

THE CHALLENGE OF EMBODIMENT

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Seven years ago, with crippling back spasms, a neck I couldn't hold up straight, and a pocket full of pain prescriptions, I was despondent with pain and fatigue. My chiropractor recommended joining a gym, so I did. After just two weeks, my back was restored and my journey into the world of health and fitness began.

Now, I see physical health as a critical component of any individual discipleship path. For a health practice to “live” in our life, it must be sustained and held by two balancing pressures: “self-compassion” and “schedule.” Self-compassion is part of the “why” for fitness. Schedule is the “when.” So before we jump into tips and practicalities, let's explore these two ideas for a moment.

- **Self-compassion**

The wellness industry is a multi-billion dollar amalgam of products and programs. These goods and services are not *intended* to shame us—but often that's our motive for such purchases.

Shame is the nebulous psychological sense that we are inadequate, not enough, don't have the resources to live our own life, and should hide from God, others, and even our true self. Shame is a poor motive for wellness. Feeling ashamed of our body won't lead to *true* health, but to a self-torturing bondage.

In the Garden of Eden, no one had body image issues. Now, body image struggles are widespread. I'm a former gym-owner so “kinda fit,” and I know I struggle with aspects of myself I wish were different. But in Jesus, we can begin to heal from the abusive stories that have been proclaimed over our bodies by our self, others, the world, or dark spirits. **Your body was created by God**; it belongs to Him, and is celebrated and accepted by Him, even amidst disease, blemishes, injuries, and aging. Self-compassion is clothing yourself in the kindness God treats you with so that you can extend that kindness and flourishing to others.

- **Schedule**

If it's not on your schedule, it doesn't matter to you. We can throw out all kinds of “ifs,” “ands,” and “buts” here. But the “buts” are lying through their faces. Because you and I only get 24 hours a day. What we do with those 24 hours *undeniably* captures our priorities. What we perceive as most essential, most valuable, gets done.

- **Designing a Personal Health Challenge**

Any health challenge you create for yourself must live between those two parallel pressures. They are the “why” and the “when.” With that, I'd like to suggest four different types of health challenges for you to choose from. I'll list them from most basic to most challenging. These practices build on themselves and are somewhat sequential so let's call them “levels”.

Level 1 - Stress Recovery

- Psychological stress is at epidemic proportions in our world today. Chronic stress lowers your immune system over time. Brain scans find that it is a near antithesis of creativity. Long-term stress contributes to hormonal imbalances that can result in: disintegrated presence, damaged relationships, accelerated genetic aging, and increased adverse epigenetic expression. Basically, it's bad.

The most fundamental element of biological health is your body's ability to ebb and flow between the “go” (sympathetic) and “rest” (parasympathetic) states of the nervous system. If you are chronically stressed—that is to say, if stress is “normal” for you—experimenting with solutions here is your Level 1 challenge:

Trade substances for sleep. (You've probably heard that 7-8 hrs/night is a clinically significant threshold so spend 8-9hrs/night in bed.)

Trade media consumption for rejuvenating activities. (Media can sometimes numb our minds, whereas activities like reading, walking, bird-watching, or drawing are both calming and restorative.)

Level 2 - Practice Conscious Breathing

- Pause right now and take a deep, deep breath... That was *different*, wasn't it? Your respiratory system is the most visceral, tangible representation of the state of your nervous system. But most of the time, we aren't really paying attention to the process of breath, since it's automatic.

Unfortunately, this means that most of us are chronically under-oxygenated. Ever wake up with a headache? Feel lightheaded when working out? Started panic-breathing during a stressful moment? Research says that most people don't use the bottom 1/3 of their lungs! That's a missed opportunity!

So your Level 2 Challenge: **see how you feel after an entire day of conscious breathing.** Breathe deeply throughout the day, when you are praying or meditating, when you are working. Receive these signals from your nervous system because controlled breathing actually sends a signal back to the brain that you are safe and well.

Level 3 - Train Energy Pathways

- Without getting too technical here, your body has multiple "energy pathways" for different demands that may be placed upon it. A quick sprint, or heavy lift. Taking a heavy wheelbarrow down the street, or running a couple of miles.

Living on Earth, it's good to be ready for anything. I never could quite clock a sub 5-minute mile when I had my timer going at the track, but I'm confident I ran a sub-5 mile at the Cliffs of Moher when it was life and death on the line, getting medical help for a woman having a heart attack.

Your training intensity should match the demands (or potential demands) of your life. I can't really give you the inside scoop on how to write a workout program for yourself in just a few sentences here. But if all you're looking for is results, highest ROI on your time, here you go, Level 3 Challenge:

Three times a week do strength training using 3-4 sets of 3-6 repetitions. Keep reps around 75% maximal load or a rate of perceived exertion of 7-8/10. Use a stone or sandbag if you don't have traditional weights. **Once or twice a week do 4-6, 8-15 second sprints** (run, row, swim, bike, ski, erg, etc.) Rest 90-120 seconds between each set and/or sprint.

Level 4 - Stimulate a Responsive Metabolism

- A responsive metabolism is like a functional steering wheel. It provides directional authority for your energy assimilation, storage, and expenditure systems. If you have done all of the previous "levels" and nothing is working as you try to gain or lose weight, there are only two possibilities. One, your metabolism (your caloric expenditure, regulated by the endocrine system) is running like a steering wheel with no steering fluid. It just won't turn. You should express these concerns to your doctor and request a comprehensive metabolic panel to see what emerges. Then, follow up with a professional nutritionist who will *not* put you on an unsustainable, metabolically catastrophic diet

but will encourage a healthy relationship with food.

The second possibility is that you aren't eating the right amount of food for your body type and goals. If you really feel like you need to move the numbers on the scale one way or another and you don't have the aforementioned metabolic problems, the path is very simple. If you want a high level of control over your nutrition and your bodyweight, here's what you do...

1. Use a [professional tool](#) like this to calculate what your macronutrient intake should be (it's free).
2. Buy a food scale (\$9).
3. Download MyFitnessPal (free).
4. Weigh and measure your food, and hit your macros every day.
5. Once you know your meals, the app remembers things and it is about 3-4 mins of work per day.

- **Reality Check for Your Potential Challenge**

It is vital to remember that **any health challenge you create for yourself is only life-giving to the degree it exists between a mature level of self-compassion and the reality of your schedule.**

Ask yourself, "Can I hold and sustain this practice between self-compassion and my schedule? Does this challenge/practice unite my inner world with my daily reality, or does it falsely bifurcate them in some way?"

Make sure you start any kind of health challenge with this deep inner work, and you will be poised to follow through, learn, and experience God's presence as you care for the body he has entrusted you. May your body bring His creative love into the world.

****I am not a medical doctor. Please consult your primary care physician when implementing significant health changes.****