

It's the beginning of a new year and we always hear about resolutions at this time, so, I promised myself I wouldn't write on resolutions. However...on the radio the other day, I heard statistics on health resolutions, including about 20% of all resolutions made are related to looking and/or feeling better. Part of these included being a better person, which I think is always a commendable goal. My take on this article I found on Huffington Post online isn't just about how to make goals, but more about my experience as a physician and athlete. Always, I encourage you to send me your questions or personal stories.

I was so excited to see the first recommendation in this article was to hold a plank! This is *the* fundamental core strengthening exercise I ask all patients to do, especially with low back pain, weakness, stiffness or instability. It's also one of the easiest exercises to master. If you are going to do this first thing in the morning, though, I would highly recommend performing some warm up mobilization exercises, such as cat-camel, gentle spine twists, and/or deep knee bends. Contact me if you need help with these.

To perform a correct plank, you should feel a slight contraction of the gluteus muscles, almost as if you're tucking your pelvis under, but never to the point of rounding your back. Rather, you're attempting to flatten out the natural low back curve. Start by holding this position as long as you can until the proper form starts to drop; then take a break and go again, if you're feeling sprightly! A note to protect the neck: keep your entire spine as plank-like as possible. Avoid looking up (as the picture in the article demonstrates incorrectly) and avoid looking too far down. Imagine, or actually have, a book on the floor in front of you. Once you've mastered this exercise, let me know and I can give you some great challenges.

The second and third suggestions are great and, in my opinion, should be combined. I agree that many of us set goals for health and wellness that are too vague or too far from where we are now, which only sets us up for likely defeat and quitting. When I set my goal to complete an Ironman triathlon, I started by training for and completing Olympic and Half Ironman races for several years. Crawl before you walk, and walk before you run.

Now, I agree with the idea that performance-related goals are good. So is flexibility. But, I wouldn't necessarily agree that "touch your toes" is the best advice, especially for those of you with low back issues. There are so many other, safer, ways to improve your flexibility, including the hamstrings (which is what you're primarily stretching when you touch your toes), without risking a disc herniation, muscle/tendon strain, or other issue. Ask me for some other suggestions. Please.

In #7, CAUTION! The image of stepping on a scale and selecting a specific number is misleading. Reading this suggestion in the proper context, we see it's more important to have specific goals to work toward, as suggested in #2 & #3. In my experience, when we have a concrete number goal, especially on a scale, it's too easy to be too hard on ourselves if we can't get there. Health and fitness are about so much more than the number on the scale. How much muscle tone have you gained? Are you sleeping better? Has your mood improved? How about

your cardiorespiratory (heart and lungs) health? When setting your health goals, don't be too easy or too hard on yourself.

That's the most important message I can offer on setting health and wellness goals, whenever you make them. Set goals you have to work for but make sure to celebrate the progress you make along the way. Achieving *your* optimum health is a lifelong journey and, in my opinion, one that never ends.

-Dr. Laurel Johnson, DC, LAc, Dipl. OM