

BY DALE FLETCHER, M.S.

# Faith and HEALTH connection

## *“An Introduction to Spiritual Exercises... for a Healthier Life”*

Spiritual exercise might be defined as any intentional behavior that helps one become more like God, draw closer to Him, know Him better or that follows the principles or commandments of God. In most translations of the Bible, the word godliness is used in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4:8 instead of spiritual exercise. The more we become like God, the more spiritually fit we will be and the more we will experience a full life. That's what God wants for each of us, to live a life full of joy, peace, kindness and love. This is what Jesus had in mind when he told us in John 10:10 that he came to give us a full and abundant life. In addition to having an eternal life, which we can have if we believe in Jesus, we can have a truly wonderful life on earth before we die if we live according to the principles that God lays out for us in the Bible. Part of having a full life is being healthy. When we enjoy good physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health we are better able to do the type of things that we want to do and enjoy doing. We are better able to use the gifts and talents that God has given us. Our life is more meaningful.

Much has been written over the years about spiritual exercises. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, wrote an influential book titled *Spiritual Exercises* where he wrote about his struggles to grow closer to God and of the benefit of certain behaviors. When practiced, these activities would help him grow in his faith. Scientific research is showing that when people practice certain spiritual behaviors that are associated with their faith, their health is positively impacted. Many of the behaviors that have been identified in this research can be considered spiritual exercise. Activities like praying, believing in God, attending church, socializing or fellowshiping with others of a like faith and serving others in need have all been shown to have a positive impact on health. The medical community recognizes the significance of the faith and health connection. According to a poll of doctors by the American Academy of Family Physicians, 99% of physicians say that religious beliefs can make a positive contribution to the healing process. This is, perhaps, the tip of the iceberg.

God inspired the writers of the Bible to write about his principles. God loves us and his principles were intended for our good. They were intended as a guide to help us make decisions and to know his will for our life. Read a contemporary version of Psalms 119 and you'll understand the benefits of following the guidelines set out for us by God. The writer says in verse 93 that his joy and health was restored because he followed God's principles. Verse two tells us that when we obey his principles we are happy! Throughout the Bible God reveals his principles which are forms of spiritual exercises. When we incorporate well defined principles of physical fitness into our exercise routines, we become more physically fit and healthier. A regular exercise program that includes cardiovascular activity, resistance training and flexibility exercises will help us to be more fit. When we eat a variety of foods in moderation and accompany that with physical activity, we are better able to control our weight. When we incorporate God's principles into our life, we can become more spiritually healthy, and this improved spiritual health can impact on our physical and emotional health.

*Physical exercise has some value,  
but spiritual exercise is much more  
important for it promises a reward  
in both this life and the next*

—1 Timothy 4:8 NLT

There are numerous spiritual exercises that, if practiced, will improve one's spiritual health. Perhaps the best way to understand what exercises are best for you would be to get to know God better by reading and studying his operation manual for your life, the Bible. That is a form of spiritual exercise. Just as it is important to eat foods that provide physical nourishment, it is important to nourish yourself spiritually. As you read the Bible, you will get to know God better. You will understand how he wants you to live so that you can have the terrific life he intends for you to have. As you combine this with praying, another form of spiritual exercise, you will begin to draw even closer to God. Spending quiet time alone with God will also help you grow in your faith. Some would call this exercise solitude. As you get to know God better you have the opportunity to love him more deeply. When your love grows you'll want to yield to God more frequently. This yielding, or surrendering, will draw you even closer to him. This is what happens in your relationships that are important to you. You begin to make sacrifices for the other person, out of your caring for them. As you love God more and more, you'll want to be less selfish. You'll also begin to realize and believe that submitting to his principles is in your best interest. Serving others is another form of spiritual exercise. Study after study in the research has shown that when we volunteer and give our time to others, it has a positive impact on our health.

The secret to living a full life is to have a life of love, gentleness, kindness, peace, joy, helping others and other “fruits”... including good health. The more we remain close to God, and live out of his power and direction, the more fruit we will bear. The secret to staying connected to God is to follow his principles, to obey him. The more we love God, the more we will desire to obey him. And the secret to loving God is to know him better. The disciplines and behaviors mentioned in the Bible that help us to be more God-like are forms of spiritual exercises. Practicing these spiritual exercises can help us move along this process and enable us to enjoy a more full life. When we incorporate these type exercises into our spiritual fitness program we are more likely to experience better emotional and physical health.

## *Secrets of Living an ABUNDANT LIFE*

*The secret of living is fruitbearing.*

*The secret of fruitbearing is abiding in God.*

*The secret of abiding is obeying God.*

*The secret of obeying is loving God.*

*The secret of loving is knowing God.*

Adapted from *5 Secrets of Living* by Warren W. Wiersbe

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