

# HEALTH AND FITNESS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELOR

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## ABSTRACT

Nutritional information followed by Chair-exercise and a 20-minute cardio exercise to light hip-hop music was presented at a workshop at the Georgia School Counselors Conference Fall semester, 2006. As a follow-up to the conference presentation, during Spring semester 2007 data was collected from Cobb County School counselors to examine the health and fitness needs of professional school counselors. This article addresses the health and fitness needs of school counselors across school levels.



School Counselors today face a myriad of issues as they seek to provide life-changing services to students, parents, teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and community stakeholders. Often these entities increase school counselors' duties and responsibilities and produce excessive stress. This leaves the school counselor drained of needed energy and inspiration to thrive in the profession (Stone, 2004; Williams, 2004). In order for professional school counselors (PSC) to keep up with the daily demands of their school setting, effective collaboration and the essential services of counseling are necessary but consulting, coordinating, and appraising are not the only useful tools to meet these requirements. Professional school counselors must also attend to their health and fitness to meet these demands. Good nutrition and physical fitness improve mental and physical well-being and increase work performance. In other words, regular

exercise and a balanced diet are essential to overall health and fitness (Brown, 2004; Cruise, 2004a; Rath, 2003; Schmidt, 1999; Williams, 2004).

In an effort to educate PSC about this issue the authors presented information at the Georgia School Counselors Association (GSCA) 2006 Fall Conference on the nutritional and physical fitness needs of counselors who are typically the main caregiver in schools. Later to gain a sense of PSC's habits and behaviors surrounding health and fitness, the author's surveyed PSC in Cobb County. This article addresses these findings and presents suggestions for better health and fitness.

PSC must remain healthy and physically fit in order to not only manage their caseloads but also to ensure that their caseloads do not manage them. Healthy eating is a must. According to research by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Americans spend each year more than \$33 billion on weight loss products and services, while only 30% of those surveyed follow a program of eating fewer calories and exercising. Instead, most Americans consume vast amounts of fast food which largely consist of sugary products, excessive carbohydrates and fats. In order to remain healthy the school counselor must have a renewed sense of well-being and be knowledgeable of health and fitness information (Brown, 2004; Yeager, 2006; see also [www.4fitbodies.com](http://www.4fitbodies.com)). Guided by this information, it was hypothesized that PSC need to improve their health and fitness.

## Review of the Literature

There is a tremendous amount of literature on health and fitness. The suggestions which follow provide diet information and exercises designed to enhance a renewed

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sense of well-being (see Appendixes A and B). PSC should begin their day thinking “cleansing”. For example, instead of starting the day with coffee and doughnuts, water with a squeeze of lemon, or a cup of green tea are better substitutes to flush out toxins in the body that accumulated from the previous night’s meal and while asleep. This is a better way to “**break the fast**” each morning. Also, this process jumpstarts metabolism which is nature’s way to control weight gain. Next, eat breakfast within the first 2 hours of the morning, yet another means of firing up the metabolic system. It is also highly recommended that food consumption take place every 2-3 hours (see table below).

Breakfast	7:00 AM
Snack	10:00 AM
Lunch	1:00 PM
Snack	4:00 PM
Dinner	7:00 PM

It may seem impossible to adhere to such a schedule, so modifications may be in order during the first several weeks. The point to remember is that the body needs fuel about every 3 hours. If the body does not get food throughout the day, it tends to store fat as a precaution. Stored fat can create loss of energy, lowered metabolism, overeating and eventual weight gain (Brown, 204; Cruise, 2004b; Longbotham & Miller, 2006; McVeight, 2006; Trudeau, 2004; Yeager, 2006; see also [www.deniseAustin.com](http://www.deniseAustin.com)).

*Acidic Foods versus Alkaline Foods*

Another tip for PSC seeking a healthier lifestyle is to turn the body’s pH from acidic to alkaline. Human blood pH should be slightly alkaline (7.35-7.45). The higher the number, the more alkaline foods are. For some, this may have to be done in gradual steps. A partial list of acidic foods include white rice, cheese, milk, butter, green peas, beef, fish, lobster and sunflower seeds, while alkaline foods include garlic, collards, apples, tomatoes, cinnamon, ginseng, herbal teas, eggs, all berries, bananas, yogurt, and watermelon. The pH scale for acidic and alkaline foods ranges from 0-14. Spending time looking at the foods commonly eaten and where they fall on the pH scale is invaluable.

