

SOMETIMES, THE CONSTANT MARKETING MESSAGES THAT POUND UNREALISTIC IDEALS INTO OUR HEADS ABOUT HOW WE SHOULD LOOK AND FEEL CAN GET THE BETTER OF US. BUT IT IS POSSIBLE TO FOCUS ON MENTAL AND PHYSICAL FITNESS WITHOUT BEING A FANATIC. THREE LOCAL EXPERTS LAY OUT SOME SIMPLE STEPS TO MAKE YOUR JOURNEY TO A HEALTHY YOU A LOT EASIER—AND A LOT LONGER-LASTING.

DIETING VS. HEALTHY EATING

FOCUS ON HOW IT MAKES YOU FEEL.

We are smacked in the face daily with tips and diets that we should follow to be healthy, lose weight, or look good. Eat this many times. Consume this. Cut out that. But how do we know what will help us be healthy, and what our bodies need?

“When I first started as a dietitian, I thought I knew what was best for everyone to eat,” says Krista Kohls, registered dietitian at UnityPoint Health Meriter.

But as she gained more experience, she realized that we can learn what’s best for each body if we just tune in.

Kohls notes that sometimes diets are necessary to regulate a chronic condition like diabetes, but she doesn’t call it a diet.

“It’s hard to think about being on a diet for the rest of your life. Instead, let’s work through some tweaks, and create an eating plan that might make a difference,” she explains.

Many diets today focus on cutting one whole category of food, like carbohydrates, gluten, dairy or sugar. And if the eating plan feels restrictive, or far out of the norm of your usual eating habits, sticking to it will become harder and harder. Kohls explains that this is because the connection between why we are following the diet lessens over time because the focus is on the food.

Instead, she recommends tuning into how foods and eating patterns make us feel to drive our actions.

“Often we’re focused on the wrong things,” she says. “For example, if we’re eating a dessert with a lot of gluten, we’re focused on that we shouldn’t be eating it because it’s a dessert, and less on how it’s actually making us feel.”

This type of mindless eating is common in our society, which can set us up for failure when we’re trying to create healthy eating habits. How often have you found yourself grabbing that donut at work just because it’s there, or wolfing down lunch at your desk while checking emails?

“Usually the end of eating in those situations is the end of the bag or the plate is clean, instead of acknowledging when your belly is satisfied,” Kohls says. “This often leaves us wanting more.”

By carving out a mealtime and respecting the food we put in our bodies, success is more likely. And not only planning when to eat, but also what to eat. Kohls says meal planning is critical, especially if you’re rushed during the day or lacking the will to cook at night. She recommends finding healthy but convenient options like pre-cut or frozen veggies to add to a main entrée, and jotting down what those meals will be throughout the week, then bringing those foods into your environment.

“I see my patients give up when they feel they aren’t eating perfectly,” she says. “But healthy eating is not so black and white. By creating a healthy eating environment, it’s easier to make better choices.”

And she says we need to give ourselves some credit. If the scale doesn’t move, but you’re doing something differently that’s making you feel better, pat yourself on the back. Acknowledge those good choices and you’ll find balance, and that’s what will keep you coming back for more. — *Emily Leas*



FITNESS OBSESSION VS. PASSION

TEND YOUR PRIORITIES.

This year, I'm going to exercise more! Does this sound like a familiar New Year's resolution? As we work through the winter, many may find themselves in two camps: Having trouble motivating to keep up with that resolution, or going overboard and hopscotching from Zumba to spinning to boot camps. So how do we find that passion for physical fitness without going overboard?

Lauren Birkel, owner of Orange Shoe Personal Fitness, says finding a partner is key.

"Whether it's a personal trainer, a friend, a family member, a coworker, it's really important to have someone that can be supportive of your goals and hold you accountable at the same time," she recommends.

And if you're new to making movement part of your routine, finding something that you enjoy will lead to greater success. If you don't like it, you're probably not going to stick with it, Birkel says. Try out a variety and build a plan around the activities that you can look forward to.

"I always like to think of it as 30 minutes is only 4 percent of your day. When you break it down that way, it can feel more realistic," says Birkel.

But even that can seem daunting in a world where work and home life don't turn off. Begin by removing obstacles. If you know you won't want to work out after a long day in the office, pack a bag in the morning and go straight to the gym, or find that partner who will hold you accountable for a morning workout. Then pick a goal that is measurable and has a specific timeline, suggests Birkel. For example, be able to do a pull-up by March, or run a 5K in June.

Then celebrate milestones along the way with your training partner, and reward yourself when your goal is met. And when life gets in the way, Birkel says have a plan for that, too. Often, when a workout is missed the path either goes the way of giving up, or going overboard and doubling up.

When the latter happens, it can sometimes lead to an exercise addiction, a condition that is more common as we are all pressured to look a certain way. Athletic. Fit. Like all addiction, it's needing to do more to get the same effect, having symptoms of withdrawal, having trouble cutting back. But it may be harder for you or others to recognize since exercise is viewed as virtuous, a habit that is envied. How do you know if you're obsessed with the gym?

"Indicators of overtraining are things like restless sleep, or feeling irritable, run down or fatigued," says Birkel. "Or little things like getting a cold that continues to build because you're not giving your body time to heal."

Beyond the physical, Birkel says if hitting the gym is interfering with relationships in your life that are valuable to you, there may be diminishing returns, thinking you need more, but getting less from the workout.

Whether you find yourself obsessed with exercise, or just having trouble motivating, re-evaluate what started you on this path, your original goal, and tap into a partner to help celebrate even the smallest victories on the journey to better health. — *Emily Leas*