I believe a healthy mind and body are crucial for a successful life. After all I’m a psychiatrist! Therefore, I am writing something that I think is most important for long-term mental health. At the end of your school years, how would you define your success? Of course, getting excellent grades and high exam scores to progress to the next stage are quite important. But would it not be great if you achieve your goals with happiness and satisfaction? Here are the five steps I believe if adopted would ensure long-term positive mental health and success:

- Regular physical exercise
- Healthy sleep
- Learning and adapting to environmental stress
- Positive social behavior
- Mental resilience

1. Regular physical exercise

Staying healthy and physically fit are arguably the most common New Year’s resolutions for many of us: (1) High interest levels in gym membership in the first two weeks of a New Year (see Facebook data) would attest this fact, (2) While some of us may succeed in their resolution by continuing the physical exercise past January (2), many of us don’t, including myself, many times! Well, do not worry, that’s OK! At the very least you get more time with your favorite gym equipment in February!

Intention to stay fit is a positive first step. But why do some of us lose interest in physical exercise after taking that first step? How do we go that extra mile and get past that inertia to successfully continue regular physical exercise? I would ask myself, did I have a real motivation to do it in the first place?

One of the successful psychological techniques in facilitating positive behavior change is motivational interviewing (3, 4). The main principle is that the motivation to change behavior is usually successful if ambivalence about that change itself is resolved. We can see the examples right in front of us when we take a moment to reflect upon our daily habits that are usually done without any second thoughts about it.
Find out if you have any unresolved ambivalence about exercise. How?
Here are the three questions that may help:

1. **Why do you want to exercise?**

   It is simply good for you! Many of us are well aware of the potential benefits of at least moderate degree of aerobic and/or weight training exercise in reducing the risks of diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular events, dementia, and many other health conditions (5). However there are not that many people pursuing exercise just for mental health benefits. The positive effects of physical exercise on brain function and mental health are becoming popular and more recognized. Regular exercise, regardless of the intensity, offers at least some modest benefit in improving mild to moderate depression (6) and preventing depression and anxiety (7). Evidence from clinical trials suggests that attention, processing speed and some aspects of the executive function improve after aerobic exercise training (8, 9). Strong correlations between fitness and academic achievement have also been observed (10). Furthermore, exercise promotes brain plasticity (11) may be by improving growth factors and protecting against inflammation (12).

   Brain plasticity is the key for learning and adapting to changes.

2. **Do you really like exercising?**

   This is straightforward; if you enjoy the experience of exercise then you are more likely to sustain for long-term effectiveness (13). What can we do to help enjoy exercising?

   - Before you engage in an exercise program, just go for a trial. Do it and get a feel for it. If you like it, continue.
   - Decide on the type of exercise you really enjoy. It doesn’t matter if it is a gym workout, running, swimming, yoga, dance or simple walking.
   - Go easy on yourself in the first few weeks. This is really important. Don’t try to set unrealistic targets and overexert yourself.
   - “Know thy self” – easier said than done! Every day when you are exercising, feel yourself (body and mind) and stop stressing yourself if exercise becomes an uncomfortable effort. For the first few weeks, the duration of exercise doesn’t matter as long as you enjoy it and feel good.
   - Progress very gradually and don’t run out of steam.
3. Is it practical for you to exercise regularly?

Most often people discontinue exercise citing practical inconvenience: weather changes, distance of gym, more academic work, stressful schedule, etc. Convenience and access may be crucial to facilitate your exercise behavior. If the balance of comfort over inconvenience is in favor of exercise, then you are more likely to continue. Remember you can exercise most of the time and at any place. Therefore make it easy for you to have fun with exercise and leave very few excuses.

Please think, question, reflect upon it and then decide for yourself. Pause.

Now, are you raring to go?

References

1. USA.gov Popular New Year's Resolutions.

Sudhakar Selvaraj, M.B.B.S. DPhil, is a psychiatrist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at UTH Health Medical School. He is available at Student Health and Counseling Services on Mondays and Thursdays. To set up an appointment with Dr. Selvaraj, please call Student Health and Counseling Services.

Shannon Weston, M.P.H., R.D., L.D., is a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator who provides nutrition counseling and education for students at Student Health and Counseling Services. To set up an appointment with Shannon, please call Student Health and Counseling Services.
**Recipe Page**

Here are a few healthy and easy recipes that you can make at home for lunch or dinner. Each recipe takes no more than 10 minutes to put together.

### Brown Rice and Black Bean Salad

*(Makes 1 serving)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredients:</th>
<th>Instructions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base of fresh greens (Spring lettuce, spinach, romaine)</td>
<td>Top your base of greens with beans, rice, vegetables of choice, avocado, cheese and dressing. Add canned tuna or cooked chicken for extra protein, if desired. You could also use salsa or hummus as a substitute or addition to avocado and cheese.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup cooked pre-cooked quinoa OR brown rice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup black beans (or any bean of choice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlimited vegetables (peppers, carrots, tomato, cucumber)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4 of an avocado</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tbsp. feta cheese (or shredded cheese of choice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tbsp. balsamic vinaigrette (or dressing of choice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Nutrition facts:** *(each serving):* 390 calories, 54g carbs, 12.5g fiber, 4g sugar, 18g protein.

### Healthy & Simple Mini Pizza’s

*(Makes 1 Serving)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredients:</th>
<th>Instructions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 whole wheat/high fiber English muffin</td>
<td>As the base, use both sides of a whole wheat English muffin, whole wheat pita, flat bread or tortilla. Top with pizza sauce. If you do not like tomato sauce try pesto or just use olive oil. Top with cheese. Get creative and add unlimited vegetables/pine of choice on top of cheese. Add protein of choice. Use microwave, oven or toaster oven to heat pizza until cheese is melted. Enjoy with a side salad of mixed greens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 Tbsp. pizza sauce/marinara sauce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ounce low-fat shredded mozzarella cheese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce of choice (onions, olives, tomatoes, peppers, spinach, pineapple)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4 cup pre-cooked chicken or 3 slices pepperoni, ham or meat substitute (optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Nutrition facts**: *(1 muffin):* 245 calories, 26g carbs, 6g fiber, 1g sugar, 26g protein.

*Nutrition facts vary depending on ingredients.*