

Personal Growth Part 3 – Practice Consistent Habits for Personal Growth

Hello TD Fitness Family! Welcome to episode #115 of the TD Fitness Podcast. This is episode number three of my personal growth series, and I'm excited to bring you some helpful information related to instilling habits (they really are the building blocks of growth), taking small steps, and striving for "better," not "perfect." As we walk through these topics, I will again provide insight and advice through the six lenses of fitness, nutrition, stress management, marriage, parenting and spiritual living. So, let's dive right in and kick things off with some background on the importance of habits.

The challenge with any change or personal growth initiative is filling in the difference between where you are right now and where you want to go, who you want to be. There needs to be a plan, an approach to walk the path. So how do you move toward your goals and how do you make those steps a part of your daily life? Well, the goal is to build better habits. Habits are the building blocks. We tend to focus on the goal, but we need to focus on habits. Why? Think of this this way. If the goal is to grow so that you can improve your lifestyle in some way, remember that a lifestyle is made up of behaviors...how you act from day to day. Behaviors are defined by the actions you take. And what are repeated actions? They're called habits! So, habits are key. They define who we are. Those who are deliberate about practicing healthy habits are generally healthier. And this concept applies to more than just fitness. Those who practice their faith and put it into action are living a more spiritual life. And the converse is also true. If you have unhealthy habits, your health will be worse. And if you don't do things that will get you closer to the parent or spouse you want to be, you won't grow in your efforts. So, the goal is to put some action behind our intentions, to move closer to the person you want to be. The way to do that is through relevant and consistent habits. The most important thing in personal growth, no matter what area of your life you're looking to improve, is to practice consistent habits over time that will grow you as an individual in those areas. Sporadic habits won't do it. Consistent habits practiced only for a short time won't do it. And obviously negative habits won't get you where you need

to go. Relevant habits practiced consistently over time...that's the key. You can't rush it, and you must stay consistent. Not perfect, but consistent. And once a habit is formed, it's your new normal.

So, let's talk about how this applies to fitness. When it comes to fitness habits, there are three specific areas that I'd advise you to focus on. They are movement, stretching, and recovery. You may be asking, "what about exercise?" Well, movement is exercise. Taking the stairs instead of the elevator is deliberate exercise. Parking farther from the door so you can walk is a form of exercise. The reason I present it this way is because the term exercise has a tendency to scare people off before we even get started, especially if you lead an already busy lifestyle. Finding time for "exercise" can be challenging, but incorporating more movement is totally doable. Movement and exercise are *extremely* important for overall health. So where do you start with exercise and movement habits? I try to keep it simple. If you haven't been exercising, always check with your physician to ensure it's safe before you start any regimented exercise program. Once you know it's safe for you to exercise, you can focus on simply moving more. Period. If you're sedentary, or sit for most of the day, just try to move more. That's it. If you're sedentary and not exercising at all, move more. Sedentary lifestyles are particularly bad for your health. That's why exercise and movement are important...and it starts with simply moving more. Moving more will start to counter those extreme negative effects of a sedentary lifestyle. If you're already exercising, but find it hard to get 5 workouts per week for example, simply strive to move more. If you're getting enough exercise already, then keep moving!

But flexibility is critical to proper movement and range of motion. And it's often not until we *lose* flexibility that we notice it – usually through recurring pain or injury. But flexibility is about more than stretching. When your muscles are able to move freely, without restriction and without pain, this allows for more pleasant and effective exercise, and more comfortable activities of daily life. Put simply, muscles only know how to do one thing...that is *contract*. Unless they are stretched regularly, imbalances, poor movement, and pain can be the result. We need to be deliberate about incorporating

regular stretching and mobility work in an exercise routine. If you do this, I'm a happy camper (and you'll feel a lot better).

Regarding rest and recovery, my third piece of the fitness triad, it's important to understand that you grow stronger during the recovery and time *between* exercise sessions. This is because muscles could be fatigued, torn and broken down with intense exercise. They then grow back stronger as they repair themselves. So, the recovery is important. You can't rush it and you need to allow time for it to occur. So, whether it's a matter of hours after a short workout, to a couple of days after a longer, more intense exercise session, or a couple of weeks after a long-distance endurance event, recovery is important. Get in the habit of making time for rest and recovery as the third component of fitness with movement and stretching.

Edward Stanley is quoted as saying, "Those who think they have not time for bodily exercise will sooner or later have to find time for illness." I'd offer that if you don't find time for stretching, you will have to make time for injury. It's that important.

So, as you think about your fitness, and habits you can start or maintain, consider how you can move more, increase flexibility, and ensure you get the required amount of rest you need.