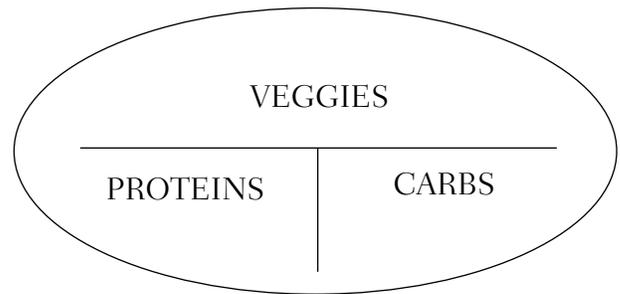
**The pH scale**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 healthy 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

Do not be fooled by the lemon into thinking that it falls in the acidic category. Though acidic outside the body, once the lemon juice is digested and assimilated in the body, it becomes alkaline. However, the opposite is true

with meat. Meat tests alkaline before digestion, but leaves a very acidic residue in the body. This may be the reason many people become vegetarians ([www.rense.com/1.mpioms/acidalka.htm](http://www.rense.com/1.mpioms/acidalka.htm); [www.essence-of-life.com](http://www.essence-of-life.com); and [www.health.com](http://www.health.com)).

When meal planning, think of the pH scale and then balance the meal with more alkaline foods than acidic. Half of the plate should consist of vegetables; 1/4 should be proteins and 1/4 carbohydrates. Controlling portion size is the way to jumpstart healthy eating habits. There is no need to measure your food; just switch to a salad plate instead of a dinner plate. Soon your body will adjust to your new eating habits. The following graph represents a suggested food plate distribution per meal:



While following the suggested food distribution is beneficial, there is more to be said about one’s proper diet and its relationship to a longer and healthier life (Brown, 2004; Cruise, 2004b; McVeight, 2006; Longbotham & Miller, 2006; Rath, 2003). First, there is protein that can be found in meats, fish, seeds, and nuts. Protein, a Greek word that means “of first importance,” is essential for the formation of bone, connective tissue, hair and muscle. Proteins are composed of building blocks called amino acids. The body is only able to create 12 of the needed 20 amino acids. We must get the others from the foods we eat, usually meats (see [www.jordanrubin](http://www.jordanrubin) and [www.low-fat-recipe.com](http://www.low-fat-recipe.com)).

Carbohydrates are the second element of a healthy diet and have gained much popularity as well as controversy. Their function is to provide energy in the body. Good sources of carbohydrates include grains, whole brown rice, root vegetables, and fruit. Bad sources of carbohydrates are usually sweet and salty-tasting foods such as potato chips, French fries, cookies, ice cream and soda drinks, to name a few. Excessive amounts of such carbohydrates can cause obesity, cardiovascular disease and even tooth decay. Also, mood swings and hyperactivity have been noted in children. Tinned and packet foods are surprisingly full of sugar (Brown, 2004; Trudeau, 2004).

The third component of a proper diet is vegetables. Vegetables include five subgroups that are based on nutrient content and range from broccoli to

carrots to beans to tomatoes to corn. The dark green vegetables are the most preferred among health enthusiasts. Starchy vegetables such as corn, potatoes and lima beans tend to work like the carbohydrates food group. So eat 1/2 plate of corn for your veggies and 1/4 plate of potatoes for your carbs. Remember, eat to live not live to eat (Brown, 2004; McVeight, 2006; Longbotham & Miller, 2006; Rath, 2003; see also [www.jordanrubin.com](http://www.jordanrubin.com) and [www.low-fat-recipes.com](http://www.low-fat-recipes.com)).

*Physical Exercise*

The need for physical exercise is paramount. Physical exercise is divided into two types, aerobic and anaerobic. Aerobic refers to physical conditioning that causes the body to have a marked temporary increase in respiration and heart rate. Anaerobic refers to physical conditioning that does not cause a marked increase in respiration and heart rate. Jumping rope would be an example of aerobic exercise while stretching the arms above the head would be an example of anaerobic exercise. Both are useful in stress reduction and essential to the health and wellness of the PSC. Using a chair, counselors can perform “Chair-er-cise” which is mostly anaerobic. Emphasis is placed on performing body movements that could be done in the office. Counselors are able to work their obliques, upper rectus abdominals, lower rectus abdominals, thighs and hamstrings, back of arms and shoulders, and back of thighs and buttock. Using a chair for balance, six additional routines can be performed standing up (see Appendix B) (Ambandos, 2004, 2003; Cruise, 2004a, 2004b).

Participation in aerobics is crucial to overall health and fitness. A 20-minute routine that incorporates squats, leg extensions, marching, lunges, and even the grapevine are typical movements. These aerobic steps are usually cumulative in nature with aerobics from one song added to the new routine on the next song. A marked temporary increase in respiration and heart rate is the desired goal. Plenty of water is needed throughout and after all aerobic routines to avoid dehydration. The idea is to make exercising fun and a daily habit. Physical conditioning that includes aerobic and anaerobic exercises keep the body agile and strong for many years (Basic Step, 2004; Work It Off Cardio Sculpt, 2004; Yeager, 2006; see also [www.4fitbodies.com](http://www.4fitbodies.com)).

