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Get Fit in the New Year: Mind, Body and Soul
By Karen Trachtenberg

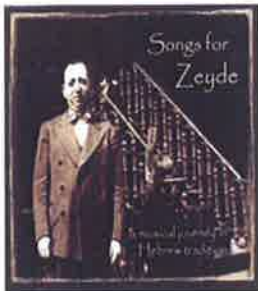
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What's with the barrage of "New Year, New You" gym commercials, morning show segments and "how I did it" talk show specials bombarding us every January?

Must we subject ourselves to this annually, or is there any way to get around it? Turning off cable for a month and cancelling magazine subscriptions is a little impractical. We are actually being pressured by society to make lofty New Year's Resolutions that we never keep.

With the New Year here, it is important to try and examine some new beginnings, yes, but they should actually mean something. If we limit ourselves to just one or two commitments, we can make them count.

This year, instead of trying to lop ourselves with laundry lists of negatives, (i.e., "I'm going to make over every muscle in my body and give up any and all carbohydrates, go on a cabbage diet and try to lose twenty pounds all at once"), maybe a commitment achieve health with a gradual, well-rounded approach is in order.

Holistic health centers and acupuncture/massage centers are one option. More and more people are considering a wide-ranging approach to their well being. Health practitioners, and even insurance companies, are following suit. They are widening the scope of "good health" to be all-inclusive, and are blending Eastern and Western medicines.

The U.S. government has established an agency (The Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine) that is charged with exploring complementary and alternative healing practices in the context of rigorous science. The agency is part of the National Institutes of Health and trains and sets standards and practices for alternative (Eastern) medicine professionals.



Highland Hall Waldorf School - Children are not rushed, but encouraged



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The best way to achieve and maintain optimum health is by using a blend of Eastern and Western medical practices. Dr. Arnold Bresky, M.D. runs the Camarillo Springs Holistic Health Center with a partner, and also has offices in Woodland Hills and Beverly Hills. He is an integrated doctor who practices Complementary and Alternative Medicine. In order to get and stay healthy, we must take a mind/body/spirit multi-faceted approach, he says.

"Pills and surgery are often necessary, but not enough," he says. While antibiotics cure acute symptoms, they do not go to the root cause of them.

However, Eastern practices do work on the root cause of symptoms, which are based on how we think and perceive things. Some of the major health issues facing Americans - obesity, hypertension, heart problems - are caused by life problems. Chronic stress, depression, and poor diet suppresses our immune systems. Believe it or not, the thing that most determines how we age is not genetics (30 percent), but lifestyle (70 percent).

How can we get out of this mess? The body can heal itself - but we need to give it the right energy to do so. We have to change our expectations and perceptions. People must have the expectation that they will get better to do so.

Acupuncture and massage are great ways to deal with stress. But what is the ability of herbs/acupuncture to do things like improve people's allergies? They CAN work, but one must be open to the methods and must also share with his/her doctors what they are doing. Also, and this is important - if herbs are not FDA regulated then absolutely stay away.

In short, some of the best ways to start improving our overall health are improving diet, engaging in physical activity, engaging one's spirit (i.e., meditation), laughing, and socializing (mental activity).

Healthy Mind

Since so much of Eastern Medicine is based on helping our minds and spirits, how can you go about learning to love the proverbial "skin I'm in?" First off, change your mind and attitude; and if that can be done, the rest will follow suit.

Anxiety, depression and chronic pain often comes from stress that is directly related to how we think and feel about ourselves, and subsequently, how we view the world.

Research has shown that when people spend a little more time pursuing exactly what they love, they feel more fulfilled. According to Author David G. Meyers, "People who tend to have work and leisure that engages their skills are overall just happier."

"We are here for two reasons," adds Dorothy Neddermeyer, PhD, an Arizona-based hypnotherapist and spiritual advisor, "for emotional and spiritual growth." "Mental health is an inside job, she says, and so is happiness. "We can all 'sweat it out' at the gym. But if we don't use our 'emotional muscle' get to know ourselves internally, there will be always be that empty feeling, as if something is missing." The willingness to get through the "emotional rough spots" is a key component of overall health and fitness.