What about nutrition? Well, just like fitness, I tend to break nutrition down into some key actions as well. This time, there are four: drink more water, manage your calorie intake, eat fruits and veggies, and limit added sugars.

Starting with water intake, this is one of the simplest, yet most effective changes you can make when it comes to improving your nutrition habits. This is especially true if you actually replace sugary drinks with water. I won't go into all of the details of why water is important, but let's just say that it's important for body function, weight loss, muscles and skin. Everyone is a bit different when it comes to requirements for water throughout the day. Some recommend drinking specific quantities of water to stay hydrated, but the best way to judge proper hydration and whether you're doing ok with this habit is to observe the color of your urine. The clearer it looks, the better!

Habits for managing calories can vary depending on the individual. For me, I sometimes practice intermittent fasting, but counting calories, monitoring or limiting

portion sizes also work for some. The key to your individual approach to calorie management is to stay consistent.

The same applies to fruit and veggie intake. While there are guidelines that recommend 38 grams of fiber for men and 25 grams of daily fiber for women, again, I try to keep it simple. My goal is to have some fruit with breakfast (if I eat breakfast), a large salad for lunch, or some veggies for dinner. Whatever your approach, once again, consistency is key.

And finally, limiting added sugars requires that you make a habit of reducing something that you could be consuming in excess. I find that it's sometimes easier to replace rather than eliminate. Identify the areas where you consume the most added sugars. This is usually in the sugary drink arena. Start by reducing the size of your drink when you can. Then move to cutting back on one of the drinks over a period of time (each day or each week). The habits you set will continue to grow, and before you know it, you'll have less sugar going in, and less weight adding up!

Moving on to stress management, we don't usually think about it too much, but an added benefit of practicing healthy habits is that they allow us to better manage stress. People exercise or diet to lose weight, but those habits, along with healthy sleep habits serve to reduce stress in our lives. The busyness of life will continue, but it's easier to manage when you practice healthy habits. In fact, the specific approach I take to keep my stress levels relatively low are to counter stress, remove stressors or to manage stressors. I counter stress through regular fitness habits, by practicing healthier eating habits, and with good sleep habits. I remove stressors by deliberately adding white space into my schedule, reducing commitments and obligations, and taking time back for myself. Finally, I manage stressors by better planning and organizing my time. If you just let life take you along for the ride, you're prone to stress because you never feel like you have control of what's going on. But if you're deliberate about your actions and habits, you'll be better able to manage stress.

Now, marriage...if habits ultimately define our lifestyle and who we are, the most important relationship where habits can have a tremendous impact is in your marriage.

So, what are some healthy marriage habits that my wife and I have learned along the way from our roles as marriage mentors and after 16 years of marriage? The first is that love is a verb, not a noun. Love is not something you fall in and out of. It is what you do each and every day to show your caring and commitment. One way that we try to practice love consistently is through investments in our relationship. This includes attending marriage retreats together on a periodic basis, and being deliberate about carving out time together (without the kids). We also pray together multiple times a day and we try to practice patience. The interesting thing about practicing patience is that neither of us are perfect at this, but usually when one of us is impatient, the other is patient and we can keep things going smoothly. We also try to make time for communication. Honest, respectful, constant and consistent two-way communication is essential for a marriage to thrive. In our experience, these things have been important habits for us in maintaining a fruitful marriage. And they're habits that you can practice too.

On parenting, the growth and development of our children are some of the most fleeting moments and experiences we face. It seems like yesterday when I was there to witness the birth of each of our daughters. Now, almost 10 and 7 years later respectively, I'm already feeling like this parenting and childhood thing is going by way too fast. And though our daughters are still relatively young, many of my friends with children in or through college comment about how fast the years go by. But what does this have to do with habits and personal growth in the parenting realm? For me, it's a reminder to make every day count. There are only a set number of bus pickups and drop offs, sports games, dance recitals, nighttime routines, and fun experiences while they're still young, and I want to be a part of as many of those as I can. That means taking daily action to be an active parent. For me, it means cutting away from work to see the kids off at the bus stop or to meet them after school, even if I have to go back to work. It means being home every evening I can for the bedtime routine. It means saying that I'll coach so that I can be at every practice and game. And it means being deliberate about planning and taking trips to the amusement park or zoo or children's museum. These are all habits. They're habits in parenting. And they not only make me

grow as a parent, they also strengthen the relationship between us and our girls. And I'm sure there will be times in their lives when we'll appreciate those investments in the relationships even more.