**Methodology and Results**

Professional school counselors in the Cobb County School District were asked to participate in this study. Cobb County School District located west of Atlanta, is the second largest school system in Georgia

with over 107,000 students and 184 school counselors, school social workers and psychologists (see <http://www.cobb.k12.ga.us/generalinfo/aboutus.htm>). A survey was developed to explore questions about the health habits and behaviors of the sample population. PSC were invited to take the JW Health and Fitness Quick Health Assessment in April 2007. The 10-item survey (see Appendix C) was emailed to approximately 125 school counselors. There was a 1-week turn-around period to email responses resulting in a 52% response rate with 65 respondents. The purpose of the survey was two-fold: (a) to assess school counselors’ perceptions of their current health and fitness status and, (b) to promote self-awareness among counselors in paying attention to their health and fitness. Data from the surveys indicate that many school counselors do consider their health and fitness, but may still need to do more in order to remain healthy throughout their lifespan. The counselors’ responses to the survey items are indicated below.

*Question 1: Do you eat breakfast each morning?*

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
87%	Yes
12%	No
<1%	Sometimes

*Question 2: How often do you eat from at least three of the traditional 4 food groups per meal (protein, vegetable, fruit and dairy)?*

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
34%	1 meal
48%	2 meals
13%	3 meals

*Question 3: Do you have a bowel movement within 2-3 hours of each meal?*

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
50%	Yes
34%	No
11%	Sometimes

*Question 4: You smoke how many cigarettes per day?*

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
98%	None
>1%	1-4

Question 5: You drink how much water per day?

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
28%	Pint
55%	Quart
14%	Gallon or More

Question 6: Would you consider yourself a health and fitness enthusiast?

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
21%	Definitely
48%	Somewhat
28%	Seldom

Question 7: On average, how many times per work do you participate in physical activities (such as hiking, jogging, running, swimming, racquet ball, tennis)?

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
16%	One Time
40%	2-4 Times
36%	5-7 Times
1%	7 Times or More

Question 8: Which of the following do you participate in at least 4 times per week for 45 minutes or more? Check all that apply.

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
53%	Walking
11%	2 or more
33%	None

Question 9: How well do you handle your job-related stress?

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
17%	Very Well
50%	Good
16%	Fairly Well
16%	Poorly

Question 10: You see a physician for your annual check-ups?

Percentage in Agreement	Item Response
68%	Always
26%	Sometimes
>1%	Only if Sick

## Discussion and Conclusions

The survey results indicated the overall health and fitness level of Cobb County school counselors to be consistent with the authors' hypothesis. While many health areas for the counselors responding to the survey appeared to be satisfactory, a need for counselors to improve their health and fitness was evident. For instance, counselors need to increase their intake of meals per day, eat from the four food groups, and consume fewer calories. While discussions of bowel movements are not a popular topic, they are essential to good health. Therefore, efforts to increase solid waste elimination are needed. The responses indicated a 1-quart consumption of water daily by most counselors which is good in that the body needs water to keep all bodily functions working including regulating the body temperature and removing waste. However, the body may need more water as one's activity levels increase such as daily exercising. Efforts to drink 6 to 8 glasses of water would be optimal.

Most counselors reported eating breakfast while less than 50% eat two additional meals per day. Counselors should be aware that eating one meal per day can cause the metabolic rate to become sluggish causing the storing of fat which often leads to weight gain. For PSC seeking to lose weight, eating a substantial breakfast should strongly be considered.

Less than half of the counselors reported participating in regular physical activity. This is of great concern since the benefits of regular exercising such as walking can be instrumental in weight reduction, releasing toxins and relieving daily stress. Counselors need to incorporate regular exercise in their schedule.

Perhaps the most positive item on the survey was related to smoking. Only one of the 65 respondents indicated that smoking occurred. Another positive item on the survey was that most counselors see a physician on an annual basis. Many counselors are able to handle job-related stress, while others reported not being able to handle job-related stress.

### Limitations

This survey did not inquire about the demographics of gender, race, socio-economic status, school setting, or educational attainment. The timing of the data collection during Spring semester and the 1-week deadline for emailing responses may have been factors in response rates. Additionally three surveys were incomplete. The exact sample size was unknown until the surveys were returned. Though the sample size was small, the surveys do demonstrate trends in the health and fitness of PSC in Cobb County Schools. However, the sample size may be too small to generalize to a larger population.

