center in Dallas. Jim Killam lives in Poplar Grove, Illinois, and teaches journalism at Northern Illinois University.





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This article first appeared in the Winter 2000 issue of
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Reflect

- *Which of these tips is most helpful to you? Why?*
- *The final suggestion is to avoid the easy things. What specifically could you do to add more physicality to your day?*



Slimming Down the Body of Christ



Here's what several health experts want believers to know.

By Randy Robison

A new movement of Christian health experts says the church's witness is compromised when it forgets the importance of physical fitness. Here's what they want you to know about taking control of your health.



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Browse any Christian bookstore and you'll discover an ever-expanding list of diet and health books. Ask anyone in ministry what the top prayer requests they receive are and health-related concerns will invariably rank at the top of the list. American Christians, like all Americans, are worried about their health more than ever before—and for good reason.

One of the biggest health crises in the U.S. these days is what has been dubbed "the obesity epidemic." According to the Center for Disease Control, two out of three American adults (about 65 percent) are overweight, and a quick inventory of the bodies in the pews and pulpits of America reveals that the church is far from exempt.

Dr. Don Colbert, an Orlando, Florida-based physician and ministry leader, deals with a wide range of overweight patients—from the morbidly obese, whose excess weight poses a threat to their very lives, to the average dieter seeking to drop a few pounds. His research prompted him to write the best-selling *Bible Cure* series and *What Would Jesus Eat?*

"There is a spirit of gluttony in the church," Colbert says bluntly. "Christians don't feel like they can drink or party or use drugs, but they do feel they have a license to eat. And eat they will." This inattention to diet, combined with the inherent idleness of most of our occupations and hobbies, has led to pews and pulpits filled with obese people, adds Colbert.

Though it's fun to joke about the ubiquitous nature of fried chicken and baked beans at the church potluck, or the ready availability of doughnuts and pastries





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after Sunday services, the fallout out from our unhealthy eating habits is no laughing matter. Dr. Cris Enriquez, medical director of the Rapha Health Institute in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, identifies excess weight as "a very significant risk factor" in the development of the three biggest killers of the modern era: heart disease, cancer, and stroke. "As temples of the Holy Spirit, to neglect the health of our bodies is to disobey God," he writes in his book *The Healthy Life*. "[God] desires us to care for our health—spirit, soul, and body."

Christians should not only stand out in the world as spiritual salt and light but also as a physical witness of healthy living and self-control, suggests Jordan Rubin, author of The New York Times bestseller *The Maker's Diet*. "Thousands of years ago, the Israelites were much healthier," Rubin observes. "They were much more separate. Today, health-wise, there is very little difference between a believer and a non-believer. So, my passion in life is to help transform the health of God's people, one life at a time, and through God's people change the world."

In *The Maker's Diet*, Rubin lays out a "best-case scenario" for eating: vegetables free from pesticides, meats free from pollutants, and milk free from hormones. It's a tough regimen, but one that literally saved Rubin's life after he was physically crushed by Crohn's Disease, a chronic inflammatory disorder of the intestines that has no known cause or cure. Years of research, experimentation, and prayer led him to develop a plan that has helped him attain good health. He admits, though, that his radical diet may be too





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extreme for the average person. "Most people don't do the whole ball of wax, but they get great results anyway."

From Atkins to South Beach, fast and easy weight-loss programs tend to be the goal of most people seeking a new diet. But virtually every health expert agrees that the path to true wellness lies not in the latest diet craze but in a permanent lifestyle change.

"The weight is certainly what is causing the amazing detriment to our health and our vitality and our energy," says nutritionist and author Pam Smith, "but the issue isn't really just the pounds on the scale. It's the perspective that we have about eating, the perspective we have about food, and the perspective that we have about our bodies that is really the issue."

Since 1987 Carole Lewis's Houston-based ministry, First Place, has helped countless believers experience dramatic changes in their health. Recently, one First Place adherent dropped 55 pounds in six months. "And all he did was start eating sensibly and walking three miles a day," says Lewis. "The only way that people are going to lose weight and keep it off is with a lifestyle change. It's not dieting."

The Right Foods

Fortunately, Christians have a place to turn for insight on healthy living. In addition to the emotional and spiritual guidance of the Scriptures, there are practical physical guidelines to help us slim down and live longer.

