

Episode 059: Practical Advice for the New Year: Reduce Stress and Take Action

This is the TD Fitness podcast with Coach T, episode number 59.

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 guys. Welcome back to the TD Fitness podcast, and this first episode of the new year. I am excited, and there's a lot of excitement around this time of year, right? I mean just coming off the holidays, you probably got some rest, or at least a break from work, or at least I hope you did, and I hope it was a restful time for you. I mean, I feel recharged. Maybe you saw some friends or relatives you don't get to see that often. It just feels like a fresh start, a new beginning. That is what the new year does, and as we start this new year, I want to give you some practical advice, a couple of simple instructions for you to think about as you enter another year. The two instructions, or pieces of advice, are to reduce stress and to take action.

You know, we have become a society in constant search of productivity. How can I squeeze more into my day? How can I be more productive with the time that I have, or how can I maximize my workouts for the best or the biggest rewards? How can I optimize my eating habits, and none of this is inherently bad, but I fear that we've started to focus so much on the productivity, and the constant quest for improving, and sometimes the constant quest for perfection, that we actually neglect another part of the equation. Another part of the equation of a balanced life, and that's the topic of this podcast episode.

As we begin a new year, we turn over a new leaf and we strive to become our best selves, or at least a better version of ourselves in 2019, I feel like it's important to provide a little bit of perspective, and to add to the argument for balance between work and rest. Between productivity and recharging, and between extreme focus and intentional downtime. So in 2018, I read a number of books, and I'll highlight two of them here because they are pertinent to this topic. The first is called Getting Things Done. It's by a gentleman named David Allen. Paradoxically, the title makes it sound like it's all about learning to be more productive, especially with the time that you have in, and that is largely the case.

The book does give strategies and techniques for maximizing your time, for organizing your inbox, for managing your tasks, among other things. But one quote from the book stands out to me more than the rest. In it, the author states, "In truth, this book, Getting Things Done is more about championing appropriate engagement with your world, guiding you to make the best choice of what to do in each moment, and to eliminate distraction and stress about what you're not doing." I think that's a powerfully profound statement. Appropriate engagement in your world. The best choice of what to do in each moment. Eliminate stress about what you're not doing. So, here's the paradox in this new era, the era of instant gratification, the era of more connectivity than ever, but fewer connections with real people, and the era of hyper productivity, which is made easier through technology for sure, but it tends to degrade our

quality of life, because the more we are able to do, the greater the expectation there is to actually do it.

Social media, for example, gives us the ability to connect to almost anyone and everyone in the world, but you have to ask yourself if the expectation to engage with so many people is stressful. The computing power in your pocket, on your smartphone, makes super computers of the 1970s and '80s look like simple calculators, but the ability to work anywhere, anytime is yet another tick mark in the stress column. What we view as an enhanced quality of life is actually the opposite because we have become a society that is more stressed than ever.

So, what does all this have to do with health and fitness, or diet? Well, as a health coach, I can focus on more than just diet and exercise, right? And as we start the new year, I want to make sure that you're taking care of yourselves, not just by adding more exercise, or by adding more fruits and veggies to your diet, and not just by cutting back on empty calories or processed foods. No, I want you to cut back on those things that cause an inordinate amount of stress in your life. The things that you may not even realize. The things that add to your day being filled. Those things that suck up the little bit of white space on your calendar. To paraphrase another portion of David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, despite popular belief, you don't manage your time. You don't manage information, and you don't manage priorities. You manage your actions, nothing else. So, the question then becomes what will you do with your time?

Another notable book I read in 2018 was called *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg. You know that I often talk about habits. How to change them, how to practice healthy habits, how to minimize less healthy habits. Well, this book offers some practical advice in these areas, and I'd like to share some of the gems from this book because I think that they can help us understand how to make our lives healthier. In no particular order, first, habits consist of three things. A cue, a routine, and a reward. This is how new habits are formed, so think about it. If you come home every day and turn on the TV, your cue may be walking in the door, setting your bag down, and hearing the silence in your house or your apartment, and then grabbing the remote to turn the TV on, and then you feel a relief that you're not alone. That there's some other sound, and there's something interesting, maybe, on TV that will take your mind off of the stresses of work and life.

Habits cannot be erased. They can only be replaced. Remember that habits consist of three parts, right? The cue, the routine, or the action, and a reward. You can replace the routine. You can replace that action and keep the same cue, and sometimes the same reward. This is called reprogramming. This is the exact approach I use with clients through the Fit Life program, so going back to the example of turning on the TV every time you come home, the cue may be, again, coming in the door, feeling a sense of relief that the workday is over, but then feeling like there's some void. That's kind of your cue, because that's what you're used to every day. Your action then is to reach for the remote and turn on the television, and then the reward is maybe the ambient noise, maybe a show that you might like, but each habit consists of those three things. The cue, the routine, and the reward. That's point number one.

