Fitness Forum: Exercise experts give their best advice about shaping up - and staying in shape

by R.J. Ignelzi

Getting in shape is probably near the top of many people's New Year's resolutions lists. However, for lots of folks, that's as far as it goes - a well-intentioned aspiration that never makes it into reality.

Incorporating fitness into your life can seem like an overwhelming endeavor, especially for someone who hasn't exercised regularly. To make it worse, there's an abundance of conflicting information out there via buff celebrities and Internet fitness gurus.

WORKING OUT - Exercise physiologist Richard Cotton recommends having a fitness plan with specific goals. He runs regularly with his dog Howie. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. To help simplify things and motivate you with some solid exercise advice, nine fitness professionals offer what they each consider a practical, yet vital tip for improving or maintaining your fitness for 2007.

To help simplify things and motivate you with some solid exercise advice, nine fitness professionals offer what they each consider a practical, yet vital tip for improving or maintaining your fitness for 2007.

To help simplify things and motivate you with some solid exercise advice, nine fitness professionals offer what they each consider a practical, yet vital tip for improving or maintaining your fitness for 2007.

- Plan your workout and work your plan. Richard Cotton, chief exercise physiologist with www.myexerciseplan.com

"After the first of the year, people go diving into a weight loss or exercise program without any upfront planning. And, they usually fail because they don't have a plan," Cotton says. "You've got to have a specific, well-thought-out (fitness) plan and anticipate possible barriers and obstacles so when the first one hits, it won't be a surprise."

A fitness plan starts with determining specific goals.

"Don't just say you want to lose weight or lower your cholesterol. Rather determine how many pounds you want to drop or how much you'd like to decrease your cholesterol and in what period of time. Be realistic," Cotton says.

He recommends creating a "fitness vision" looking six months into the future. At what weight do you see yourself? What cholesterol level?

Focus on any barriers you might face in reaching your goals and how you plan on overcoming them.

"Write it all down and get it out of your head," Cotton says, noting that during the year you may need to revise and rewrite your goals and visions as you achieve them.

- Work with a certified fitness professional. Todd Galati, kinesiologist, personal trainer and certification and exam development manager for the American Council on Exercise

"A fitness professional can help you reach your personal physical goals just as a financial planner can help you with your financial goals or a medical professional can help you when you have medical needs," Galati says.

While you can make some progress on your own, if you really want to reach your fitness goals, enlist the aid of a pro who can help you set up a program that will help you progress and set attainable goals.

In the beginning, you can work with a trainer once or twice a week. Then as you get into the maintenance phase, the schedule can be every couple of months, Galati says.

WORKOUT PLAN - Fitness director Colette VandenBroeck suggests scheduling a fitness activity into your day. Here she trains with Michelle Satren, who recently lost 93 pounds. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual.Trainers, who usually charge $55 to $85 an hour, can be found through the ACE Web site, www.acefitness.org. Look for someone who holds a professional certification from organizations such as ACE, the National Strength and Conditioning Association and the American College of Sports Medicine.

To make it more affordable, think about semi-private or small group training. By sharing the trainer with two to four other people, you not only cut the price of a session, but you can also benefit from the camaraderie and group support.

- Exercise first thing in the morning. Todd Durkin, personal trainer, massage therapist and owner of Fitness Quest 10 in San Diego

"When we talk about getting in shape, we're talking about behavioral change. And, if you do it first thing in the morning when there are fewer distractions and demands on your time, you're more likely to make it a habit," Durkin says.

"Don't wait until later in the afternoon because it's likely it'll never happen because things come up; you have to work late or take the kids to soccer or answer some e-mail," he says. "By exercising first thing, it helps you formulate a habit so you can do it consistently. And consistency is critical to making progress."

- Schedule fitness activity into your day. Colette VandenBroeck, exercise physiologist and senior fitness director at the Mission Valley YMCA in San Diego

"Make your fitness activity just as important as the luncheons, meetings and children's soccer games," VandenBroeck says. "Put it on your calendar in ink."

