



## You're Healthier in 4 Minutes

Debbie McNeill

*"There's lots of people in this world who spend so much time watching their health that they haven't the time to enjoy it."*

– Josh Billings

### What Is Health and Does Stress Help or Hinder?

Traditionally, the image of how people should look is in the process of changing. People are changing their views of what is healthy. Ideas are changing about what "healthy" looks like and we are incorporating technology to manage our health goals.

Mr. Billings had me thinking about what people are doing to stay healthy: eating only certain types of food, or running only because it is healthy, or constantly researching what they should do to be healthier – to the point that they are not enjoying the art of healthy living, but living to be healthy.

If one were to ask a professional athlete, "How fit is fit?" the answer would likely relate to personal goals. For example, a weightlifter may cite the amount of dead weight lifted, or a biker may cite the total number of laps within a certain time frame. Thus, health is defined differently for different reasons. Health through one's intellectual, social, physical, or emotional areas is a personal challenge, and stress can be a major component of what one's understanding of health status may be.

When stress is added to the above four areas, it can act like a friend and encourage one to be better, or it can become the enemy and create more stress, which then becomes unhealthy. Either way, stress for me is the measuring device that helps me to manage my daily activities. Whether people embrace their health through diet, exercise, or some combination of diet and exercise, and regardless of the manner of diet or exercise, health is an individual process.

How I manage stress determines my health level. The stressors in my life have pushed me to define how, what, and when I accomplish tasks. The stressors are part of my intellectual, social, physical, and emotional states, which guides me through the various areas of health. Stressors can be healthy or a negative major component for individual people. For me, stress sets up the fight or flight response. People like me are so busy that stress levels can dominate on a daily basis. Daily stress impacts my four areas of emotional, physical, social, and intellectual well-being.

### Emotional Health

My emotional health is definitely a manageable area. I like to think that I am able to control many aspects of my well-being, including the emotions that create some ups and downs in my daily journeys.

When Professor Terry asked me to participate in a conference that she was organizing, I responded with an enthusiastic "yes." However, I experienced a few stressors or dilemmas. My first dilemma was what to present; after much deliberation, I chose health. This is an area that I enjoy and understand. I participate in improving my health through a variety of activities. My second dilemma was the presentation length, which was to be 5-10 minutes. My third dilemma

was arriving in Brandon at the university on time, because I had to travel from Winnipeg to Brandon. My fourth and final dilemma was that I wanted something that was fun and that everyone would be engaged with.

Therefore, the quick and simple “4 Minute Fitness” workout by Dr.Keith Jeffery was the victor in my decision. I had been introduced to this neat, compact resource as a volunteer while I was on the MTS Wellness committee. The five simple exercises would be easy for me to introduce and engage the other participants in the workshop. The second dilemma was solved because, as the title states, 4 Minute Fitness, time was on my side. The third dilemma was one that I had some control over if I could time my departure from Winnipeg. If I were to leave early from Winnipeg, I would get into Brandon on time with minutes to spare. However, my early morning run to raise awareness and donations for a “mindfulness” cause with the Women’s Mental Health Organization left me with only seconds to play with. My third stressor kicked in when I realized that I would be late. I reminded myself that Dr. Terry is very patient and understanding while I decided not to waste precious time by pulling over and phoning to let her know of my delayed arrival time. I just kept driving west.

My stress at that point was decidedly unhealthy. I considered pulling over and advising Dr. Terry to cancel my presentation, which would eliminate my stress. My flight response wanted to take control, and I could turn around and head back to Winnipeg – and that would be that.

My personal commitment to follow through from beginning to end is what kept me in the fight and on the Trans Canada Highway heading west. I finally arrived in my state of stress, and entered the room where other participants were attentive to the presenter who was completing his session. I caught the attention of the organizer, Dr. Terry, who breathed a sigh of relief (or it could have been an “it’s about time” sigh). Either way, I was sitting, taking in breaths of calm air and mentally preparing for my presentation, which was to be up next. There was a 5-minute break and then I was introduced to the group.

#### **4 Minute Fitness**

I introduced myself and explained my presentation as a form of Tai Chi but in a “Mindfulness” movement.