### *Implications for Professional School Counselors*

The implications of this study are for PSC to become aware of proactive steps for better health and the need to practice healthy habits throughout their lifespan. While these implications are not exclusive to PSC, the stress that comes with the school counseling profession requires counselors to be healthy and physically fit so that they will not succumb to the high demands of their school setting, in particular, and life in general. A combination of good food choices and exercise is essential (having variety in meal planning and exercise is best so as to not reach a plateau). Lifestyle changes may be necessary for many school counselors to improve, enhance, and maintain good health.

Before data was collected for this study, a brief educational session at GSCA's 2006 annual conference was presented in an effort to provide information useful to PSC in seeking measures to begin or improve their health status. The presentation sparked an interest in collecting data from a local school counseling population to check the hypothesis that PSC need to improve their health and fitness. While the research did not cover all facets of wellness, the review of the literature provided information and resources for counselors to easily become health conscious. Some of the health tips are simple and can readily be applied. If PSC are healthy, they will be in a better position to help students. Also, maintaining a healthy lifestyle throughout the lifespan is an important concept to model to students.

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### **Related Websites**

- [www.4fitbodies.com](http://www.4fitbodies.com)
- [www.health.com](http://www.health.com)
- [www.densieAustin.com](http://www.densieAustin.com)
- [www.health-fitness-tips.com](http://www.health-fitness-tips.com)
- [www.low-fat-recipes.com](http://www.low-fat-recipes.com)
- [www.rense.com/1.mpioms/acidalka.htm](http://www.rense.com/1.mpioms/acidalka.htm)
- [www.essence-of-life.com](http://www.essence-of-life.com)

**Lifestyle Changes for Longer Healthier Living:**

- Detoxify the body through cleansing.
- Eat last meal/snack 2-3 hours before bedtime.
- Buy and use a juicer.
- Increase intake of fruits and veggies and begin to see a natural increase in bowel movements.
- Avoid transfats, artificial sweeteners including high fructose core syrup.
- Read food labels.
- Try organic foods. It is cheaper to pay the local grocery than any doctor.
- Drink 6-8 glasses of water throughout the day.
- Eliminate drinking milk with meals. It slows down the digestive process and may cause bloating and gas.
- Walk one hour 3-5 times weekly and/or jump rope for 30 minutes every other day.
- Buy a rebounder. It is easy on the joints. Try 10 minutes 4 days a week and notice the difference.
- Add weight-lifting to your exercise routine.
- Sleep 6-8 hours each night to maximize your body's natural healing process.
- No smoking.
- Lower or eliminate alcohol consumption.
- Consider not eating later than 7:00 p.m. You may be able to eat just about anything you want with this plan and still lose weight considerably.
- Consult your physician if you are in doubt about your food intake and any physical exercises.

**Note:** These wellness tips represent recommendations based on the authors' personal lifestyle changes and a review of the literature. Please consult your physician and/or nutritionist for professional advice.

## CHAIR-ER-CISES:

1. Seated Torso Rotation: Obliques
2. Seated Crossover: Upper Rectus Abdominals
3. Seated Crunches: Lower Rectus Abdominals
4. Seated Stretch: Thighs and Hamstrings
5. Seated Bridge: Back of Arms and Shoulders
6. Seated Bridge: Back of Thighs and Buttocks
7. Standing Knee Lifts: Front of Thighs
8. Standing Leg Lifts: Back of the Thighs and Buttock
9. Standing Leg Swings: Inner Thighs
10. Standing Side Raises: Outer Thighs and Hips
11. Standing Pump: Calves
12. Superman Hold: Lower Back

## APPENDIX C

**JW Health & Fitness Survey  
for  
The Professional School Counselor**

**Directions:** Read each item below. Underline the statement or question that represents your best response.

1. Do you eat breakfast each morning?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Sometimes
2. How often do you eat from at least three of the traditional 4 food groups per meal (protein, vegetable, fruit and dairy)?
  - None
  - One meal per day
  - Two meals per day
  - Three meals per day
3. Do you have a bowel movement within 2-3 hours of each meal?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Sometimes
4. You smoke how many cigarettes per day.
  - None
  - 1-4
  - 5-10
  - 11-15
  - 16 or more

5. You drink how much water each day.

- None
- One pint
- One quart
- One gallon or more

6. Would you consider yourself a health and fitness enthusiast?

- Yes, definitely
- Somewhat
- Seldom
- Never

7. On average, how many times per week do you participate in physical activities (such as hiking, jogging, running, swimming, racquet ball, tennis)?

- 0 times
- One time
- 2-4 times
- 5-7 times
- More than 7 times

8. Which of the following do you participate in at least 4 times per week for 45 minutes or more? Check all that apply.

- Fitness Club
- Walking
- Golf
- Tennis
- Snow Sports
- Water sports
- Basketball
- Racquet Ball

9. How well do you handle your job related-stress?

- Very well
- Good
- Fairly Well
- Poorly

10. You see a physician for your annual check-ups.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Only if sick
- Never