"I help my clients create an idea of where they want to go and what they want to create for themselves - an "ideal scene," says Scott Molluso, a Santa Monica, California certified life coach. Making over the mind, he says, is the most basic way to help oneself achieve. People tend to envision what they think they want (based on other people's perceptions of them) instead of what it is that they really want. "Are you motivated by fear, obligation or guilt toward others, or, by the desire to do positive things for yourself?" he asks.

Think long and hard about what it is that brings you true joy, i.e., hobbies, actions, anything, really, that brings them true bliss. Find a quiet place and decide what you want to create for you based on that hobby or ideal- and do not consider what anyone else might think about it.



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Taking ten to fifteen minutes out of the day to mediate is a good idea. Meditation helps calm and focus the mind. A simple breathing meditation can be very easy. Find a peaceful place, away from distractions. Sit upright, in a comfortable position, back straight. Partially close your eyes and pay attention to your breathing. Breathe through your nostrils. Without attempting to control your breath, try to become aware of the sensation of your breathing as air enters and leaves your nostrils. That sensation is the object of your meditation.

Now, concentrate to the exclusion of everything else. Although your mind may start to clutter, just remain totally focused on your breath. As your mind wanders, just return your focus immediately to your breath. There! You did it. After about ten minutes, your mind will feel more lucid and fresh, and the more you practice, the better you'll become. And breathing meditation is just the beginning. Visiting howtomeditate.org for additional guidance.

Healthy Body

Moving on to the physical: Achieving a healthy body takes time and patience, and in our increasingly high-stress world we owe it to ourselves to be kinder to our bodies. Equinox Fitness (with clubs in Woodland Hills and Pasadena) has some reminders for year-round body maintenance.

Work Your Body. We all know the benefits of exercise at this point. Whatever it is - cardio, weight training, walking, jogging - getting moving improves circulation, gets oxygen to the brain, helps us live longer, and just makes us feel good. So get to it - try and establish a routine to get yourself moving for at least 30 minutes a day.

Sleep. Adults need at least seven to eight hours of it a night in order to function properly. Less than that and you could be in trouble - your cognition and judgment will be impaired, and your appetite will be affected. Studies show that lack of sleep makes us crave sugary, starchy foods, causes weight gain, and weakens the immune system.

Watch what you eat and drink. Want to feel better immediately? Start limiting drinks such as caffeine, (which causes blood sugar fluctuations), and cut down your alcohol consumption. Both can cause dehydration and sleep disruption, among other things.

Drink lots of water. Instead of reaching for quick-fixes, packaged foods and candy bars, this year, consider taking time out to re-work your diet. Whole grains (i.e., quinoa, brown rice, steel cut oatmeal), eggs, lean cuts of meats like chicken and turkey, fish, and lots of fruits and veggies are the way to go. For optimal health, there is just no way to get around that.

Also, for an interesting take on group fitness, the Pasadena club has a class called "IntenSati." It combines cardio, yoga and martial arts with affirmations and positive phrases (intentions). IntenSati is the creation of Patricia Moreno, one of Equinox's Group Fitness Instructors.

People always seem to be missing something in their attempts to transform themselves physically. That elusive "something," Moreno says, is the ability to transform thoughts and attitudes. "The actions we take are a function of what our minds are saying, and the key to good health and body transformation starts with deep awareness about thoughts and attitudes."

Moreno has choreographed moves in the class that are aligned with attitudes, like "confidence," "strength" and "empowerment."

"When you connect the body, the mind and the heart, you can re-shape your vision of what is really possible for you and your life," Moreno says.

Healthy Spirit

Physical strength of the body is directly related to strength of the spirit, according to the ancient Chinese practice of Qigong. Qigong means, literally, working with the "qi," the vital breath, or "life energy." "Gong" means "work applied to a discipline."

Practitioners of Qigong learn to become aware of this energy, controlling its flow through a precise choreography of posture, movement, respiratory technique, and meditation.

The goal of Qigong is to obtain a kind of peaceful alertness and harmony, and its techniques and philosophies are prominent in the practice of Taoism and Buddhism. It is the preventative and self-healing aspect of Chinese medicine, which incorporates Qigong along with diet, herbs and acupuncture.

