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Optimal Movement

Decades after the aerobics revolution of the 80s, the gym and fitness industries have ballooned to over 100 billion dollars annually. That's a nearly incomprehensible amount of money spent each year on machines, weights, memberships, trainers, supplements, classes...

And yet with all this money spent, we are less active and physically fit than our parents and grandparents were. Somewhere along the way, our views on movement, our relationships with exercise, and our everyday habits became profoundly skewed. And it's only by parsing out the terse medical recommendations into actionable steps, and by re-examining what the fabled *active lifestyle* is, that we can begin to make the changes consistent with a more enjoyable, more mentally fit life...and maybe we'll even have some fun along the way.

Perhaps it's best to examine some words. Because while we may sometimes use "exercise," "activity," or "movement" interchangeably, they probably carry vastly different implications for you--implications that impact your views around getting up and moving purposefully. *Exercise* may carry the connotation of directed, purposeful tasks that you do to strengthen muscle or improve endurance. Images of the gym may come to mind--of weights and treadmills and ellipticals. *Activity* is pretty broad. You might just look at it as doing something which, by definition, is *active*. While *movement* might be even more loosely defined for you. Maybe it's just getting up and walking around the block?

The official recommendations for cardiovascular exercise are, in a sense, fairly clear and straightforward. The CDC recommends 150 minutes of aerobic activity, dryly stating: *It has been estimated that people who are physically active for approximately 150 minutes a week have a 33 percent lower risk of all-cause mortality than those who are not physically active.* Other guidelines state that: *adults should move more and sit less throughout the day*, which--yeah, sure. But this leaves us a lot of room for exploration, and you may still be asking,

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“Okay, so what should I do?” But more often than not, it’s best to ask yourself, “What would I like to do?”

You see, so often when we consider exercise and think about it in concepts that other people define for us we don’t see the enjoyment of it. Our movement, or exercise, or activity becomes a chore, not something that fuels us and engages us.

Seriously. Figure out something active you may want to do, and then go do it. But remember--we’re trying to create long term habits, not one-offs. Think about the habit loop--cue, routine, reward--if you can make the routine something you actually want to put time into, consider how much easier that habit will be to build. And while your vision of perfect fitness may be a marathon runner, have you ever considered badminton? Again, seriously.

Physical activity can broadly be categorized as either open-skill or closed-skill exercises. That hypothetical runner from earlier is demonstrating closed-skill. These are the things our minds generally jump to when we think of exercise. They’re repetitive in nature with expected outcomes. Generally, the goal is based around heart rate, measured distance, or calories burned. Things like running, swimming, the elliptical. Open-skill compose activities that are more reactive--most team sports, climbing, and... badminton. A study was conducted that measured production of BDNF--remember, that’s the neurotrophin linked closely to brain growth--in both running and badminton, and surprise - the open-skill took the gold. That’s right, badminton produced more BDNF than running. What does this mean? It means the narrow definition of what we tend to think of as traditional aerobic exercise can, and must, be expanded, and the field of options in front of you may be bigger than you think.

This is why, for you, it might be better to think of daily recommendations in terms of movement, or even play. And as you think about the recommendations and how to

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incorporate them into your schedule, understand that each of them should be contextualized based on your own preferences, likes, dislikes, and circumstances.

We know that twenty minutes per day of moderate aerobic activity is linked to higher rates of mental satisfaction--not to mention the numerous other health benefits. By moderate exercise, I mean anything that gets your heart rate going a little--it doesn't have to make you double over. Try exercising outside, if you can, as the sensory effects of outdoors can have an additional effect on your mental state. And if you can double up and turn exercise time into an opportunity to be social, all the better.

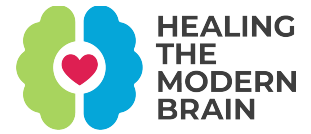
It's great to move your body, like playing basketball with other people, and it's great to do that on a schedule so you're engaging in regular activity that feels organized that you're doing with other people on a regular basis. That's win, win, win.

If you're new to an activity consider tracking your progress. It may sound like homework, but for most, it adds a layer of satisfaction to the new experience, and by seeing your incremental progress, you'll be able to build toward bigger goals more effectively.

In my own life I've tried so many different types of exercise. From being a pole vaulter and a basketball player in college – to now where I do a lot of walks in the woods or playing pick-up games of soccer with my kids, or riding a horse. They're all different types of movement that I've incorporated into my schedule to make sure that it's a habit.

A good question to ask yourself when evaluating any activity and its role in your life is: *what am I enjoying about this?* This goes both ways. If you find yourself physically stagnant, ask, what am I enjoying about sitting still? What am I getting from it? How do I feel as a result? And likewise, with any exercise or activity you take part in, think about how you feel while you're doing it, and afterward. This introspection is at the heart of everything we're talking about in this course. And it's one of the first steps toward building the movement

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habits that lead to greater life satisfaction and improved mental clarity and overall better mental fitness.