

Personal Growth Part 6 – Measuring the Right Things

Welcome back to the TD Fitness Podcast, family! This is episode #118, and it happens to be the sixth episode of a seven-part series on personal growth. And in this episode, it's all about what we measure as we seek to grow, and some things to consider as we think about defining success. And as with the other episodes in this series, I'll step through each of the six growth areas that we've focused on this year: fitness, nutrition, stress management, marriage, parenting, and faith.

So, let's get right into it. When it comes to measuring progress, much of what we measure is in terms of outcomes. What was the outcome of my 100 meter sprint? Was it a world class time? How many points did she score in the game? Was it her personal best? How much weight did I lose? Was that my goal? Well, measurements of outcomes are fine, if you're trying to compete or compare. But if your goal is to grow as an individual, to be better than you were yesterday, to do better with your habits, then perhaps you should consider measuring your actions, not the outcomes of those actions. This is an important concept, because what we measure and why can have a huge impact on your actions and adjustments going forward. The results of our measurements are feedback to us. That's why it's important to focus on consistent actions, not results, and to track progress. You can improve the effort you put in, your attitudes and your actions toward a particular goal. But there are outcomes that you have much less direct control over (things like the rate of weight loss or whether you'll be able to fit into that dress in time for the event). In personal growth, measuring progress through actions or attempts is usually the best course of action. Outcomes are important to the outside world, but individual action is important for personal growth. What we measure is important, because it informs what we think about ourselves and our motivation to continue. It will tell us what we need to change going forward. Success leads to confidence, and confidence is both contagious in that it spreads to others, and it spreads to other areas of your life as well. So be deliberate with how you measure success.

So, what's the best thing to measure when it comes to improving fitness habits? Well, what you've probably heard is that weighing yourself or using a tape measure to determine your girth are good ways to track your "progress" toward fitness goals. Well, as a personal trainer and health coach, I have indeed used these techniques to first determine where individuals are, where they're starting on their fitness journey with me, and on a periodic basis after that to assess how far we've come. But these measurements are not necessarily outcomes of our true goals. If I work with someone who wasn't exercising at all before coming to me, and whose weight and girth have hardly changed over the course of a month, but who has exercised by walking three times a week for four weeks straight, is that a win? Is that progress? You bet it is! He has improved in the sense that he's closer to instilling healthy habits. And

that's what will get you to personal growth and continued fitness improvement. The measurements are a byproduct of the habits you create and carry out. And the more of these habits you have in your life, the better off you'll be from both a healthy habit standpoint, and eventually from a weight loss and size standpoint as well.

The common refrain in improving your nutrition is typically centered around your calorie intake, as if that single thing is the end all be all in weight loss. Well, in some ways it is, actually. But there's more to your diet and nutrition than just the number of calories you consume. Ten calories from fat are different than 10 calories from protein, for one. Secondly, you have to think about sustainability. I could absolutely cut my calorie intake in half by eating only salad and drinking water each day, but I know that's not sustainable for me. I want to enjoy food. So, a better approach for me personally is to eat a salad each day, or to try to limit my portion sizes from time to time, or to skip some meals altogether through fasting. And when I measure "progress" in these areas, it's not about how much weight I've lost, it's about improving the actions that I take on a consistent basis in order to create and instill habits that will keep me healthier over the long-term.

Moving on to stress management, how can we measure what it means to be less stressed? My smart watch tells me my "stress level," but what is that, really? And is it a true representation of the amount of stress I'm under? It uses variations in my heart rate throughout the day to determine a stress level...I guess it's the best we can do to quantify the amount of stress I feel. But stress is really just that, a feeling. So how do you know if you're doing "better" at managing stress? Well, because it's such a subjective thing, and because you can't really control how stressed you are, I'd offer that our actions, decisions and mindset are the things that we can alter to reduce stress. What unneeded situations or circumstances do we put ourselves in? And if these situations or circumstances happen because of situations beyond our control, what is your attitude toward these things? Just yesterday, my flight from one location to another was delayed to the point where I missed my connection to my final destination. I didn't want to have to rebook my flight. I didn't want to have to track down bags. I didn't want to spend the night at an interim stop. I didn't want to get up at 3:30 to make the first flight out the next day. I didn't want to finally arrive at my destination a day later, without my luggage and have to travel back to the airport later that evening to get my bags when they came in on a later flight. But these are all circumstances that I was dealt. No need to get upset, just deal with it and don't be a jerk to the people trying to help you who had no control over the unfortunate set of circumstances. My mindset could have made this experience extremely stressful for me, or simply another challenge to overcome. It's all in how you look at things. What do you measure to get better at managing stress? Control what you can and simply deal with things that you can't control in an unemotional way. You'll feel better, and you may find that the stress number on your smart watch or phone goes down as well.

