

Exercise for Mind, Body and Spirit

By

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We are all aware of the much publicized health benefits of aerobic exercise. Regular aerobic activities—like walking, jogging, and bicycling -- strengthen the heart, the lungs, and the circulatory system.

Recent scientific studies have shown that physical activity does not even have to be vigorous to yield health benefits. The equivalent of 30-45 minutes of walking each day can have a measurable, positive impact on cardiovascular and respiratory health.

There are two ways to view the effects of exercise on physical health. First, inactivity leads to decline. When muscles, including the heart and lungs, are not used they will weaken. During the first part of the 20th century, we have seen dramatic evidence of the effects of inactivity on large segments of the population in developed countries. Obesity, heart disease, stroke, and adult onset diabetes are epidemic. Our nursing homes are full of frail elderly people whose physical decline is more a result of 40-50 years of being sedentary than it is the inevitable result of aging.

Evidently, our body requires a minimal amount of use in order to maintain functional integrity. The decline in physical function becomes dramatically visible by the time people are 30 years old, but there is evidence that chronic inactivity begins to take its toll even on teenagers.

The second way that exercise affects health is through a strengthening process. A minimal level of activity is required to prevent decline. What happens when a person engages in more strenuous exercise on a regular basis? Not only does this prevent weakening and decline, it, in fact, results in building muscle and strengthening the system that delivers oxygen and nutrients to the muscles.

There are limits to this strengthening that are set by individual genetics and by the limitations of our species. The fact, however, that world records in sports continue to be broken indicates that as individuals and as a species we haven't quite reached the outer limits of how strong, fast, and agile we can become. Once you approach your limits of strength and endurance, a high level of activity is still necessary to maintain your level of fitness.

Exercise can be viewed on two levels. At the first level it is the minimum amount of activity required to prevent loss of function. We might call this the "use it or lose it" principle. Second, exercise involves pushing oneself harder in order to grow and develop. We might call this the "no pain, no gain" principle.

Both functions of exercise require the individual to put forth effort. In the past, the work we had to do to survive, whether it was farming, industrial, or domestic, was usually enough to maintain strength and was often enough to make people stronger. Today, life in the industrialized countries is so easy physically that we actually have to put forth effort in order to get enough physical activity to prevent rapid physical deterioration. Only a small minority of people are sufficiently disciplined to exercise at a level that will result in the growth and development of strength, endurance, and fitness.

I would like to consider the possibility that exercise is also necessary in our mental and spiritual lives. I think about my ability to do arithmetic, for example. I stumbled the other day on 9 times 8. Occasionally, I am caught without a calculator and have to do long division. Arithmetic is a mental activity that, if not exercised, will decline. Our modern society with its calculators and computers means we have to put forth effort to exercise our arithmetic skills.

I am constantly amazed at the number of adults who never read. If you don't read and exercise your mind, it will decay. The major form of mental exercise we get in our society is watching television. Perhaps television is not all bad. We might think of it as the minimal amount of mental exercise needed to prevent total

mental decline. However, the mind is capable of more than simply holding its own after the completion of high school. The pursuit of knowledge can strengthen the mind. Rigorous mental discipline -- such as required to become a physician, lawyer, scientist, or artist—greatly enhances the mind.

There are very few people who become mental athletes and push the strength of the mind to its genetic limits.

What could we accomplish as a planet if more people put the kind of training into the working of the mind that our Olympic and professional athletes put into the training of the body? What could you accomplish as an individual if you instituted a training regimen to improve your grasp and breadth of knowledge and your ability to read, write, and do mathematics?

Consider for a moment the interaction of mind and body. Does a body in decline due to lack of physical activity make it difficult for the mind to soar to new heights of knowledge and insight? Does physical health contribute to efficient mental functioning? I believe that physical fitness improves our ability to cope with emotional stress and that a strong healthy person is less prone to debilitating fear, anxiety and depression.

Fear is a mind killer. Depression is a heavy weight that holds us down. Anxiety takes its toll on our minds and our bodies. A minimal amount of physical exercise not only prevents the physical deterioration of the body, but also contributes to better mental function through both physical and emotional health. The person who is regimented and trains to strengthen the body is also at the same time creating a space in which it will be easier to discipline the mind, keep it strong and growing in knowledge and insight.

Taking mind development to the next step, what happens when you allow yourself to become hungry for truth? What if the spiritual urge that arises from the divine spark within each of us is allowed to give both impetus and direction to our mental exercise. Surely reading romance novels, working word puzzles, or writing drivel on the internet prevents mental death and if done vigorously enough can lead to mental growth. I am struck, however, by the possibility that becoming a truth seeker in the areas of science, philosophy, art, or religion is a form of mental exercise that not only energizes but also integrates.

The mind filled with hunger for truth that regularly feeds at the trough will be able to withstand stress, disappointment, failure, and adversity better than the mind whose only nourishment is Oprah Winfrey, professional sports, or soap operas. Strengthening the body has a calming effect on the mind. Exercising the mind is energizing. Seeking truth whenever and wherever it may be found is mind integrating. A strength, maturity, and wisdom can arise when one drinks from the fountain of truth.

Is there also a spiritual side to life that will wither if not used and grow strong if exercised? If one of the purposes of our brief mortal existence is to lay the foundations of an immortal soul that will survive into eternity, then engaging in activities that promote soul growth should be one of the highest priorities of living.