When it comes to faith, if you were a believer living in the time before Christ, the "habits" you practiced for your faith were in the form of a litany of laws, customs and traditions. But Jesus, through his life, teachings and sacrifice, made it much simpler for all of us. In fact, it's so simple that I can easily remember...love God and love others. And how does this direction manifest itself in my daily life? What are my habits in faith? I read the Bible, do daily devotions, attend church regularly, listen to praise and worship music, and I pray and reflect on His word. These are some of the habits that I practice in order to grow closer to Him. And by doing these things, I find it easier to love others in a world where there are so many things that try to drive us apart. Practicing my love for God gives me patience and perspective when I interact with others, to include friends, coworkers, my wife and our children. Positive, healthy habits lead to personal growth in multiple areas of your life, to include faith and spirituality.

So, as we change gears from the importance of consistent habits in each of the personal growth areas we've discussed, I'd like to revisit those areas, this time with a technique that has been proven to work time and again. That technique is to take small steps for continued growth. We've said that habits are the building blocks of behaviors, and behaviors, those actions you consistently take, define your lifestyle. Here I want you to remember that long-term growth starts small and develops through consistency. Starting small can make your habits sustainable and consistent. When seeking personal growth through improved habits, it's not just what you do...it's that you do something. And it's that "something" that needs to be maintained. Now, one question you may have is how small should you make your new habit. I mean, if you just barely move the needle a little bit at a time, you'll never reach your goal, right? So, I coach others to take small enough steps to create wins, but large enough steps to be a little bit of a challenge. We tend to take on bigger bites than we can chew and larger goals than we're ready for. Do you think you can begin a new habit by practicing it 5 times a week?

Why not start with 2-3 times a week and see how it goes? It's better to grow a small positive habit than to fail a larger attempt, get discouraged and give up completely. Get some wins in your corner. Then add more to your personal growth habits as you remain consistent. This will increase your confidence in both your attempts and your overall ability, which spreads to other areas of your life. That's the snowball effect of success. Long-term growth starts small and develops through consistency. Constantly achieving small victories will help to develop habit patterns that lead to lifelong growth.

What are some examples of taking small steps in your fitness growth? Looking through the lenses of the three fitness focus areas that I mentioned earlier, movement and exercise, mobility and stretching, and rest and recovery, I'll point out some of the things that I do. A demanding job and family commitments make it hard for me to find time to exercise for over 30 minutes at a time. So, taking a smaller, "bite-sized" approach to fitness habits tends to work better for me right now. I'm much more likely to exercise for 15-30 minutes five days a week than I am to get three or even two one-hour sessions in. These smaller chunks of time also allow me to fit them in during parts of the day that don't conflict as much with other obligations. I can wake up 15 minutes earlier to stretch, for example. I can take 15 minutes of my lunch period to knock out some calisthenics while I'm in the office. Now, for some, even 15 minutes may seem like a lot, especially if fitness is a habit that you're trying to start. But going back to the small steps approach, and asking what can I do that's not too hard, but does require a little bit of effort, perhaps a five-minute walk a few times a week is where you start. Maybe you start to get more rest by going to bed 15 minutes earlier. Maybe you take one short yoga class a week. When you start small, you can build on your approach.

When it comes to improving nutrition habits, the small step approach is one of the most effective things you can do. Want to drink more water? Start by adding one more glass per day than you currently drink. And continue to build on that until you reach your goal. For me, it's 100 oz per day, and I'm consistent with that because it's something that I worked up to. If you're looking to better manage calories, you could

start by gradually reducing your current calorie consumption. Or you could make your portions a bit smaller. Or possibly start intermittent fasting for a short period throughout the day. And to add healthier foods to your diet, try incorporating some fruits or vegetables in just one of your meals each day. If you're already eating fruits and veggies, maybe you could add a smoothie as a meal replacement to get even more nutrition. And to cut added sugars, start by reducing the size of the sugary drink you order every day. Or by omitting one of your candy or snack breaks throughout the day. You can improve your diet through small, consistent actions. In fact, this is the best way to approach dietary improvements because it serves to start your path from where you are, not where you desire to be. And we must always start where we are.

How do small steps relate to stress management? We know that chronic stress is unhealthy. We also know that some of the most common stressors in the lives of busy individuals are work, family, relationships, money and health stressors. And we talked earlier about ways to counter, remove and manage stressors in our lives. Let me provide an example of how seemingly small things in your life can add up to produce more stress. When you live a busy lifestyle, the tendency is sometimes to think, "this new thing is small, I can probably manage it, it's just for a short time." So, when you say 'yes' to organizing the cookie drive, or to writing that short article about an event, or to hosting the next home owner's association meeting, or to being the association secretary, you're adding small things that in and of themselves aren't that big of a deal. But when you add those seemingly little things up, and pile them on top of an already busy schedule, you can quickly reach the point beyond which stress is no longer manageable and you just run yourself into the ground. So, what's worked for me in the past is simply not saying 'yes' to everything. It's ok to say, 'no' sometimes. In the same way that small positive habits add up to define your healthier lifestyle, small obligations and commitments add up to increase the level of stress in your life as well.

