

The Four Practitioner Habits

Personality-based habits form a feedback loop, as positive behavior garners satisfying results that reinforce right behavior. Habits are not about *having* something, but *becoming* someone: the person you want to be. New habits have the power to change your beliefs about yourself.

- **A habit is an automatic**, unconscious solution to a real-life problem. You don't have to think about habitual behavior. The thinking only occurs as you are setting up and repeating the behavior you want to do automatically, without thinking about it.
- **There are four steps** to building a habit: declaring your intent, remembering in the moment, following through on your commitment, and reaping rewarding results. This program will suggest appropriate habits; you must provide the mental and physical work.
- **The most effective** form of learning is self-discovered through practice. Habit formation is the process by which behavior becomes progressively more automatic through many repetitions. Every meal and every workout becomes a health and fitness opportunity.

Habit 1. Mindfulness. Practitioner athletes must learn how to place their attention on certain things in their environment: the lay of the ground immediately in front of them, their variable sensations of exertion, and the plethora of feelings and attitudes cropping up incessantly.

- **Mindful attention** requires concentration. Training at the practitioner level is like learning to play a musical instrument. You wouldn't expect to learn the piano without focused practice. Learning how to read your body and respond appropriately is similar.
- **Mindful thinking** also requires a conceptual framework, such as the hard-easy system to guide you towards an understanding of right exertion and optimal effort. Your facilitator will focus you initially and your support group will remind you later.
- **Mindful practice** leads to new habits and less thinking. Hooray! Meanwhile, whatever you do, do it well so you form good habits. Practice until you can, say, get to a hill and automatically adjust your pace and posture without needing to again before the top.

Habit 2. Break each workout into discrete and manageable parts, which you deal with automatically and appropriately. Think of your races in the same way. Fitness exercise is never about just one thing. It's as varied as your intelligence and creativity can make it.

- **For starters**, think in terms of routes you might take to vary your experience, features (flat vs. hilly), purposes (warm-up/ability-building/practicing skills), mental challenges (say, urban intersections), and time periods (say, warm-up vs. ability-building).
- **An interesting feature** of this program is the way duration builds in 5-minute increments. Thus you are always figuring ways to incorporate a new 5-minute segment into an old route, using your familiarity with the area to do it automatically and intuitively.
- **The one constant** in fitness exercise is a certain rhythmic movement. The tempo may vary (fast-slow), as can specific motion details, but there is something deeply satisfying and life-enhancing about sustainable long-distance exercise. Our bodies crave it.

Habit 3. Develop a stress-management regimen. If you're alive in the 21st Century, you are subject to burnout—too much activity without enough rest. Regardless of how your stress originates, you need ways to deal with it so it doesn't incapacitate you before your time.

- **Exercise** is only one of a number of stress-reduction strategies, but it's effective. Stress hormones build up each work-day and need to be dissipated so you can sleep soundly. You can use those stress hormones productively to gear your body up for exercise.
- **The best way to manage stress** is to break each day into segments, with none becoming the dominant daily feature. Practice balancing your work and family duties with friendships, hobbies, entertainment. Work hours shouldn't overlap with other features.
- **Most stress-management programs** mention meditation—sitting quietly in a relaxed position, without reference to religion or anything in particular. Sitting enables your mind to process recent stress-producing experiences, and thereby dispel them.

Habit 4. Build mindfulness meditation into your life. Remember, mindfulness is a matter of using your attention to examine certain things in your life. The most fundamental practice is to place your attention on your breathing: again and again, habitually and easily, every single day.

- **Thoughts and feelings** will clamor for your attention. One thought at a time so the strongest is first in line, with others close behind, making it difficult to attend to your breathing. Each time you yank it back the muscle grows and the mind slows.
- **If you sit long enough**, thoughts and feelings disappear, and your mind calms down so you can concentrate without constant interruption from within. Meanwhile, meditative practice enables the mind to slowly solve the problems of the day. Messy, but effective.
- **The word "problem"** is generic. The main thing is your resolve. Later, you must remember your resolve and act on it. In this sense, meditation is practice for life, as each time you bring your attention back to your breathing, you mimic what happens later.