I remember a Sunday school teacher I had when I was 13 or 14 years old. Her name was Grace, and she was an octogenarian with an immense goiter. I clearly remember her telling us that she was building a mansion for herself in Heaven. Each day, she tried to live righteously so she could send up another brick.

The analogy, while perhaps naive in some ways, is really very accurate in many ways. While we are not literally sending bricks to Heaven, we are constructing through our thoughts, feelings, decisions, and actions an essential self, an immortal soul, that will be the starting point of the postmaterial phase of our eternal existence. Faith is all that is required to begin, but spiritual growth and the evolution of an immortal soul is achieved through deliberate, motivated, and vigorous living.

What kinds of activities constitute spiritual exercises that lead to soul evolution? We might also phrase this question as: What can we do to enhance our ability to bear fruits of the spirit? First and foremost is learning to attune the mind to the leadings of the indwelling spirit. We also know this as discovering the Will of God in our lives.

While the basic prerequisite is a sincere desire to know and follow the will of God, a regular practice of worshipful meditation is a form of spiritual exercise. The kind of worship we learn to do in church is the level of spiritual exercise that prevents soul death. Repeating prayers, singing songs, and listening to sermons is the equivalent of a daily walk or of reading the newspaper. It can keep you alive, but it usually does not strengthen.

Take time to relax, become centered, and quiet the mind first. Focus your thoughts on God the Father and allow yourself to express your gratitude for his love and mercy. Address yourself not to an infinite being somewhere far off in outer space, but instead try to feel the spirit presence in the core of your body, in your heart. Have a conversation. Talk about the things that are on your mind and the problems that are troubling you.

It is not so important what you say or what you talk about. The soul building exercise is the attempt to contact the Father with loving gratitude, childlike humility, and a sincere desire to evolve to the point that your will and His will are one and the same.

As you strengthen your connection with the indwelling spirit, you'll find yourself attempting communication at different times of the day. It isn't long until you begin to feel or sense the spiritual presence. It may take a long time to achieve more or less direct communication, but when it is established, soul growth can proceed much more rapidly.

The second activity that functions as spiritual exercise is prayer. By prayer, I mean the act of making requests of the Divine. We can pray for ourselves, which often means praying for a greater knowledge of the Divine Will and the strength and courage to act upon it. However, praying for others is a more effective form of spiritual exercise.

Love is the dominant characteristic of the personality of God. God is many things, but first and foremost he is the Divine parent of all the personalities in the Universe. As such, love is the attitude of the Divine parent toward his spiritual and material children. We strengthen our souls to the extent that we can take love from the Source and direct it toward others. When we think of our friends, our family, and the many people on this planet we can perceive many needs that they have.

Ask yourself: If I could tap into the Divine source of love and redirect it toward those around me, what needs could be filled? While prayer may accomplish its objectives by focusing or directing the love of God to places where it is most needed, it also is soul exercise. It socializes us by breaking down selfishness and replacing it with love and understanding.

Service is the final form of spiritual exercise I would like to discuss. Sitting and thinking about what those around us might need, and asking God to fill those needs may be a soul building experience. It is pale in comparison to seeing a need and taking direct action to fill that need in the lives of friends, family, and strangers.

Praying to God to help feed the homeless people on the street is fine. Doing something to minister to a suffering human being is far superior. As you fill with the Love of God, as you attune yourself to the Divine will, you will become motivated to express this love through service.

While prayer can shine a flashlight into a dark corner, service allows you to jump in and install lighting yourself. Service can take many forms. The exercise, the soul building activity is to increase your awareness of when and where you can be of service. When you see an opportunity, take action. Your action sends up another brick to help you build a magnificent soul.

As I currently understand it, spiritual growth is not necessarily simple or easy to define. It involves becoming less and less an animal and more and more a well adjusted, truth seeking, service devoted, God conscious citizen of the Universe. We become more real, in a spiritual sense, as we transcend our evolutionary origins. The mind gains mastery over the body. The emotions flavor life, but do not dominate or control it. The inner spiritual presence is allowed to lead the mind. The quest for food, shelter and sex takes a back seat to the quest for self-perfection and the discovery of the many facets of God. The paradox is that mind over matter and spirit over mind is best achieved through a life that includes food, shelter, and sex.

Strengthening the body through physical exercise, building and integrating the mind by satisfying truth hunger, and enhancing soul growth through meditation, prayer, and service can only be accomplished when one is fully engaged in material life.

Should I exercise? It depends. If you do not engage in physical exercise, the body will wither. If you avoid mental challenges, the mind becomes weak and confused. If you eschew spiritual exercise, soul growth stagnates and your mansion may turn out to be a hovel.

Body, mind, and spirit are inseparable. Devoting yourself to even a minimal regimen of physical exercise and mental stimulation prevents decline and facilitates spiritual growth. The development of a vigorous regimen of physical, mental, and spiritual discipline will create a tremendous synergy. The discipline is stimulated by the spirit leadings. Practice of the discipline more quickly connects you with the spirit leadings which will ultimately make the discipline less of a burden and increasingly a joy.

The quest for mind-body-spirit integration through the adoption of a deliberate program of physical, mental, and spiritual exercise will lead to rapid personal growth, a calm sense of self-assurance, the ability to withstand the hardships of life on the planet, and the emergence of an increasingly mature, wise, and integrated self. What could be more important than this?

Background

Dr David Schlundt was an ordained a minister when he discovered the Urantia Book while working as a pastor of The First Evangelical and Reformed Church, United Church of Christ, in Goshen, Indiana. He was the first member-at-large accepted in the Urantia Brotherhood in 1958.