On to small steps in marriage...someone who had been through a divorce once told me that divorce is insidious. It doesn't usually happen overnight. It may start with sleeping with your back toward one another every night, or sleeping in separate beds

altogether. Or when you stop saying ‘I love you’ just before bedtime or when you wake up. Or maybe the goodbye kisses and pecks on the cheek stop. Perhaps you stop making her coffee, or folding his clothes. Those things that you once did, that you would go out of your way to do to help, to show love and commitment, just start to fade away. Drawing apart can be insidious. And before you know it, there’s a widening gap between the two of you that seems like it can never be filled. So how do you close that gap? How do you prevent the gap from occurring? You do it through small steps, small habits that continue to show you care. Say ‘goodnight.’ Say “I love you.” Do the small things for him. Do the things that she appreciates. This is how small habits can add up and serve as big steps in maintaining and protecting your marriage.

With parenting, one of the things that I think about often as a parent and as an extremely busy adult is this – what small things am I missing that I need to be doing to show my children that I love them and to let them know that they are the best things that have happened to Mom and Dad? Too often we let the busyness of life overcome us. Then we blink, and our 3-year-old is graduating from high school. Where did the time go? What happened? This speaks to the topic of intentionality. Of doing things that are representative of what you value in life...your priorities. Is family a priority for you? Are your children the priority? If the answer is yes, do you treat them that way? The best application of the small step approach in growing as a parent is to be deliberate about spending time with your children. And when we’re busy, and we all are, that often means choosing not to do something at work or in another demanding area of your life. So, the question to ask with respect to what small steps you can take as a parent is this, “what are your priorities?”

And how can we apply small steps to faith and a spiritual life? You see, believing isn’t always the hardest thing for us to do. Rather it’s practicing our faith that can be hard for some, and having that spiritual mindset, particularly in the challenging and rougher times of our lives. But do you know what can help us with that? It’s the seemingly little things that we do in our normal, everyday lives that serve to make us stronger in our faith, to have a kind heart, and to give us patience in times of stress and

difficulty. For me, it's things like listening to music and artists that uplift my faith and send a positive message. This is what's almost always on in my truck or on Alexa when we're doing things around the house. It's also things like going to Church regularly so we can interact with fellow believers, have conversations and hear the message. For me, it's also daily Bible readings and devotionals that serve to remind me of His Word and His plan for me. I'm also strengthened in my faith through the people we choose to associate with and spend time with. From the conversations we have to how we treat others, we are products of our environment. Do the small things to make your environment conducive to the person you want to be in faith.

So I've talked about the importance of consistent habits, and taking small steps to make those habits more manageable so that we can indeed remain consistent. But another thing to point out is that consistency does not equal perfection. We sometimes think it does, but consistency over time does not mean perfection all the time. In fact, striving for perfection usually has the opposite effect of the one you're looking for. Why? Because perfection is an unachievable goal. And when we fall short, and we will fall short when striving for perfection, it can have devastating effects on our motivation and self-efficacy (or our belief in ourselves that we can indeed achieve our goal). So, I want you to remove "perfection" from your vocabulary. Things happen to disrupt our plans. That's called "life." So, let's talk about some ways that you can apply this principle to different areas of your life by planning for imperfection, building in slack, and simply taking action, despite how imperfect that action may be. It's about being better, not being perfect.

What are some ways in which we try to be perfect versus consistent when looking to improve our fitness habits? Have you ever chalked up this week a wash since you didn't start the week off right with your exercise goals? Have you ever said to yourself, I overslept by 15 minutes...since I won't be able to complete my full workout, I may as well just sleep a bit more and try again tomorrow? Have the first few days of the month gotten away from you to the point where you're two weeks into June, and you just say, ok, I'll just hit it hard in July. Have you ever set out to go for a jog or walk and

just didn't have it in you to do the entire three miles, and then feel bad about only logging a mile and a half instead of feeling accomplished for exercising period? Here's the point...you don't need to be perfect. Imperfect action is still action, and when it comes to building or improving habits, it's the action itself that matters, not being perfect at it. As a bit of a perfectionist, I still struggle with this. But I try to remember that consistency is the goal...perfection is not.