If you're just starting out after months or years with little activity, start slowly and pick out two days a week to schedule exercise. Once you get into that habit, schedule a third day.

For someone already exercising, schedule some cross-training to challenge your body.

- Be patient for results. Phil Sanchez, exercise physiologist and director of group exercise and Pilates at Pacific Athletic Club in San Diego

"We live in a society that's so focused on immediate gratification that we forget that fitness is a long-term life change," Sanchez says. "Sometimes you may not see the results right away, but if you're consistent and patient, the results will come."

To avoid frustration, especially for those just starting an exercise program, he suggests setting short-term realistic goals.

"If you're coming into a new Spinning class and you can't cycle for an entire hour, come for just 20 or 30 minutes," he says, noting that you should explain to the instructor that you may not stay until the end. "Twenty or 30 minutes of exercise is better than nothing. And you can build up (time and endurance) from there. If you keep at it, you will see results."

- Get a workout buddy. Fabio Comana, exercise physiologist with the American Council on Exercise.

"To help you develop a good support system, find a workout partner with fitness goals similar to yours," Comana says. "When you work out with a friend, you push each other, remind each other (to work out) and are more likely to adhere to an exercise program. Your workout partner can be your pillar of strength and support."

Don't know of anyone to share your workouts? Comana suggests first talking to your circuit of family and friends to see if any of them has a similar fitness agenda. At the gym, if you see someone who is often doing the same activity as you, "engage them in conversation and see if they'd be interested in working out as partners," he says.

"For the person who is just starting out (exercising) and who has let themselves go, it's very important to have this kind of support system," Comana says. "Your workout (partner), more than a trainer, will be able to understand what you're going through and empathize with you and support you."

- Include functional fitness exercises in your workout. Erica Roberg-Williams, personal trainer, fitness instructor and owner of SIFT Workout in Oceanside, Calif.

"By doing exercises that mimic the activities of our daily life, we become stronger and are able to (perform those activities) more efficiently and without injury," Roberg-Williams says.

Functional exercises often include balance work or core stabilization movements, such as standing on a balance board while doing bicep curls with dumbbells or standing on one foot and looking up at the ceiling. In addition to several books and Internet sites devoted to functional fitness, functional training programs are available through many trainers and fitness centers.

"These functional exercises focus on core strength because (they are required) when we're gardening, carrying groceries from the car to the house or holding a child while we bend down to pick up our keys," she says. "It's important to keep the body fit and active for the activities of daily living."

- Switch workout routines regularly. Laini Gray, personal trainer and 24-Hour Fitness group instructor

"Your body will adapt to whatever activity you ask it to do. If you don't challenge it and change workouts, after a while it won't burn fat or calories as efficiently," Gray says. "To give your body a little shock, switch cardio modes every three to four weeks and change your strength-training routine every six to eight weeks."

Dedicated runners, for example, should work out on a stair climber, ride a bike, or take a kickboxing class for a change of pace, she suggests.

"Different activities require different muscles and energy, plus it relieves monotony," Gray says, noting that a varied routine is especially important if you're trying to burn calories and shed weight.

If you're using strength training to get stronger, it's important to change your routine every couple of months. That can mean lifting heavier weights with fewer repetitions or going from free weights to weight machines.

- Find a fun fitness workout that works for you. Jason Waiton, exercise physiologist and fitness director at Frog's Club One in Encinitas, Calif.

"For many people, fitness is just a pain in the butt. But if they can find something that is fun for them to do on a daily or weekly basis, it can be the key to longevity and maintaining a strong fitness level," Waiton says. "Find a special hybrid Spinning or weight class that you enjoy. Look for the right trainer who can create fun (workout) programs for you or do an outdoor activity you enjoy. Keep it fun so you can stay motivated."

Â© Copley News Service

Fitness Forum: Exercise experts give their best advice about shaping up - and staying in shape by R.J. Ignelzi