Qigong is practiced by millions of Chinese and is slowly but surely making its way into the US and Europe as a spiritual and physical practice. And it certainly doesn't hurt. Qigong has been tested in controlled environments and has been proven to help people improve their mental health, and thereby improve their immune function.

Dr. Daoshing Ni, a 38th generation healer and his brother, Dr. Maoshing Ni, founded Yo San University in Los Angeles in 1989 and has been practicing and teaching Chinese Medicine ever since.

Because Qigong uses so many aspects of the human experience and puts them all together, it has had tremendous healing benefits for many, according to Dr. Dao. It improves stamina, coordination, and flexibility. Practitioners of Qigong can achieve optimum health because it "calms emotion, improves balance, blood pressure, regulation of blood sugar and cholesterol, and detoxification function, or our bodies' ability to efficiently get rid of toxins." It heals and rejuvenates, he says.

Qigong can improve our lower resting heart rate, cholesterol levels, immune system function, cerebral blood flow, chronic pain, and can promote longevity. And experiments have also already proven that Qigong improves people's sense of well-being.

Ojai

Pampering is of course a great way to achieve optimum health, so if an out-of-town retreat is in order, consider the Ojai Valley Inn on Country Club Road in Ojai. Ojai was originally inhabited by the Chumash Indians, who revered it as a place of healing. It is a haven for spiritual practitioners, artists, writers, and of course, movie stars.

The spa its own little village within the larger resort and is designed to encourage total relaxation and greater self-awareness, according to Cole. Men and women can enjoy an extensive variety of facial, skin, and body treatments designed for indulgence, rest, and detoxification.

After spa treatments, visitors can take classes (yoga, t'ai chi, qigong, meditation), nature hikes, power walks, and "Short Courses in Living Better" lifestyle classes.

The courses are designed to help guests discover newly found skills, which in turn inspires confidence and creativity.

"The Artist's Path" inspires students to draw intricate patterns on a mandala and encourage meditation, making hand-crafted paper, or painting while accompanied by music. "Tasting Wine Like a Pro" teaches wine tasting technique and provides guests with a better understanding of wine textures and varieties. "Golf: The Name of the Game" teaches students to get comfortable with the game and its etiquette. "Horseback Riding: Life's a Cinch" teaches people to gain confidence and composure while learning to handle and take care of large animals (horses). Of course, a beautiful trail ride is included. "Aromatherapy" introduces guests to one of the oldest forms of holistic healing. They will learn about the properties of essential oils and will blend their own.

Classes take place in the new Artist's Apothecary across from Spa Ojai. The Apothecary also offers pottery, painting, fiber arts (batik prints and weaving), journaling, soap making and haiku classes.

FBE Holistic Health Center

Firm Body Evolution (FBE) Holistic Health and Fitness Center opened last year in the Miracle Mile District and offers wellness treatments that cannot be found anywhere else. The Center, which overlooks the La Brea Tar Pits, offers "the best of the best in anti-aging, weight loss, and detoxification treatments," according to owner Joseph Harounian.

Harounian was introduced to Eastern medicine years ago when he was told that he would not survive ailments he had at the time. After years of prescription medications, he gave up on Western medicine, sought out alternative treatments and with herbs and acupuncture his health improved markedly within a few weeks. After a few months, he was disease and symptom-free." It is possible that alternative medicine can help where traditional medicine cannot, and I want to educate people about it," he says.

FBE uses the same vibration machine Madonna uses to keep herself chiseled and fit, along with an automated massage room that includes whole body massage beds and hip rotator beds.

Staff is on hand at FBE to provide a variety of massage treatments, quantum biofeedback, acupuncture, reiki, and chiropractic treatments. Also available is the first-of-its kind-in-L.A. Jade Sauna, a dry sauna clinically proven to promote healing and rid the body of toxins. "So far, business has been great, Harounian says, and there are quite a few Western doctors referring patients to us, so the word is getting out."

And so it is that the New Year is here. Perhaps some of the techniques above and a unique perspective can move us all toward that "getting better" resolution - and maybe it will stick this time.

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