With nutrition, we all have days or weeks where it's almost impossible to maintain a healthy diet. There are periods when the schedule and demands of life, family, work, or all three prevent me from taking time to eat a healthy breakfast, eat my planned salad for lunch, or cause me to grab a quick, less healthy dinner just because I need food but don't have time to go find the best options for my health. And oh, by the way, when the stress levels rise, so does my craving for chocolate...seriously. So, I know I'm not perfect with my nutrition. I don't even try to be perfect. But I do try to be consistent over time. One meal, a week of eating poorly, even a month of fast food isn't going to kill you, but years of it on end can have some very severe effects on your health. So do what you can to stay consistent. You may not be able to eat perfectly all the time, but you can prevent those long periods of unhealthy eating by injecting some fruits and veggies, or by breaking the streak of soda or candy every day. When the stresses and obligations of life keep you from eating healthier for what seems like days or weeks at a time, add healthier options when you can. And gradually grow those healthier habits. If we can't be perfect with healthy choices, let's at least make sure we're not perfect with unhealthy choices.

On stress management, the interesting thing about stress in our lives is that we often contribute to it by how much we worry. When we place unreasonable expectations on ourselves or set artificial goals, we also set ourselves up for increased stress. Whether it's the pressure to maintain an unreasonable diet, the expectation to follow someone else's exercise regimen, to parent like someone else, or whatever it is, you have to be you and run your race. And understand that it's normal to have periods where you aren't as effective at meeting your goals. Some things I do to reduce the

likelihood of these types of stressors are, 1) planning for imperfection because as Voltaire said, perfect is the enemy of good, 2) build some slop into your plan by adding periods where you're not expected to work toward your goal, and 3) freeing yourself to take action no matter how imperfect that action is. The most important part of imperfect action is the action itself. Imperfection doesn't matter. Be better, not perfect and reduce some of the stress in your life.

On marriage, how can I be a better spouse, a better partner to my wife? Well, there are things that I can do with my attitude, my actions and my communication. With my attitude, it's all about the outlook and approach I take. I can view things that I perceive as my spouse's weaknesses as excess strengths. I can accept her for who she is, because she is indeed perfectly made in God's eyes. I can be thankful for what she brings, not the faults I wish were better. For example, do I focus on the fact that she's a few minutes late in getting ready for church, or am I thankful that she wants to go to church as a family? What's the more important thing there? I can also assume that her actions are well intentioned because we truly are on the same team. I can make my actions better by taking positive steps to invest in the relationship. Things like going to marriage retreats, praying together, practicing patience and carving out time together away from the kids...just us. And I can communicate better by deliberately making time for it, by being open and by sharing how I feel. A better attitude, better actions and better communication make us better as spouses.

When I think of what it means for me to be a better parent, a couple of things come to mind. First (and this may be age-dependent...our girls are only 6 and 9), our children want our time and attention. And in a world where there are so many competing demands, this is often difficult for parents. That said, it's vitally important. There will be a time when your child really needs you. Not "can you help me tie my shoe," need you, but "dad, I need some serious help and advice here"...that kind of need. And if the relationship isn't built through time and attention early on, it may be difficult for them to trust you later in times of need. They will turn to someone. Who do you want that someone to be? Next, we can all do better with teaching vs. scolding. With letting our

children learn through their mistakes vs. robbing them of the opportunity to grow. Scolding and reprimanding our children is sometimes required, but it's also the easy button, especially if that's how we were raised. It takes a lot more effort to teach your child. Do you lean toward automatic correction or do you let your child learn through his or her mistakes? Better parenting often requires more patience and sometimes just clearer priorities.

And finally, on faith...God isn't looking for perfection. In fact, it's impossible for any of us to be perfect. That's why He selflessly sent His son to bear the burden of all of our sins. And that's why I'm comforted in the fact that his expectation of me is that I strive to be better, to live better, and to carry myself in a way that uplifts Him, serves as an example of all that He's done in my life and points others to His saving power and grace. When we talk about being better, not perfect in our journey for personal growth, it is so comforting to know that that is God's very expectation of me. And that's His expectation of you too.

So, in closing, consistent habits, small steps to make those habits consistent, and just striving to be better, not perfect...those are the things to remember as you continue to grow in every area of your life.

As I close, don't forget to leave a rating or comment, and spread the word if you like this. And if you have feedback, let me know. And if you're interested in these and other principles and concepts to apply to any area of your life in which you seek to grow, head over to tdfitness.net and download my "Principles for Personal Growth." It's a one-pager, it's free, and I created it for you.

As always, thanks for listening, have a blessed one. Coach T, out.