"The healthy diet," Dr. Enriquez says, "is what we find in the Bible—the fruits and vegetables in Genesis 1:29. God added meat in Genesis 9:3, but we're not supposed





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to let go of the carbohydrates [as the Atkins craze would suggest], because we need them for our energy. But we need the right carbohydrates, not the simple ones you find in white bread or white pasta or white rice. They give us calories, but they have no nutrients. We need more complex carbohydrates in the form of fruits and vegetables."

Though a myriad of opinions exist among medical and health professionals, both inside and outside the church, the vast majority agrees that natural foods (God-made) serve the human body far better than manufactured foods (man-made). Lean meats, including poultry and beef, balanced with generous portions of fruits and vegetables, and sprinkled with nuts and whole grains, provide the best fuel for the body. Conversely, processed foods, bleached wheat, chemical sweeteners, and other packaged products quickly convert to fat and threaten our well-being.

Dieting offers temporary punishment for short-term gain, but a lifestyle adjustment offers true hope for long-term change. Dr. Ben Lerner, author of *Body By God: The Owner's Manual for Maximized Living*, advocates an "addition role" when it comes to food choice.

"Just start adding foods that belong in your body to your diet," he recommends, "and what will start to happen, eventually, is they will replace some of the junk food. You'll start seeing your body change without having to starve yourself."

By focusing on the good food that God has given us and putting His diet into our bodies, we don't have to lack in any good thing. We just need to remind ourselves that





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God's foods are better than man's. And while there may be some truths encompassed in the various fad diets, such as the benefit of eating fish instead of pork, the overriding consensus among Christian health and fitness experts is that quick fixes have little or no legitimate place in our lives.

Made for Motion

The other half of the health equation lies in exercise. Dino Nowak, a Los Angeles-based fitness trainer who works with numerous celebrities, believes that "lasting change must start from within." He has made it his life goal to motivate and educate people by debunking fad diets and promoting what he calls the "esp Fitness Program." (esp is an acronym for Emotional, Spiritual, and Physical.)

Nowak likens our body's need for food to a car's need for gasoline. "If you keep trying to pump gas in your car and you're not driving it, you don't need that much gas. If you want to burn the gas, you have to drive the car."

For virtually every overweight person, the equation is straightforward.

"It's a simple matter of energy," Nowak explains. "We are taking in far more energy than our bodies are expending, and that's why we're getting fat."

So how do we burn this extra energy? Since most people do not perform strenuous manual labor on the job, the answer lies in exercise.

Fitness trainer **Leslie Sansone** created a video centered on the idea of "in-home walking" in order to make exercise accessible to everyone. By removing the usual barriers to a regular workout, such as cost, schedule





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and lack of comfort around strangers, Sansone's *Walk Away The Pounds* videos have encouraged millions of people.

"One of the biggest gifts God gave us was this gorgeous feeling of not only empowerment, but also the coping and peace that exercise brings us," she says. "And no drug, no pill, nothing takes the place of what our natural body produces when we are in motion, because God's design for muscle and bone is for them to be active. We're meant to be spiritual and physical beings, and when we're in motion we are happier, healthier, more creative, and smarter."

Sansone's just-released book, *Walk Away The Pounds: The Breakthrough 6-Week Program That Helps You Burn Fat, Tone Muscle, and Feel Great Without Dieting*, features principles, exercises, and recipes for healthy living.

Nowak breaks down exercise into three categories: cardiovascular, resistance training, and flexibility. For cardiovascular exercise, Nowak suggests, "find your activity." Whether it's rollerblading, jogging, playing tennis, or simply walking, it's important to engage our bodies in an enjoyable activity that also increases our heart rate.

Resistance training typically means weightlifting, but not necessarily in the way we imagine body builders pumping iron. "You're much better off doing things in movement patterns as you would experience in life," Nowak advises. Squats, rows, presses, and other low-impact repetitions that mimic real-life actions help develop useful strength and balance.





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Flexibility, in way of warming up to a full-blown workout and stretching the muscles to elongate and preserve them, completes the triad of exercise.

Diet and exercise go hand-in-hand. Together, they provide the key to a healthier, longer life.

Most of the fitness professionals interviewed for this article recommend 30 minutes of activity at least four times per week. And, of course, they say you should always consult your doctor before beginning any new diet or fitness program.