*Stand straight, knees slightly bent and ready to relax. Breathe deeply in and out.*

This beginning is a must for me, to settle and prepare for the remainder of the introduction to Dr. Keith Jeffery’s 4 Minute Fitness.

##### *Step One*

Breathing is a very important and powerful body cleansing that we should be doing at all times. Breathing releases the stress in stressful situations. Breathe in deeply, pushing the air out, not in and up to the lungs, but down by expanding the stomach walls and opening the blood vessels. I do this breathing exercise in time frames when waiting is the only solution, at malls and grocery stores. This can be done while sitting and waiting in traffic jams in busy time frames.

##### *Step Two*

Bend the knees as you release the breath. Feel your body. Then return to standing. This small movement can stretch the body muscles and makes us mindful of what the body is doing.

##### *Step Three*

Calm the centre of the body and mind. Slowly breathe as you move your arms (one at a time) in a circular motion and bring them down through the center of the body. This creates balance or flow of the breathing and body movement.

#### *Step Four*

This next move reminds me of a multi-tasker, going in constant motion but handling the tasks at hand. A yoga stance is used as you stretch your arms to the side of your body, slowly switching directions while breathing through each movement.

#### *Step Five*

The final exercise is a combination of bending knees and arms, then opening the arms wide as you stand tall. This movement stretches the chest muscles, which completes a brief yet fulfilling 4 Minute Fitness that can be done anywhere at any time.

This, for me, is a carry-all exercise without the yoga mats, weights, or other items that others may use to be physically healthy. This activity provides a burden-free emotional state of well-being.

### **Summation**

The participation level for those in attendance was a positive experience, and many shared positive feedback of the simple yet practical exercise. My choice of presentation offered an overall view of a simple yet engaging opportunity to try a new take on a less physically demanding energy builder.

My emotional area was settled and my overall well-being was calm. I had fulfilled my obligation and saved face with my patient Dr. Terry. All went well.

This is but one of many situations that have tested my emotional health, with stress as a contributing factor. As a parent, I have had to deal with maintaining a happy home environment with my three sons and husband. I have been fortunate to maintain a home and busy lifestyle while continuing my own personal growth with the support of my husband – which helps to release some stress.

### **Physical and Social Health**

I enjoy running, swimming, and biking. These activities push my body to the limit. At times, my physical stressors prevent me from continuing my daily activities. For me, it is a good feeling to understand what my body is capable of doing and when it is telling me to slow down. Up until four years ago, I ran for my personal pleasure of running, but I finally committed to a 10k run while working overseas in Beijing, The Great Wall Marathon. I enjoyed this unique experience both for the location of the run and the personal challenge that I wanted to create and fulfill. Since that initial 10K run, I continue to participate in other runs such as the Women's Mental Health Runs sponsored by the running room and other businesses. These runs raise public awareness of mental health, and I encourage others to participate in a worthy run. Even though it is an individual run, many others are participating in the same goals and purpose, which then provides the social health networking.

The biking component helps to build up my leg muscles for the running and gives me a good tour of the area I bike in. Swimming is a very manageable activity that I can enjoy all year round and support the local swimming and recreation services in the community. My personal goals are designed by me for flexibility and change. I do not have to compare myself to others, but do these activities because they enhance my overall well-being and reduce the stress that builds up throughout the day.

### **Intellectual Health**

Diets, to my understanding, are more of an intellectual form of growth and change. This diet change can feed off itself in a positive result by meeting the goal weight over a certain length of time. The negative effect develops into an unhealthy image that may cause a person to become seriously ill. The diet industry has many well-known artists and stars advertising the success of

following a low-calorie diet or other food-reducing diets such as Weight Watchers and Atkins, to name a couple.

My thought is that the diet part of measuring health has a purpose when used to maintain a healthy lifestyle over a long period of time, but not when used just for the quick fix that others use diets for. I believe that food is meant to be enjoyed, but the amount of the food enjoyed is the main factor. The people I have met who go on a diet do so to get skinny, not to get healthy. The diets are their way of controlling how they look, not how they feel.