Point number two, you can't erase your habits, but they can be replaced. Once a habit is ingrained in your psyche and your mental channels, it's going to be there forever, but you can overwrite it with another habit. With a healthier habit, for example. The third thing to point out, and it's more on the traits of habits. This is straight from the book. So, replacement habits only become what are called durable new behaviors when they're accompanied by a belief in something. A belief, for example, that things will get better. That they can change. That the program will work, for example. Again, that's why we first focus on mindset and unbelief before anything else when I work with health coaching individuals. We have to

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address the belief in yourself, and the belief that you can actually accomplish the goal that you set out to accomplish. Because if you don't believe that, then there's not going to be any power, any push behind your desire to change.

It's worth noting, too, that a community can help spark or foster a belief. That's one of the powers of social engagement, of interaction, and even social media when it's used appropriately. An accountability partner, a group of like-minded individuals. Those are very powerful in helping to change habits and behaviors. In fact, it's a tenet of one of the most successful behavior change organizations in history, and that's Alcoholics Anonymous. That's a big part of what AA is built around, that sense of community, that sense of having an accountability partner, and someone that you can call when you're tempted, for example. But, for habits to permanently change, you have to believe that change is feasible. That belief is easier when it occurs within some kind of community group, or with some form of accountability.

Next, small wins have a disproportionate effect, and it's disproportionately positive. The reason is because small wins are still wins, and wins build confidence, and wins build your belief that you can do what it is that you set out to do. So as we stated earlier, replacement habits only become durable new behaviors when they are accompanied by a belief in something. Again, something I cover in the Fit Life program, something I cover with those that I work with as a health coach. Small wins are so important in forward progress. There's a lot more in in that book, *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg. In fact, I highly recommend it if you're interested in understanding why we do the things we do, and how to change your behaviors. But the final thing I'll point out from the book is that the real power of habit is that they are what you choose them to be.

You have a choice in your habits. You have a choice in the actions that you take. If you can, number one, identify the routine, number two, maybe experiment or play around with different rewards. But number three, isolate the cue. That trigger. The thing that causes that action. Almost all habitual cues fit into one of five categories. Location, time, an emotional state, other people, or something that happens immediately preceding it. Immediately preceding action, it's called. So for example, if every time you go to the grocery store, for example, you have a particular habit of turning left to go to the produce aisle, or every time that your alarm goes off at 7:00 AM, maybe you have a certain habit, something that you do right when you wake up. That's a time-based habitual cue.

An emotional state. Sometimes we see this with emotional eating, so if you're stressed, or depressed, or something like that, there could be something that triggers some kind of emotional eating event. That is also a real thing. Other people. Seeing someone that you might know. For example, if you see someone, a buddy, that every time you see that individual you associate it with going out for a drink, then you're going to be prompted to drink every time you see that individual. So whether it's location, time, your emotional state, other people, or an action that happens immediately preceding the one that you're going to take, all of these things are habitual cues that can lead to another action, which then becomes a habit, but if you can identify these things, then you can develop a plan.

That is the framework for changing habits for the better. I'll leave you with another quote, and this is from an individual by the name of William James. William James, I'm sorry. He wrote *The Principles of Psychology*. I actually found this as a reference after reading *The Power of Habit*. This piece of work, I think it was an essay that this individual had done a long time ago, but he wrote a lot about psychology and what causes us to do the things that we do. He says, "The will to believe is the most important ingredient in creating belief in change, and one of the most important methods for creating that belief are habits. Habits are what

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allow us to do a thing with difficulty the first time, but soon to do it more and more easily, and finally with sufficient practice to do it semi-mechanically, or without hardly any consciousness at all."

So, what does all this mean? What can we learn from these two books? Well, I want to leave you with a know. K-N-O-W. A know, and a do. That's a tip I learned from my pastor, Pastor John. So, here's what I want you to know, and I'll make a bold statement here. I believe the biggest threat to our health today is excess stress, because it derails our fitness and our healthy eating efforts. It negatively affects our sleep. It causes metabolic changes in our bodies that literally cause us to carry excess weight, so that's what I want you to know. We have to be conscious of this. We have to look to minimize stress, not by living, or or having a completely carefree attitude, but by first recognizing those subtle stressors that can be avoided.

Things like an overdependence on social media. Working longer hours than we need to. Taking on more than we should. That's what I want you to know, to recognize those things, and here's what I want you to do. I want you to take action by deliberately cutting back on those stressors, and by adding de-stressing activities. These can be different for different people, but for me, they're things like exercise, like quality time with my family, and making time for self-reflection, but the most important part of what I just said is to take action itself. Whatever that action is for you to reduce some stress, I want you to work towards doing that. Be deliberate about what you do with your time. Plan. Make a move to improve, not to be perfect.

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