

# Getting and trying to stay fit

SPORT

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For lessons on how to age well, we could do worse than turn to Richard Morgan. At 93, the Irishman is a four-time world champion in indoor rowing, with the aerobic engine of a healthy 30- or 40-year-old and the body-fat percentage of a whippet. He's also the subject of a new case study, published last month in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*, that looked at his training, diet and physiology.

Its results suggest that, in many ways, he's an exemplar of fit, healthy ageing; a nonagenarian with the heart, muscles and lungs of someone less than half his age. But in other ways, he's ordinary: a onetime baker and battery maker with creaky knees who didn't take up regular exercise until he was in his 70s and who still trains mostly in his backyard shed.

Even though his fitness routine began later in life, he has now rowed the equivalent of almost 10 times around the globe and has won four world championships. So, what, the researchers wondered, did his late-life exercise do for his aging body?

As this new year gets into its stride, and Ash Wednesday falls on 14th February, I'd like to share some basic tips and resources for how to maintain your healthy lifestyle across your PIES: the physical, intellectual emotional and spiritual dimensions of your life.

### 1. Measure and watch your weight.

Keeping track of your body weight on at least a weekly basis will help you see what you're losing and/or what you're gaining. Recently, aged 84 and a half, I checked that my weight. It is the same as it was when – aged 20 – I rowed for Imperial College

### 2. Limit unhealthy foods and eat healthy meals

Do not forget to eat breakfast and choose a nutritious meal with more protein and fibre and less fat, sugar, and calories. I refuse to snack between meals and use my 'double two three' diet to ward off weight gain. Typically, every two out of three days, I eat two out of three meals: just breakfast and an evening meal. Given my age, it works for me. Maybe not for you.

### 3. Take multivitamin supplements

These make sure you have sufficient levels of nutrients, especially when you do not have a variety of vegetables and fruits at home. Many micronutrients are vital to your immune system, including vitamins A, B6, B12, C, D, and E, as well as zinc, iron,



copper, selenium, and magnesium.

In some cases, high doses of vitamins can be bad for your health. Thanks to my god-daughter Kare, I discovered that Turmeric Curcumin and Omega 3 oil together eliminated the rheumatism in both my hands that, due to excoriating pain, had been incapable being shaken. Now they are both fine.

### 4. Drink plenty of water

Having had the undiluted pain of two kidney stones – both on my left side – I now drink plenty of water and have cut out sugared beverages.

### 5. Exercise regularly and be active

I walk up and down escalators and up to four flights of stairs, and aim to do 10,000 steps a day.

How is your exercise? As soon as the alarm wakes me up, I flip back the duvet and while massaging my face, bring up my knees as close to my chest as possible, a dozen times. Then I lift up my legs and at 45 degrees hold them up for 20 seconds. On my way to the bathroom, I pray: 'Dear Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.'

Before my push-ups and after my squats, I carry out a stretching routine.

Every morning – Sundays being a day of rest – I brace myself for a manageable ordeal. I alternate proper push-ups – no knees on the floor! – and full squats. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 86 push ups, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays 86 squats. The 86 is due to my time on earth. 84 and half years breathing + nine months in my mother's womb, rounded off to the nearest higher number = 86.

The squats are easier. Using my electric shaver, I can shave during the first 60 squats. Getting back up, I feel a glow of satisfaction as I drink a glass of water prior to climbing into the shower.

Thanks to the Canadian Air force 5X plan, I do not need to go to the gym or even use weights to keep my

arms toned.

Ever since I watched him on our neighbour's tiny TV screen winning the 1948 London Olympics 10,000 metres, Emil Zatopek has been my role model. He know how to push himself to the limit. Four years later, at the Helsinki Games, he won the 5,000, 10,000 meters and the marathon – a race he had never run before. A great athlete from my country of birth.

### 6. Reduce sitting and screen time

Exercise can't immunise you from your sedentary time. Even people who exercise regularly could be at increased risk for diabetes, heart disease and stroke if they spend lots of time sitting behind computers. Practically speaking, you could consider taking breaks from sedentary time, such as walking around the office/room a couple of times in a day. You might be lucky enough to have to walk to the printer in your office a few times a day!