Remembering Body and Soul

Once the church realizes the power of good health and the witness it provides to the world—not to mention the benefits it provides to Christians—we will be on our way to revolutionizing our neighborhoods, cities, country, and world, says Jordan Rubin.

"I believe the power of helping one person change their health is unbelievable," he adds, "especially a believer, because they will be able to impact thousands, if not millions of people."

All the Christian fitness experts agree especially on this one thing: When we line up our appetites and habits with the Word of God, we will naturally reap the health benefits. And this means a total lifestyle change, not jumping after the latest fad.

"It's presently popular to be 'non-judgmental' and to avoid stamping self-destructive behaviors with moral labels," writes theologian J. Raymond Albrektson in *The Plain Truth* magazine. "But unless we recognize over-eating as a moral failure, traditionally known as gluttony, we remain helpless to enlist [God's power]. Just





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as every alcoholic takes the first step toward recovery when he looks squarely in the mirror and says, 'I am an alcoholic,' we need to take a good look at ourselves and admit, 'I eat too much.'"

Changing our habits may not be easy, but God, through His Holy Spirit, can empower us with the discipline necessary to be set apart from the world in our health. But that separation can only come through a consistent practice of healthy eating and exercise.

"Our bodies hate change," Nowak says, "so whatever you stick to most consistently, that's where your body will go. If you are consistently being active and fit and eating fruits and vegetables, then having sweets occasionally is fine. But the problem is, people go the other way around. They are consistently sedentary, consistently overeating, consistently turning to food for emotional comfort, and occasionally they'll go for a walk for a few weeks. But our bodies go back to whatever we're most consistent with."

Nowak continues: "The same thing is true with our spiritual walk. If you occasionally read the Bible, occasionally go to church, but are more consistently hanging out with people who are drawing you away from the Lord, your spiritual walk will reflect that.

"If we were to practice in our spiritual walk what we do in our bodies, it would be a joke. So why do we continue such poor habits in our physical walk?"

Randy Robison is a writer based in Fort Worth, Texas. This article first appeared in the November/December 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN.





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Reflect

- *What's been your experience with the way the church views fitness?*
- *What are the differences in attitude Christians have toward someone with a drinking problem versus an eating problem?*
- *What might churches do to help promote physical fitness?*



Walking with Purpose



Prayer walking will take your marriage a step in the right direction.

By Karen O'Connor

For months in the early years of our marriage, mornings at our house were a blur of busyness. My husband, Charles, and I would jump out of bed, shower, dress, eat, scan the newspaper, then rush off to work.

After a while, I felt the need to add some exercise to my routine, so I'd power walk through the neighborhood or hit the nearby gym for an early aerobics class. Charles was never as interested in exercise as I was, however, so usually I went alone.



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Then gradually, as his schedule permitted, he agreed to walk with me before work. I treasured these intimate early morning walks with my husband. They seemed the perfect time to talk out our problems with money, kids, and parents—and each other. Then one day I suggested that on our return route, we stop at a park bench near our home for a quick time of prayer. Charles agreed and this became my favorite part of our time together. The only problem was that we both felt rushed. It seemed there wasn't time for everything—a nourishing breakfast, much-needed exercise, and quality time to talk and pray. I wanted to find a way to make it all work.

Then one Saturday as we walked, enjoying the freedom of a day off work, it occurred to me that we could combine our walking with our praying. Instead of commenting on the passing scene, or discussing a situation that needed our attention, I realized we could pray about these things as we walked! I was excited about this new possibility and mentioned it to Charles, who liked the idea.

Today, prayer walking has become a popular trend, but when Charles and I started (more than 20 years ago!), I'd never heard of it. There was no mystery to it. We just did what we'd been doing—walking—only we put our prayer into the walk instead of leaving it for the park bench at the end. I wondered if we'd feel self-conscious praying aloud in a public area. But soon we realized the joggers and other walkers were as involved in their own routines as we were in ours.





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We didn't follow any prescribed method or carry prayer books with us. We just talked and then prayed about whatever we talked about. For example, I might mention a concern I had with one of our children or with my mother or a colleague. As soon as I voiced it, Charles would pray on the spot. If he shared a dilemma, I'd pray aloud for that. Then we'd take turns praying for our families, our church friends, neighbors, etc.