My friends or family have viewed as positive the results that they have experienced from diets that curb high-calorie foods or sugars. The Weight Watcher users saw their weight decrease by following the recommended calorie intakes of food measured out in small amounts according to the person's physical make-up and other criteria. This portion control worked well for them while on the diet, but when they stopped following the rules their weight returned quickly and sometimes doubled. They were displeased with this unknown factor of the diet. I never really heard them say, "I need to be more disciplined when I go off the recommended guidelines." What I did hear was, "Oh, this diet is not good because I have gained all my weight plus more back."

Many other gimmicks are available to those who want to lose weight. The "skinny-jean pill," for example, is a little pill that induces quick weight loss when ingested, so the advertising in the media areas deliver. Does the media share with the viewers what potential health risks are involved as a result of taking the "skinny pill"? I have not truly heard of the risks of taking any type of weight loss diet pharmaceuticals. I then ask, "How can taking weight lose products be healthy for a person?" This is the type of critical thinking that I would encourage others to implement regarding any type of quick weight loss.

Diets are not a healthy way to lose weight and keep it off. I view diets more as a quick fix. The thin models in the fashion magazines show the reader the unhealthy side effects of diets. This thin image is a false image of what the real people in the larger society do not look like. Diets that really do not provide much of anything in the way of nutritional value should be recognized as unhealthy in the long run. Diets need to be about managing healthy foods over a long period of time and maintaining a healthy daily activity routine. They should not be used for short intervals of quick weight loss or as agents of yo-yo dieting that misconstrues thin as "in" images of health.

In my role as a home economics instructor, I felt it my responsibility to make sure that students understood what healthy should look like for them and others. Working with young adults, it was important that they knew what good health could be and what bad health was. The students and I went through various areas of healthy lifestyles and food choices, the pros and cons of diets, and the importance of good nutrition. We examined what they should be aware of in the way of the types of food that were healthy and affordable.

As a group, we sifted through many recipes that would be practical and tasty, yet inexpensive to prepare. Hamburger was the easiest to work with – and the most affordable. It could be prepared in many different and delicious ways that the students liked. It was the cheapest meat to buy within a healthy food range. Food does not have to be expensive to be healthy; it just needs to be healthy food. Another tasty dish was bannock, which is a staple in many of the Aboriginal diets but is made differently by different people. The students had fun working with this simple food and discovered many other ways to enjoy bannock as a taco, pizza pop, and many other inexpensive dishes with the ingredients from their kitchens.

Over the years, I have eaten healthy foods because of the direction and guidance of my mother. We ate home-cooked meals, not processed products. Her idea of healthy had been well established before I understood what healthy was. She taught me the basic rule of cooking: keep it simple, sizes small, and tasty. I passed on this healthy tradition of making my own home-prepared meals with my own children, all of whom are great cooks. From simple soups to tasty desserts, my mother made most of the dishes from scratch. She was also an avid outdoors person, who enjoyed morning and evening strolls. She was always walking here or there, and I would be running to keep up to her steady pace. It was her combination of healthy food choices and daily walks that kept me in a healthy state of well-being.

## Eating and Exercising

There was nothing more challenging than finding a system that works for me. The importance of maintaining a healthy me is as important as sifting through all the gibberish on television and in magazines that jump out at me to try this diet or this exercise or this medicine. I find it very absurd that there is such media coverage on selling “healthy” through diets, exercise programs, and pharmaceuticals. It is very difficult for the average person to make healthy decisions that will work for them as individuals.

One example of my own self-advocacy was when I was prescribed Lipitor for borderline cholesterol levels. After taking the medication for a year with no change to my cholesterol readings, I asked my doctor to take me off Lipitor. He hesitated but finally agreed, with the proviso that I had to maintain my healthy eating habits, continue my daily routine of exercises, and complete follow-up testing over the next 12-month period to see if there were level changes to my cholesterol. I picked random exercises from magazines that I liked or have wanted to try out. I looked at many different food preparations that use less salt, oils, and or fats. With the inclusion of these specific exercises and healthy food choices, I continue to maintain my cholesterol levels – without the use of Lipitor.

I choose my meals for the traditional preparation required. Since I have no microwave in my house and haven't for a number of years. I rely on the typical traditional warming up of foods and preparing dishes on the stove top and baking in the oven. Then there are salads upon salads of recipes that one can make with a variety of healthy vegetables and everyone can enjoy. Recently, there have also been more and more health programs that are more inclusive of exercising and eating healthier.

