



LUKENOTES

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Fitness Gains

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For each new client who comes to Saint Luke Institute, I conduct a fitness evaluation. The number-one goal I usually hear is that he/she wants to lose weight-anywhere from five to 50 pounds. And, they usually would like to lose it off their mid-section. Although weight loss may be a worthwhile goal, especially for persons who are overweight, fitness is more important. Recent studies show that lack of fitness is a bigger contributor to poor health (heart disease, diabetes and cancer) than being overweight. To avoid discouraging anyone, I wait until the end of the evaluation to tell them that weight loss isn't even in my top-ten priorities when it comes to fitness.

While losing weight can be aesthetically desirable and therefore an appealing goal, actually dropping the pounds is a relatively invisible, slow, tedious process that often takes weeks if not months to occur, if done healthily. Further, I find focusing primarily on weight loss to be a disservice to the exercise regimen as a whole and to the other measures of health that take immediate effect during exercise. To be sure, if achieving ideal weight were the only goal in the fitness industry, we would be failing miserably.

The fact is that almost everyone I know is on a constant plan to lose at least five pounds. Once accomplished, many people think all will be perfect and they will be happy. Some are convinced that losing that magic five pounds will cure their nagging back pain, high cholesterol, borderline diabetic condition, and enable them not to be winded after climbing one flight of stairs. Wrong. There are a lot of very unfit skinny people and very fit heavier people. Weight loss alone does not measure body composition, i.e., the percentage of lean muscle mass to fat mass. Ideally, we want more muscle and less fat, and often when we lose weight we lose muscle mass. Research has shown that without resistance training, up to 28% of weight loss is lean body mass or muscle. We need to change our focus and let our fitness programs be measured by our gains, not our losses. What are the things we gain from a fitness program? We can categorize these gains into at least three different groups: **physiological gains** or physical body changes, **chemical changes**, and **psychological changes**.

Exercise is best known for the **physical changes** that the body undergoes. Exercise affects every single part of our body because it increases oxygen flow through the blood. Exercise increases muscle mass, elasticity, strength, power, speed, balance, coordination, reaction time, and our ability to relax. It increases the density of bones and the strength of tendons and ligaments. It increases the amount of air in and out of the lungs, the flexibility of the rib-cage, the motility of the digestive system, and the killer T-cells in the immune system.

Exercise increases the body's awareness of itself in space, ability to change direction, catch balance, speed up and slow down. Finally, it increases the body's ability to regulate internal temperature in relation to outside temperature so that the body is less affected by extremes of hot or cold weather.

Body **chemistry** is also affected by our fitness regimen. Exercise increases the concentrations of serotonin and norepinephrine in the blood, (anti-depressant medication does the same thing). Exercise increases the amount of sugar taken out of the blood stream (insulin does the same thing). Exercise assists the hormones and circadian rhythms of the body that increase deep/REM sleep (restorative sleep) and alertness during the wake cycle. Exercise decreases the level of cortisol in the blood, a stress hormone that increases heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate, and fat storage to the abdomen. Exercise increases the natural opiates that block pain messages to the brain.

Psychologically, exercise is a powerful tool of self-empowerment. Physical activity regimens are learned skills that promote commitment, time management, dedication and focus. During exercise your brain and emotions are actively engaged and intertwined with your body, promoting self-awareness, deep breathing, and posture control. As a person progresses, there is less anxiety surrounding the "underground fitness world": the funny words all ending in maximus, the people in spandex, the big, loud weight machines, the aerobic classes where everyone knows exactly what to do. Also, an increased sense of community develops with people who have a common exercise goal and an increased sense of understanding about the difficulty others have with their own physical goals.

Often, a happy side effect of a physical health program is weight loss, but for those who are truly able to make a life choice to create a healthy body, it is hardly ever the first thing mentioned when asked what keeps them going. The most striking revelations of clients do not come from the new pants size they wear but from how they feel about themselves, their accomplishments, and the fact they are now in control of their body: Often I hear: *"I am no longer intimidated by the gym." "I have higher self-esteem and more confidence." "Exercise has helped my spiritual growth/balance as well as tension relief." "It has given me greater control, helped me relax, sleep, lose weight, feel good about myself, and recognize the need for balance to appreciate life." "Exercise made me feel good about myself."*

Exercise is a gift that keeps us strong, vibrant, and injury free. It enables us to live our lives without pain, fatigue, and difficulty. The benefits begin to flow immediately even though the scale may not show it for weeks, months, or ever. Let us "glorify God in our Body, and in our Spirit, which are God's" (Cor. 6:20).

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