

Episode 20 – Define Your Shape by Shaping Your Environment

This is the TD Fitness Podcast with Coach T, Episode Number 20.

Welcome to the TD Fitness Podcast giving you ways to live a healthy lifestyle without giving up the things that make life worth living and now your host, certified health coach and personal trainer, Coach T.

Hey, what's up, guys? Coach T here from TD Fitness, coming at you with another episode on the TD Fitness Media Channel, I'll call it. This is episode number 20 called Define Your Shape by Shaping Your Environment. The concept we're getting at here is understanding that there is more to your healthy living goals, your successes, and your failures if you want to call them that than just the actions you take alone. Why is this important?

Well, because an understanding of the things at play make us more informed and better able to adapt and that goes for everyone. If you've ever wondered why nothing you try works, maybe it's time to take a look at some things that are unrelated to what you're trying. There is a freebie associated with this episode. It's the 12 Small Steps to Creating Your Healthy Environment. That's one that I put together for you and you can download that right now at TDFitness.net/020download.

Now, what prompted this topic? I recently read a new report on America's health rankings and essentially what this report did was rank the states in order for most healthy to least healthiest states from 1 to 50. In the top five we had, Massachusetts, Hawaii, Utah, Vermont, Connecticut, and in the bottom five West Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. I'll link to that article and the study so you guys can check it out. Basically, the report in the article both had a pretty good visual representation of the regions in the United States, and their health factors if you will and how healthy they were. It was easy to parse out the areas that were less healthy, and those that were more healthy.

Generally speaking, the south was pretty unhealthy. Northeast, the farther northeast you go they were pretty healthy and then the farther west you went, also had positive health attributes. What was very evident was that there were large disparities between the regions in the United States. Life expectancy varies by as much as 20 years between some counties in the United States. Obesity rates are higher among those with the lowest incomes, and the least amount of education. Similar parallels are found in some ethnic groups. Now why is this? Well to some the answers may appear to be obvious, but I think that there's a lot more that can be drawn from just some of the things that initially come to mind especially when it comes to how we live our lives.

The big takeaway here is that your environment plays a huge role in your health and fitness efforts and your habits. We are influenced by both the physical, and the social environments in which we live and interact. It's not just about you, and the things that you do, there are so many things that play into our health to either support our healthy behaviors or to serve as barriers to improving our healthy behaviors.

A good way to look at this is to think about it as a set of concentric circles, each expanding out with different layers if you will. I have five circles or five levels that I'm going to talk to you about in this episode, and I got this idea of this model from some of my health coach study because it was laid out in a similar manner in that form. I changed the levels a little bit though because I wanted to make it as easy to understand, and a little bit clearer for you guys.

The five levels, those five concentric circles if you will going from inside to outside are the individual level. Those are the things that are internal to you, your past experiences, your beliefs, your attitude. Next you have the interpersonal level. That's the relationship between you, and the people that are close to you, those in your immediate environment, your family, your friends. Next you have the environmental level and then public policy and then social and cultural norms. All of these are important because there are facets of each one that play into how successful we are, and the types of actions that we have to take to be successful depending on our environment.

Let's start with the individual and really this speaks to the psycho-social factors, which is essentially the interrelation of social factors in your individual thought and behavior. How you interact internally given your external environment or how you react I should say internally given your external environment. Now, there are some things you can't change or things that are at least difficult to change. The first is your socio-economic status. That's not going to change overnight all right unless you win the lottery. Next, your race, ethnicity, that's not going to change but things that you can change, things like the amount of knowledge you have, the skills that you have, your attitude, things that are shaped by your prior experiences with physical activity, with diet, your impression of how hard or how easy it is to become healthier or to maintain a healthy lifestyle. This speaks a little bit to self-compliments but more so to self-efficacy, which is the belief that you can actually change, the belief that you can make positive movement and forward progress toward your goals.

The big takeaway with the individual ring, that first ring that we're talking about is that knowledge can be acquired and skills can be acquired if you're open to it. In fact the Fit Life Program that I run goes deep into the attitude and the mindset side of things before even talking about nutrition and fitness because it is that important. That's a key component of your state of health. It's so important but it's so often overlooked so keep that in mind when it comes to your individual actions, your individual beliefs.

As we move out we have the interpersonal level or the interpersonal layer. This includes things as I said like family influences, friends, your support structures, your neighbors, your social network. When I think about family you know I'll use positive or I'll use personal examples here. I have a super supportive wife when it comes to health and fitness and really when it comes to everything. She is very health conscious herself in fact she's also a personal trainer. We are very much aligned when it comes to the things that we understand that we must do and the actions that we must take to live healthy lives so both ourselves and for our children. That's point number one is that your spouse, your significant other, or the person that you're closest to absolutely affects how easy or how difficult it will be for you to live a health life and to practice those healthy habits.