Let's briefly talk marriage. When my wife and I were engaged and doing premarital counseling as an investment in the journey we were about to embark on together, we were introduced to The 5 Love Languages, a book by Gary Chapman. We still refer to the five love languages as a way to put action behind our intentions of having a thriving marriage. So, when I think about how we can measure either progress or success in marriage, once again, I think it comes down to the actions you take as a spouse, which is largely driven by the attitude you have. I've said before that we need to look at love as a verb in marriage. And if we do, then the question, "do you love your spouse" can really be translated to mean, "what are you doing to show love to your spouse?" If we want to be better partners in marriage, we have to do the things that make us better partners. Measure how you're doing in those areas to determine how you're doing overall.

Now, in parenting...how do you measure progress? I mean, your kids are going to grow, they're going to learn, they're going to develop, no matter (even in spite of) what we sometimes do. So, what does getting better at parenting look like? My personal opinion is that growing as a parent means growing with your child or children. If you think about it, the relationship between a child and the parents is one in which the child is constantly seeking more independence, even from the time when they're very little. And as parents, the struggle for us is in letting go, and in giving more independence, realizing that they're more ready than we think, and in providing those support requirements that are unique to every age and stage. That's tough. Perhaps growing as a parent means constantly flexing to what the situation calls for, what the world asks of us and our children, and what our children ask and expect from us. No easy task, for sure. But what a blessing it is.

When it comes to measuring progress in your faith, it's important to measure not just what you do but how you act. You can do the things that are involved in practicing your faith, like worshiping, prayer, studying the word, but do you find yourself displaying more patience? More compassion, more empathy, greater selflessness? Perhaps these things are hard to measure, but if you can't tell, those around you will likely be able to tell. How do you handle difficult situations? Are your responses to the challenges that life throws your way indicative of someone who lives a life of faith? True progress in this element of personal growth is all about making you a better person...someone who demonstrates the types of qualities that show that you're improving, or growing into the person that God intended you to be.

So, we've hit ways in which to measure your actions toward growth, not just the outcomes of those actions. Again, that's because it's growth that we're looking for. But no matter what we measure, we need to use that information and data to determine whether we're improving. And if we are improving, how to sustain that improvement. And if we're not improving, how to continue to improve and grow. We have to ask ourselves, "what does success look like?" But this starts with asking the right questions. How did you do? Are your actions or habits better now or not? And when you ask these questions, remember that the

goal isn't to compare yourself to society, it's to compare to your previous self. And then there are a few questions that you can ask to drill deeper into your path for continued progress, improvement and growth. Why, or why weren't you successful in your attempts? Can or should you change anything? If so, what? Do you stick with the specific area and actions that you're trying to improve in, or do you maintain your efforts in that area while also trying to broaden your healthy living and personal growth goals to other areas as well? I like to ask, "do I go deeper or do I go broader?" And finally, another important question to ask is whether your specific approach needs to be scrapped altogether for a new plan. If you continue to try something that just isn't working, it's ok to cut your losses.

So, what does defining success in fitness look like? For me, it has ranged all the way from completing an Ironman race to getting maybe two short workouts and a little bit of stretching in over the course of a week. That's because my definition of success varies depending on the phase of my life, how busy I am, what else I have going on and how I'm feeling. Weight loss isn't the only thing to measure when it comes to fitness. Let me say that again...weight loss isn't the only thing to measure when it comes to fitness. Weight loss could be a by-product of improving your fitness, but your goal should simply be to improve your fitness through consistency over time. And it's not always easy. From January to June of this year, my fitness goals were to get the required workouts in to prepare me for a long race in June. Since then, my goals have been to stay consistent with 3-4 very short 15 minute workouts and some stretching each week. I'll tell you that up until about three weeks ago, I had a pretty good streak of that consistent fitness. Then I had to travel for two weeks, and my consistency dropped off dramatically. And now I have a new starting point, which is to simply do better than I have over the past couple of weeks. Later, maybe months down the road, I'll start training for another race. I'm measuring success against myself, my consistency and my goals. Can you make this week a little better than last week? Can you make this week another week in which you meet your consistency goals? These are great ways to measure success in fitness.