### 7. Get enough good sleep.

Remember that sleep is not a waste of time. Sleep renews the cells in our body. There is a very strong connection between sleep quality and quantity and not only your immune system but risks of dementia. You can keep your immune system functioning properly by getting seven to eight hours of sleep each night.

### 8. Go easy on alcohol

Try – typically (apart, perhaps, from high days and birthdays) – staying sober. Don't forget that those alcohol calories tend to add up quickly. As the adverts state, 'Alcohol should always be consumed in moderation.'

### 9. Keep using your mind.

To delay – or maybe even avoid – dementia, I read, write, give talks and discuss things with my acquaintances, colleagues, allies-in-

life and friends.

### 10. Find ways to manage your emotions.

It is common for people to have feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, and uncertainty during the current tumultuous state of the world. There is an old saying: 'Worry gets you nowhere at all' – but it does accelerate your ageing.

### 11. Keep in touch with those who love you.

Thanks to my 54 years of priesthood, I am an honorary member of a number of families and keep in touch with parents, children and grandchildren.

### 12. Stay in touch with God.

I tell my best friend Yesh – Jesus Christ – what I think and feel as I journey on through each day. With him in my heart and mind life is so much finer – and worry wanders off into the distance.

The PIES are mutually, very tightly interactive. Physical fitness enables us to think more clearly, love more dearly and sense more closely the presence of God. It is God's presence in my body that motivates me to keep on keeping on in doing my best to stay fit.

Why not use this Lent to see if you can get fit or stay fitter? Remember my piece on Vifoil in the 19th January *Universe*? Every weekday's morning, there are within me, two voices: the higher and lower Vlad. The tiresome lower says, "You need a rest, you are tired. Skip the exercise." The higher says, "don't be a feeble wimp. Get that blood racing through your brain to reduce the chance of dementia! Be like Zatopek. Be proud. Do it for God." And so I do. As St Irenaeus hinted, the glory of God is a human fully alive.

Motivation is vital. I owe it to God to look after the gift of my body. I have Zatopek. I have my

pride so when asked, "Are you still on those 86?" I can delight in saying "Yes!"

Having experienced how Churchill teamed up with his enemy Stalin to beat their mutual enemy Hitler, I use my vices to fight each other. Pride beats sloth. Vanity fights gluttony. Confessions in the sacrament of Reconciliation strengthen and motivate virtues. Used cunningly, two negatives can produce a positive.

The key to keeping fit is continuity. The key to becoming fit is to start from where you are and build up the number of exercises, gradually. You might manage a half squat or a kneeling push up. The next week a full one, then two and then? As many as you feel are right for you. Remember "you can always do one more."

The new 40s are the old 20s. I looked up the 2021 Olympics. There, in basketball, was Luis Scola of Argentine 42; in beach volleyball, Jake Gibb of USA, 45; in skateboarding, Rune Glifberg of Denmark, 46; and in table tennis, Xia Lian Ni, 58, of Luxembourg .

India's Rohan Bopanna is 43 and is now the world's oldest tennis number one. He plays doubles with Australia's Matthew Ebden and recently won the 2024 Australian Open title. He puts his fitness down to three, weekly, 90 minutes sessions of Iyengar Yoga which, as you may know, uses blocks and ropes to strengthen, in his case, the muscles around the knees.

You may have read how, on 10th September 2023, Bill Cooksey walked the half marathon route from Newcastle to South Shields, accompanied by two friends. A RAF veteran he became the oldest person to complete the Great North Run. He is 102. He raised almost £2,000 to support his local NHS Trust charity in the process.

Sir Brendan Foster said despite over one million finishers over the years, Mr Cooksey was not only the oldest but also "the most inspirational." "To have met him a few times was a privilege," the event's founder said.

To stay as healthy as you can, avoid or at least reduce emotional stress. Over my 50 years in the priesthood, I have buried all too many "physically fit" – typically men – whose hearts gave out due to stresses generated at work, even at home. That is where prayer is so helpful to physical fitness. I loved Basil Hume's motto *Pax inter spinas*. 'Spinias' being either pricks or thorns.

So, dear reader, to do all you can to stay as fit as you can be. Keep a close eye on your NERP: nutrition, exercise, rest and prayer.

Remember: "If you don't use it, you lose it."

May this Lent help you to embark on becoming fitter across all those PIES.