Next, you think about the kid dynamic. Do you have a helpful older child? Maybe someone that can watch your younger one while you exercise. That's definitely a benefit, definitely a bonus. On the flip side, are you caring for a disabled family member by chance? All of these things are just realities of life that we have to deal with. Less than a year ago, my mom was going through significant health

problems and for those two months of her life, yes exercise it remained important to me but it was nowhere near important as wanting to spend time with my mother and help her in that time of need.

I'm not saying that these things are good or bad, they just are and they're just realities of life but understanding these things and understanding the times when you can devote more time and attention to exercise and good eating and the times when you can't devote as much attention to those types of things, understanding that and realizing that it's somewhat cyclic and there will be times that you can do one or the other will help you in trying to implement healthy habits on an enduring basis.

Next we think about our friends and our support or nonsupport systems, I should say. You know this time of the year is one of my favorite time of year because we're getting into the college basketball season. I have been an ACC college basketball fan for my entire life. One of the things that happens from year to year with my favorite teams is that often times they will play to the level of their competition. If you haven't heard this term before what it means is if your team is ranked very high like number one or number two and they play a team that is not anywhere are good as they are they will play poorly even if they win or lose they will drop down to the level of their competition. I use that example to make the point that the friends that you hang around with, those people that you are closest to, whatever their values, their beliefs are when it comes to health and fitness, those are probably going to be very similar to your beliefs. It's less likely that you're influencing them and more likely that they're influencing you. It's important to understand that.

Same thing with neighbors, your social networks, and I don't mean social media. I mean actual friends, your social networks. Many of you know I'm in the military and the military in many ways breeds a culture of health. It's not just because there's a requirement to be fit and to pass a physical fitness test but there are so many mechanisms put in place and mindsets of the individuals that we work with that just lead to a healthier way of living. I like to say excellence breeds excellence. I think that healthy attitudes breed healthy attitudes as well.

You know one of the most famous heart studies called the Framingham Heart Study showed that when close friends gained weight, those in the study experienced a 57% increase in their risk of weight gain, 57% that's over 50%. Forty percent increase if a sibling gained weight and a 377% increase if your spouse gained weight. The crazy thing though about this study and these findings was that proximity did not matter. Meaning, if your closest friend lived in California and you lived in Virginia you are hours, miles apart right? But, if they gained weight then you are more apt to gain weight. It's because your friends influence your perception of what is acceptable. It's not just the fact that you see them practicing less healthy habits or you see them overweight. It's that they influence your perception of what's okay, what's a norm.

A takeaway from the interpersonal layer, surround yourself with like-minded healthy individuals if you want to improve your chances of being healthier yourself. Things like meetups are good, going to the gym to meet others who have similar goals, join a run club. It's been said that you are the sum of your five closest friends and I truly believe that. You will inherit and practice the same types of behaviors and the same attitudes as those that are close to you.

Now, moving onto environmental which is the next ring, the next layer. The first thing that comes to mind with environmental settings is your home because that is where we spend most of our time. Is your home conducive to healthy eating? Is it conducive to exercise? There are so many things that I can talk about here.

One question that comes to mind, is everything in reach of your seat on your couch? Do you have a mini fridge there with the remote, the recliner, maybe some snacks there? Are you spending so much time on the couch or are you up and moving around? Do you have a candy bowl or a fruit bowl on the counter? What drinks are in your refrigerator right now? Is it water, soda, juice? How many whole foods do you have in your refrigerator and when was the last time you used your oven to cook something other than a dessert? Do your pots and pans get used? Is your treadmill a place to hang clothes to dry or is it an exercise device? Your home environment where most of us spend the majority of our days is instrumental in your healthy living efforts and goals so make it conducive to your health. That's what the freebie gets to.

School is another area to consider. There may not be a whole lot that you can change about where you go to school but understanding those things, those barriers or those things that enhance or improve the chances of you living healthier again helps you to make a more informed decision.

Where do you work? Are your co-workers really busy? Is it the type of environment where everyone's running around walking past each other, barely speaking, eating lunch at their desks if they're even taking time to eat lunch? What healthy meal options are close by? Do you have time to walk out to eat, to enjoy lunch in a group with friends? Do you have time to exercise during the day? Is there even a gym available there? Do they encourage stand up work stations and stand up desks? Is the environment one that is conducive to healthy living? These are some things to consider when it comes to your place of employment.

Then even thinking about the community. Are there recreational facilities available, parks, trails? Are the sidewalks safe? What's the city design or layout like? Again, you can't control a lot of this but you may actually have a say in where you live.

You know these days we move about every couple of years. I will tell you that what drives our decision for where we live is the quality of schools in the area but I will also say that access to health and fitness facilities plays a huge role as well. When we moved into this neighborhood, we basically were weighing the options of two primary gyms one which is very close by, I can walk to in less than 10 minutes than drive there in just a couple of minutes or another one that was farther away still within about a 10, 15 minute drive but a lot less expensive. I will tell you that we opted for convenience and it has paid dividends because we definitely exercise more and work out more. We have a circle of friends there now because of the proximity of it to our house.

