

Dash of indulgence key ingredient in fitness recipe

By Ruth Ostrow

I'M not proud of my health and fitness record. I remember many a night sitting up late, eating Tim Tams, watching those infomercials about fantastic mechanical monsters that tighten butts and strengthen abs, and feeling as if by watching all that exertion I was somehow getting fit.

Then there were my day-time viewing habits, where I'd turn on to people puffing on treadmills and doing aerobic things, whilst eating my last unhealthy meal before the health diet, which I was always going to start tomorrow.

It is unbelievable how much weight I put on in those pre-fitness binges, how many cigarettes, coffees and alcoholic beverages I downed before giving up for good, before beginning those fitness campaigns that were invariably delayed by life-trauma, work pressures, or simple laziness.

When I did finally start, I'd go to the other extreme -- approaching fitness with the severity and rigidity of an army lieutenant, taking my aberrant side under control.

Hup, hup, hup I'd breathe down my own neck, forcing my feet to pedal on those exercise bikes, forcing my body to lift and twist and pant.

No alcohol, no chocolate, no meals out, no fun. Not able to go to parties because the temptation was too great. Losing weight, losing friends, losing life-force.

And then, feeling deprived, feeling lonely, bullied, and cut off from pleasure and joy, I'd find myself at a party having not one drink but three, and in my drunken state eating half the chocolate birthday cake, and later, at home, another few Tim Tams.

Which then made it impossible to get up and exercise the next day as guilt and feelings of worthlessness crept in.

This is the real health and fitness treadmill that many people I talk to are on -- which is why so many fitness related illnesses rule the Western world.

It's the treadmill of extremes: sedentary behaviour followed by manic exercise, binge eating followed by strict control of food. And always the steady diet of guilt, self-recrimination and "I should's".

Health retreats can sometimes reinforce the pattern. Two years ago I went off to an ashram in India where I did the most wonderful life-giving yoga exercises for four hours a day, along with meditation and healthy eating -- lentils, grains, fresh fruit and vegetables.

I returned fitter and better looking than ever in my life, with glowing skin.

But within a month I had fallen back into bad habits.

How did it happen? It's the same principle. I must have been feeling deprived, over-tired, bullied.

There was no real balance in the diet, no sweet indulgences, the accommodation was austere, the philosophy was one of abstinence and repentance, quite impossible to maintain back in the real world.

However, I did recently go on another intensive yoga retreat and am now into my second month of home maintenance, and I feel fantastic despite work pressure, sickness, and all the normal routine things that tend to disrupt us when we come back from retreats.

It was a 10-day yoga intensive in Bali offered by respected Byron Bay teacher, Lance Schuler, who through his outfit Inspya Yoga, takes students away four times a year.

For me the difference has been that while we did five hours of exercise a day, plus meditation, and ate lots of healthy food, Schuler is very much a believer in moderation. He does not advocate austerity.

But he does maintain that consistency is important. A little bit of health and fitness every day enables us to indulge in the wonderful, exotic things we eat, drink and do.

We'd go out partying at night, but the next morning he'd teach us exercises that helped squeeze and cleanse the liver so that the alcohol was flushed out.

We'd order chocolate desserts that were wicked as sin, but then he'd make sure we did a bit of a detox the next day, with plenty of fresh food and exercise.

And there was great joy during class.

Most yoga classes are conducted in the strictest environment as we reach into ourselves to find a deeper space. And yes, we went deep. But not always. Often we'd be laughing, gleefully doing handstands, cartwheels and giggling like kids, playing with energy and exercise, then enjoying a good strong cappuccino and gossip with friends in the cafe afterwards.

In 20 years of trying to stay healthy, this is the longest I've been able to maintain the steam without resentment -- because my regime is now realistic.

I can enjoy a piece of cake or a rich meal, but instead of losing momentum out of guilt, I just do more activity the next day.

I can take a few days off if I'm tired, and not end up throwing in the towel from feelings of failure.

There is a saying in eastern philosophy that moderation is the key. It's the Buddhist notion of following the middle path. For those who are wanting to get fit and stay healthy, whether at retreats or by themselves, I've found that putting a dash of wickedness, indulgence, and fun into the stew, is the secret ingredient.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 13 MAR 2004