

# *Moving Through Life*



# Toward Health

By Sonia Osorio

**W**e're busier than ever with longer workdays, less leisure time, shorter lunch hours, longer commutes, and more demands than ever before. We may even be in a job that doesn't fulfill us, yet we spend most of our time there. When the day ends, we have almost no energy left to do what we enjoy. We live in a society that gives us ongoing mixed messages: one message has us aggressively achieving success, another collapsing in front of a TV or computer screen for "relaxation," and another working out to achieve a perfect body. We need to find a balance between hyperactivity and healthy activity.

Plenty has been written about the therapeutic benefits of exercise. So, why aren't more people reaping those benefits and moving toward health and well-being? We need to reexamine our notion of what exercise and movement are and consider what we're moving toward or away from. Then we can begin to ask ourselves other questions: Not just are we fit, but

are we physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy? Are we happy? Do we enjoy how we're moving through life? How can we integrate more healing movement into our days?

## Exercise as "Medicine"

**W**e sometimes see more barriers than options to exercise. But what if we reoriented our point of view to notice where the opportunities lie? We can begin by simply redefining exercise (with its sometimes negative connotation of obligation) to movement. Already opportunities arise: How do we want to move in our bodies and in our lives? How can we have fun doing that? How can we move more (or maybe less, if we need to slow down)? How does it feel to be still? How can we make time to move into pleasure, to move with pleasure? Already, the notion of movement takes on a more healing expression. Rather than simply being another item on our to do list, it becomes a way

for us to examine our lives, to see where we can move toward health, and use physical activity as a way to support this.

“When most people think of medicine, they visualize something material like a pill to be popped, a liquid to be swallowed, or an injection to be endured,” writes Carol Krucoff, author of *Healing Moves: How to Cure, Relieve, and Prevent Common Ailments with Exercise* (Harmony Books, 2000). “Some might also consider surgery, tests, or procedures ... [But] simple physical activity can have profound healing effects.”

Krucoff, who cowrote the book with her husband, Mitchell, a Duke University cardiologist, advocates movement as preventive medicine, saying it’s an ideal way to combat the increasing number of inactivity-related health conditions such as heart disease and obesity. This could actually be expanded to include stress-related conditions. In fact, it’s often this combination of inactivity and increased stress that wreaks havoc on our immune system, endocrine system, and circulatory system. Every system in our body, in fact, responds to stress and inactivity. But, if this is true, then the inverse is also true: every system in our bodies will also respond to movement and pleasure. To make movement pleasurable and to use it as a way to reconnect with our bodies is, in many ways, the perfect antidote to the cycle of inactivity/hyperactivity and stress. As we move more in this way, we gain energy and health, we feel rejuvenated and relaxed, and we become more physically and emotionally aware.

### Emotional and Spiritual Fitness

We often focus on physical fitness, but any movement toward health must also include emotional and spiritual fitness. Psychologist Nancy Mramor, PhD, author of *Spiritual Fitness* (Llewellyn Publications, 2004), ties emotional fitness with our physical health and with our heart’s expression. “There is evidence that the largest number of heart attacks occurs on Monday morning between 8 and 9 a.m.,” she says. “This occurrence is related to the experience called joyless striving. It applies to feelings of having to force yourself to go to a job that you have no interest in, or even truly dislike. Clearly these feelings suggest a lack of emotional fitness in the match between the employee and the job.”

The heart of the person pumps much more than blood; it also pumps our passion. It lets us know what we love doing and who we love doing it with; it circulates our compassion and reminds us of our commitment to life. When we’re emotionally connected to the work we do in a healthy way, and to one another in a supportive way, we not only survive, but we can also thrive because we have more energy available to become who we’re meant to be. Physical, emotional, and spiritual fitness are all intimately related. In understanding this interrelationship, we can begin to move toward health.

### Mind-Body Techniques: Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Fitness

Mara Carrico, author of *Yoga Basics: The Essential Beginner’s Guide to Yoga for a Lifetime of Health and Fitness* (Henry Holt & Company Inc., 1997), advises us to consider three key questions before beginning any fitness program:

1. What are my primary goals (e.g., stress reduction, better posture, total body conditioning, greater flexibility, vigorous exercise)?

2. Do I need to consider any physical limitations?

3. What time commitment am I willing to make?

Answer these in as much detail as possible, then look at the options available. The following are some techniques integrating physical movement with self-awareness:

- **Yoga** is a philosophy and exercise system that combines movement, breath awareness, and meditative focus. It can be very dynamic (*Ashtanga*) or very gentle (*Kripalu*). Yoga can improve flexibility, reduce stress and anxiety, improve concentration, increase stamina, and offer insight into long-standing physical and emotional conditions.
- The **Pilates** system is a series of exercises originally used to help with dance injuries. It’s done on a mat and sometimes involves specialized equipment. It teaches core body strength and awareness, develops strength and mobility, and coordinates movement through the correct use of breath.
- The **Alexander Technique** is a method for restoring natural balance, flexibility, and ease of movement. It teaches how to use the appropriate amount of effort for a particular activity, thereby releasing more energy for all activities.
- **Qigong** combines movement and meditation through a series of flowing postures. It can be performed by individuals of almost any age or fitness level. Regular practice promotes relaxation, increases stamina, establishes physical and emotional balance, improves sleep, and brings an overall sense of harmony.
- **Tai chi**, like qigong, involves performing a series of movements while maintaining awareness of body and breath to notice how our chi, or life energy, circulates in our body. It helps improve posture, develops coordination, and makes us aware of movement and thought patterns that can contribute to stress, tension, or injury.
- **Neuromuscular Integrative Action (NIA)** is both a fitness and a healing system that uses whole body, expressive, grounded movement, rather than repetitive movements or lifting. NIA is based on the idea that there’s a highly aware person within each of us. NIA has been called “movement as medicine.” It’s adaptable to any fitness level, every age, and all body types, including those with special limitations.

## Personal and Interpersonal Health


Interpersonal relationships, in fact, are one of the three major causes of life stress, along with environmental events/conditions and personal attitudes and beliefs. In his book, *Love & Survival* (Harper Collins, 1998), renowned physician Dean Ornish, who first proved that heart disease was reversible through lifestyle changes, says that in order to survive, we need not only care for our lives, but the lives of others. Individuals with supportive relationships get sick less, heal faster, and live longer.

Begin by checking in with yourself as you're moving through your day: How does your body feel right now? How are you breathing? Where is this movement taking you? Do you feel good? Are you satisfied? Are you happy? If not, then change something. Change how you're moving, where you're moving toward, or look at what you're moving away from.

"Become the change you seek in the world," Mahatma Gandhi said. This isn't about a temporary quick fix to end a bad habit, lose some weight, or fill our time. This is about long-term change—making more conscious use of



Our health and well-being is not about being hyperactive or inactive. It's about finding a balance, making our actions conscious, and learning to move in ways that are both healthy and appropriate in our lives, then moving this healing energy out toward others. So, rather than exhausting or limiting our energy, we learn to expand it. Then we can begin exercising in a whole new way—exercising our right to choose and to better understand our body, our life, and what we want to be doing with it.

our time and of our life. It's about moving through life in healthy and healing ways, and expanding our idea of who we can be. Then our view of the world widens, our heart grows, our spirit soars, and our body moves toward true change. This is the healing power of movement. 

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