We didn't go through a list of every name and need; that would take too long. But we did hold up people as they came to mind. For example, one morning we prayed: "Dear God, please watch over our neighbors today and be especially present to Laura as she leaves town to attend her mother's funeral."

It might be that specific or as general as when we prayed for the leaders of our city, state, and nation to make wise choices that day.

Two decades later, we continue to prayer walk, though we no longer hold to the early morning schedule. Now that my husband works part-time and at odd hours, we walk in the afternoon or early evening.

We've never made prayer walking a "rule." We want it to remain a treasure, something we enjoy doing. If one or the other doesn't feel like it one day, we let it go and pray just before bed at night or upon waking in the morning. Regardless of when we do it, the benefits have been nothing short of miraculous. And it's brought some unexpected rewards:





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More Intimacy. Our prayer walks have led to a deeper, more intimate understanding of each other. My husband, for example, had fears I never knew about before. They began to surface during our prayer time. One day Charles disclosed that his short fuse and occasional fits of anger were rooted in his past. His father had screamed at his mother when he was angry or frustrated. This was weighing heavily on Charles, and he was afraid it was hurting our marriage. Because we were practicing prayer, Charles felt he could be vulnerable with me. That day, we were able to talk about it and what he could do to overcome it, then we prayed over the situation. This resulted in him enrolling in an anger management workshop that produced significant healing in this area of his life.

I also felt the freedom in our prayer walks to reveal some of my secrets. For instance, I was finally able to share with him how I'd been holding back affection because of my fear of being hurt as I'd been in my first marriage. I'd vowed never again to feel sexually vulnerable. These disclosures and the prayers that followed carried us to new heights in our marriage. Suddenly what seemed so big to each of us was less of a burden, and we watched our marriage grow more intimate. It's been so freeing to let down our guard and to be completely real with God and with each other.

More Love. Over time, I realized that the fruit of our prayer walks was not only evident to us but to our family and friends, as well. Other people commented when they came into our home that they could feel the love. Even our children remarked that we seemed mellow, more relaxed, and more in tune with each other. Little things that may have annoyed or bothered





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us before didn't affect us anymore. For example, I stopped fussing about Charles leaving open the closet door or his shoes under the coffee table. It just didn't seem all that important any longer. I simply put away the shoes and closed the door as an act of love. And he was more patient and loving toward me when I forgot or misplaced something he needed.

More Spontaneity. The more we prayed, the more we were able to embrace those around us—to see their needs and to include them in our prayers. We've both noticed our increasing willingness to live in the moment. For example, when we'd notice a child laughing and playing with her sibling, we'd offer up a spontaneous praise for God's gift of laughter.

More Purpose. On days when we can't go outside because of illness or the weather, for example, we still pray together. We pray in bed before we get up, or at the breakfast table before we go to work, or if one of us is out of town we connect by phone. Our prayer life now has more purpose. Our goal is to experience oneness with God, physical and spiritual well-being, and personal time together. And what happens when the enemy tries to pull us down?

My friend and fellow prayer walker, Janet, has a helpful reminder. She says, "When you're praying, the Enemy can sling all kinds of weapons—discouragement, deception, doubt, depression, and despair. During those times of spiritual battle, the three-stranded cord—God, my husband, and I—keeps me praying even more strongly."





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More Simplicity. Perhaps best of all is the simplicity of our communication with God and with ourselves. We don't have fancy "word feasts," no self-conscious mumblings, no rattling on for the sake of hearing ourselves speak. We've discovered that prayer is simple conversation with God.

There are days when Charles and I will pray: "God, thank you for today, for each other, for life, for family and friends. Thank you for loving us, for forgiving us, for caring about us. We're sorry for our short tempers, for our careless comments. But we're also grateful that you've provided another chance to get it right! We love you, God."

Today as I look back over the years since we started our prayer walks, I'm amazed at the transformations that have occurred in my husband, in me, in our life together, and in our relationship with God. We've experienced more vitality, more authenticity, more intimacy, and more honesty in our marriage— just by perking it up with a prayer walk.

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Reflect

- *Do you pray with your spouse regularly? If not, why not?*
- *Does the idea of prayer walking appeal to you? Why or why not?*
- *If prayer walking doesn't appeal to you, what other things could you do to grow both spiritually and physically?*



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