The more programs incorporate both healthy eating and exercise, the more people like my niece and her “beach body buddies” can meet their personal goals together. She has a daily exercise program that she has been doing over the past half year or so. Drinking a high-protein shake every morning and receiving a predesigned menu plan for daily food preparation are what motivate her to be successful. She also goes online with her friends and helps them through decision making and motivation skills to keep on track. This program has worked for her, and the combination of healthy eating and daily exercise has shown me and others that if one wants to be healthy it requires a positive mind and attitude to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

The combination of a little of this, a tad of that, and a bit extra of something else have been what I think to be best for me. The combination of different exercises at different times permits flexibility and keeps my body and mind alert so they do not become comfortable with the same routine. Athletes who practise the same way over the same time frame on the same program may reach a specific goal, but that approach does not provide the mind or the body with different challenges.

The food that I enjoy is, and always has been, best for me. The pasta dishes, rice pilafs, chicken dishes, and various salad greens are tasty for me and for the family and friends that sit down at the table. That is another area that to me is important: the family meals that traditionally were all sit downs around the dinner table, enjoying each other's company and chatter. This special visit with family is slowly eroding because of the constant need to go, be here, be there lifestyle, the hurry up and run to the next event or job. I have always tried to maintain the family gathering around the dinner table, if not for all meals at least for the final meal of the day, supper.

Over the years, I have incorporated various routines that include family, exercises, and healthy eating. Something that has worked for me is family walks. In the winter, outdoor activities include skiing, ice fishing, skating, and hikes. These activities are not physically demanding but intellectually enjoyed. I participate and enjoy the less stress of yoga, the stretching of the muscles and balance of the whole body. It relaxes my body and mind as Tia Chi can in the 4 Minute Fitness routine. The “mindfulness” of how my body moves and my breath flows is what I embrace.

## **Technology**

This new fad of managing one's health and stress has been stressful for me. Numerous health apps are available for those who want to monitor their every movement all day, including sleep habits. I think this is stressful and supports Josh Billings' quote that started this article. I enjoy the use of technology in my everyday living. I make it a point to be updated with using technology to maintain contact with people who have similar interests in health. Health apps, such as the one I use to track my steps or running and biking distances and time, are handy. With a tap of a button, I can see my results over a day or a month of activity. I do not use the technology to distract me from the natural sounds of environment. The natural sounds that surround me relax me. I don't understand how others can have "constant noise" interrupting their "mindfulness" of the here and now. My inclusion of technology provides me with a daily reminder that I should be more active on the days that I have been lax while doing papers for my professor. For some, apps are a necessary form of indulging in a healthier way of wellness. For me, technology is a reminder that urges me to manage my own health with a few areas of stress to motivate me to a healthier state of well-being.

## **Conclusion**

I have always been an active participant with my continued growth in my own personal health. I make it a point to maintain healthy food choices and healthy activities that will benefit me. From the yoga, biking, running, and swimming I tend to be less stressed and more relaxed after stretching, peddling, striding, and stroking those annoying stressors that tense overall well-being. The daily routine of health feeds my other areas of emotional, physical, social, and intellectual well-being through the de-stressing of what I can manage. Maintaining my health without all those media images of what health should look like provides me with the mindfulness to be aware of what health is to me. Fueling the body with diets of false health values or using over-the-counter medication is not for me. I value critical thinking and reflective learning to be more aware of the here and now mindfulness that fulfills the four areas of my healthy well-being. Recognizing stressors before they encumber me has been far more effective and manageable to activate a combination of exercise and healthy food choices that work for me. It is my personal commitment to maintain my health with less stress for a lifelong well-being of health.

My views are solely my views on my health and they have been the basis of continued health to help guide my personal growth. Less stress equals a healthier me!

## **About the Presenter**

*Debbie McNeill is passionate about learning. She anticipates completing her M.Ed. in 2017. Her education has provided opportunities to work in diverse environments. For example, while working as a principal in a blended Manitoba program in China, Debbie had the challenging yet rewarding experience of trying to blend two discrete cultures and respect the differences of each.*