



“An Introduction to Spiritual Exercises ... For a Healthier Life”

*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

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



Dale Fletcher is a speaker and wellness coach who lives in Charlotte, NC. He writes and conducts workshops on the link between faith and health. Connect with him at www.faithandhealthconnection.org

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 1st 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 15th 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 a form 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.

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.



“Forgiveness... a Spiritual Exercise for a Healthier Life”

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During a Bible study I attended recently, a man spoke of how his younger brother was shot while walking home from school. “How am I supposed to forgive this man who shot my brother?” asked the man. My heart sank as I heard the pain in his voice. All I felt I could do was to approach the man afterwards and tell him I was sorry this had happened and that I would pray for him. He looked into my eyes and told me how the shooting of his brother had turned his life upside down and caused him to turn to unhealthy behaviors. I left the meeting with a heavy and burdened heart. When I returned home I dropped to my knees and said a prayer for him. Next week when I see him I intend to ask him if he’d like to talk with me about this. My hopes are that he will be able to forgive this man some day.

Forgiveness is a spiritual exercise that we must learn to practice if we are to be whole and healthy. Perhaps no other exercise can be as beneficial to our health as forgiving someone who has hurt us by their actions or by what they have said to us.

What the Research Says: When we harbor resentment and bitterness toward other people our spiritual, emotional and physical health can be impacted upon in a negative way. Anger that comes from holding on to these negative emotions can lead to health problems. In the book *Anger Kills*, the authors, Redmond and Virginia Williams refer to numerous studies that indicate that on-going anger can lead to heart disease. Don Colbert, M.D., in his book, *Deadly Emotions*, says that when chronic anger is present, the body has a steady drip of the hormone cortisol. This excessive presence of cortisol can cause the immune system to become confused and to attack itself, causing autoimmune diseases. This increased level of cortisol can also contribute to diabetes, weight gain, bone loss, impaired memory and other health problems. In *The Healing Connection*, Harold Koenig, M.D., writes “The research indicates those who can’t get past these hurt and angry feelings of spiritual discontent may soon be in big trouble in terms of their emotional and physical health.”

What the Bible Says: Because God loves us, he inspired many authors of the Bible to write about the importance of forgiveness. “Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.” (Proverbs 4:23) When our heart is troubled and weighed down with all that comes from holding resentment, it affects much of how we live life and our health. When we turn to God and ask Him to forgive

us from our sins, “He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.” (1 John 1:9) “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:31-32) Finally, Jesus was asked by Peter, one of his disciples, how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. “Seven times?” he asked. Jesus responded, “No! Seventy times seven!” (Matthew 18:21-22)

What You Can Do: If you know of someone who is still holding on to resentment and anger from a past hurt, love them. Pray for them and ask if you can pray with them. Ask them if they’d like to talk with you about their circumstances. If you are carrying unforgiveness in your heart, know that it is a process to get rid of any resentment that may be there. It is an act of your will to forgive. You must make a conscious choice to pardon someone who has offended you. That’s where it begins. When you are ready, consider getting down on your knees and telling God that you have made the choice to forgive. Cry out to Him and ask Him to help mend your heart. Get to know God better by spending time with Him. Experience His love and receive His forgiveness for your sins. If you are unable to do this on your own, ask a close friend, a pastor or another professional to help support you as you walk through this healing process.

Recognize that you are really hurting yourself when you choose not to forgive. And you are not able to be all that God intends you to be when you continue to harbor resentment and bitterness. Your emotional, spiritual and physical health will continue to be affected. This will, in turn, impact on how you’re able to use the special gifts that God has given you to make a difference in this world. Your life will not be as full and abundant as God wants it to be.

We all will experience major hurts in our lives. This short article can only begin to address this sensitive and often painful issue. My hope is that you’ll take time to reflect on whether you could be healthier by forgiving someone who has hurt you or by receiving the forgiveness that God has for you. It’s only when we rely on God’s unending love and the strength that he gives us that our hearts can begin to heal in a genuine way through forgiveness.