I can get up first thing in the morning, workout from 5:00 to 5:45 and then my wife can roll right over there as soon as I get back and I can be here with the kids while she goes to get a workout before I go to work. It works out very well. Things like that are things that you can consider in your decision making calculus if you will on how to live a healthy lifestyle, how to implement positive change.

Even things like food services and retail establishments when it comes to your environment, the convenience of supermarkets, fresh fruit and vegetables for example. Do they have a farmer's market on the weekends? You know there is a direct correlation between access to supermarkets and lower obesity rates. That's just a fact but if there are more fast food establishments and calorie dense options around then that's probably what the people in that area are going to eat more of. This is a vicious cycle because if you look at it from a business standpoint, healthy food, grocery stores are not going to build where they can't sell. We all know that eating healthy can be a little more expensive so lower income neighborhoods often times have less healthy options. We go back to the stat that I mentioned at the

beginning of this episode about the correlation between income level and health. Just things to consider when it comes to your environmental settings. Again, being aware of these things is so important.

Next, we move on to public policy which is the fourth ring as we expand outward. I won't go into too much detail here because frankly we don't have a whole lot of control over these things but it includes things like government programs, public health and health care systems but I will talk a little bit about media and marketing because we are bombarded with visual cues to eat. Oscar Wilde had a quote that I really liked. He said, "I can resist anything but temptation." That is so true, right? I mean you turn on the TV there are commercials for food. You drive down the road there are billboards with food.

I recently went to a conference and I met a young lady who's her job was to prepare food for photos and videos. If you think that a lot of thought and a lot of effort does not go into making you or I want the things that we see on the screen or on the billboard then you're mistaken. Okay, because the marketing and the media aspect of this is huge. Even when I think about the supermarket and I've written a couple of blog posts on this and I'll link to those in the show notes. The processed foods are upfront. They're typically more prominent. They're typically at eye level on the shelves. There are a lot of things that are working against us when it comes to our efforts to try eat healthier but again being aware of these things is the first step.

Finally, we move out to the final ring of the circle, the social and cultural norms and values. Again, things that aren't easily changed, things like your heritage, your religion but things that you can change your belief systems, and the norms associated with size, with diet and with exercise. I have heard people say and I have witnessed this. Some people think that it's okay to be overweight. They think okay this is just who I am. This is the size that I am going to be and believe me I am not one to judge by any means. I think you should absolutely be comfortable with who you are and I'm not trying to judge in any way, shape or form. However, I think that it is incorrect to think that you are incapable of change and incapable of living a healthier life. Because, that is always possible and it's always possible to be healthier, to live healthier, to think healthier, to act healthier, okay?

Lifestyle is what it boils down to. You've heard me talk about this before when it comes to habit, when it comes to actions, when it comes to beliefs, and the things that we do over time are going to determine the types of person that we are. You are what you repeatedly do.

Portion sizes is another aspect of this. What has become normal for us when it comes to portion sizes? Think about that. You go out to eat, are your portions the same size as they were maybe 15 or 20 years ago? Probably not. They're probably twice as big. I've written about this as well and I'll link to these articles in the show notes but the research shows that when more food is provided, more is eaten. You got to know that. You got to know again that's somethings that's working against you. If you go out and order food at a restaurant then maybe from the very beginning as soon as your food is delivered say, "I would like to pack half of this to go." That's just one of the techniques that you can use.

Then your priorities, those can also change. I know it's tough but sometimes it's necessary. We have got to make time for health. I'll go back to the Edward Stanley quote. He said that those who think they have not time for bodily exercise will sooner or later have to find time for illness. There is so much truth to that quote.

I'm going to wrap things up here but just to recap. There are the five rings, those five concentric circles that we have to consider when it comes to the things that play into our ability to live a healthier life and the actions that we have to take given our environment. The first is the individual level. Those inner beliefs, your attitude, your mindset. The next is the interpersonal level. That's the relationship that you have with those that are closest to you and with this comes the type of people that you interact with and those that you are close to. Then you have the environmental aspect, your home, your work, your school, your community. Then you have public policy, those government programs that are in place. Then you have the social and cultural norms. Those are those broad reaching, widely held beliefs some of which you can't change and some of which you can.

It's important to consider each one when it comes to their influences on our health. We have to at least be aware of them in order to improve our chances of making healthy behaviors stick. Behavior change attempts will not be as effective unless we understand the lifestyle and the ecological levels that play a part in our habits, our actions, and our behaviors. All right?

Before I sign off, again I want to remind you that there is a freebie associated with this episode. It's called 12 Small Steps to Creating Your Healthy Environment. Check that out. Head on over to TDFitness.net/020download and you can grab that freebie. You can find the show notes for this episode at TDFitness.net/020. This is episode number 20 and again I'll hang all of the referenced links on the show notes page as well.

Another reminder, if you like this content please share it, okay? I just want to take an opportunity now to also thank you so much for tuning in. I understand that one of the most valuable things that we all have is our time. It's not lost on me that you take time out of your busy schedule and your day to watch, to listen, to read some of the content that I produce. I absolutely appreciate that. I thank you so much for your continued support. Have a blessed one. Coach T, out.