Improving nutrition habits can be challenging simply because of the number of different options that we seem to be presented with. From specific diets that tell us to eat or to avoid certain foods, to fasting options, to detoxes, to portion control...it can all be very confusing. And how are you supposed to measure whether you're truly doing better if you don't make weight loss the measurement of choice? Because again, weight is not the preferred measurement when it comes to how we're doing in terms of our nutrition. As I said with respect to fitness, weight loss can be a byproduct, but being more fit is the goal. And with nutrition, weight loss will likely be a byproduct, but eating healthier should be the goal. So how is one to define success in your goal for better nutrition. I think the answer is, again, in consistency. Whatever method you choose to eat healthier, as long as it's a safe one and backed by sound reasoning, if you can do that consistently, then you're winning. One of those things for me is to eat a large salad for lunch on four of my five workdays each week. Another is to drink 100 ounces of water five days a week. I

can measure these things easily and my goal is to stay consistent from week to week. Measuring success with your nutrition can either be doing better than you did last week, or being consistent at maintaining a stable, healthy routine.

Moving on to stress management, how are you doing in your efforts to live a life of lower stress? What types of things are you doing? Are you exercising regularly, getting more rest, getting better rest? Have you reduced your number of commitments? Have you tried to focus on things you can control, and change your mindset to accept the things that you can't control? How is any or all of this working for you? The difficult thing about measuring success in the area of "lower stress" is that most of us will always feel stressors. And how do we know that anything that we're doing to counter the effects of stress are actually working? It's hard to prove a negative. But let me tell you this...when I exercise regularly, my mind is in a better place. When I'm well rested, I can handle the events of the day better. When I think about things that I could have been doing, that I'm not doing because I said 'no' to those commitments, it frees me up to either relax or do things that I'd rather do, like spend time with family. While we may not be able to measure what "less stress" looks like, I can tell you that doing the things to lower stress in your life do actually result in a life of lower stress. And it feels a lot better than it would if you were more stressed.

Now, defining success in marriage is iterative. It's about learning and growing together. But success in marriage may be easier to define if we first define failure. So, what does failure look like in marriage? Some may say divorce, or infidelity, or possibly just distance between you and your spouse. So is success, then, staying married, being faithful to one another and not being distant? I think the level of success we all strive for in marriage should be much more than that. For my wife and I, success looks different now than it did early in our marriage. In the beginning, we had to learn to live together. Then we had to learn to parent together. And in many ways, every day we continue to learn in these same areas. That's because things are constantly changing, we're presented with new challenges, our kids find new ways to challenge us and the world around us doesn't always look to protect the promise we've made to one another. And so, we grow, and learn together. And we love, forever. That's success in my mind.

In parenting, some people might define success as reaching the point where your children have grown up, without making any negative life-impacting decisions, left the house and are thriving on their own. That could be one way to define success. But what do the 18 or 20 years leading up to that look like? How do I know if this was a successful parenting week, for example? Well, much like the way the world is constantly changing around us and within our marriage, it's also changing with respect to our parenting. The first thing to realize is that successful parenting doesn't always mean a happy child in the short-term. And if we constantly try to please our kids, we inevitably sacrifice some of our long-term goals as parents, which almost always center around growing our children to be fulfilled and productive members of society. But to me, successful parenting looks like learning. It looks like admitting when you're wrong. It looks like

being patient. It looks like making time, right now, to be a father or mother to your children, and not constantly pushing them behind other so-called priorities. It looks like understanding the difference between disobedience and a mistake, and between teaching versus scolding. It looks like allowing for mistakes, because no one, neither you nor your children, is perfect. If you want to set some goals to be a better parent (and believe me, we all can use it), think about these things. Strive toward them regularly. And periodically measure how you're doing in some of these areas.

And finally, defining success in faith is a bit tricky, mainly because it could be so very simple. You see, we're all winners. We've already won because Jesus came and paid the price for all of our sins. So, there's nothing that we can do to earn a place in heaven or to win at faithful living. We're already saved. All we have to do is believe, and do our very best to practice living a Godly life. And these could either be the most difficult, or the most freeing things that you'll ever practice. Belief may be hard to embrace, but it gets so much easier once you start. And practicing living according to God's word is just that, a practice. We can't get it 100% right, but we still practice it. I define success in this area by asking if my actions are reflective of who God wants me to be. It's not about what others think of you, but it is about the example you set. It's all about growing in faith, and in applying your faith to your actions. It's about faith and works.

Alright, there you have it. Another episode on personal growth, this time for you to think about how you measure progress and success in the different areas of your life in which you seek to improve or grow. Every time I do one of these episodes, a FitVid, or a post, I'm reminded how much of a blessing it is to be able to provide something that hopefully brightens your day or gets you one step closer to living the life you want to live.

Thanks for listening, TD Fitness Family. I'd love to hear any feedback you have, things you'd like to hear about. And if you like this content, please spread the word, leave a rating or a comment.

And as a reminder, you can head over to tdfitness.net to download my "Principles for Personal Growth." It's a one-pager, it's free, and I created it for you to share these principles and concepts to help you grow in different areas of your life.

That's all for now! Have a blessed one. Coach T, out.