

Unhealthy Does Not Happen Overnight:



BUILDING HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE HABITS

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One gluttonous meal will not cause excessive weight gain or lead to cholesterol problems. These negative consequences are often a product of poor dietary decisions sustained over time. Due to the nature of the work, firefighters and other tactical athletes cannot afford to let unhealthy habits accumulate. It is imperative that they make changes to improve overall wellbeing and job performance before those missteps cause irreversible damage.

Intentionally building strong habits that focus on optimizing performance can lead to major, sustainable improvements. In jobs that demand a constant state of readiness, tactical athletes must be mentally and physically prepared to meet any situation. As a result, it is crucial that firefighters make an effort to foster healthy habits in order to mitigate job-related health risks and optimize performance.

Small changes

Something as routine as eating a bagel every morning and drinking a regular soda each afternoon can add up to 540 extra calories a day. This can result in gaining one pound over the course of a week, or about 50 extra pounds in a year. In order to prevent that outcome, a redirection must occur.

Change is hard. Start small. For example, replace the bagel with a cup of fruit or even an open-face sandwich using only half the bagel. Swap out the afternoon soda with seltzer. Begin with just a few days a week if doing it daily seems daunting. These little adjustments now can save you big calories later and lead to substantial changes in the future. And once you begin to see success after making a minor adjustment, you will be more encouraged and motivated to continue adding new ones.

Build a healthy habit

Once you've started making small changes, focus on making them stick. A first step can be to reframe your thinking regarding change. When it comes to diet, many people think about what foods they need to restrict from their daily intake. Instead, see it as an opportunity to get healthier and improve your functionality as a firefighter.

As tactical athletes, we must create habits that promote optimal mental and physical performance daily. Instead of attempting to cut habits out, replace them with new habits that align with your goals at work and in your everyday life. Improve hydration by placing a water bottle on your bedside table so it is already there for you to drink before you get out of bed. If your aim is to improve mobility, put a foam roller in front of the TV so you cannot avoid it before sitting down to watch your favorite show.

A holistic approach

A holistic approach targeting all pillars of performance — nutrition, conditioning, and mental performance — will lead to optimal results.

Proper nutrition creates the foundation for performance. Eating well provides the fuel necessary to maximize training efforts and sustain long days on the fireground. Start with a small change, such as trying a new vegetable with your dinner, and when this becomes habitual, add another positive change to your nutrition plan. These little changes will add up and lead to health improvements.

As a tactical athlete, there are countless job-related demands that require physical strength and endurance. However, with busy lives on and off the job, conditioning can be pushed aside. It is something small that can have major health consequences. Rebuild the habit of working out in incremental steps.

The final component of a holistic approach to habit-formation is mental performance. This includes a broad range of skills from breathing to attention control. Mental performance skills require dedicated practice to make them strong habits that you default to in times of stress. For instance, practice one minute a day of deep breathing – an inhale of five counts and exhale of seven counts – and over time work up to a 15-minute session. Once you feel the benefits, you will start to use the technique in high-stress situations to help you regain focus and improve your physiological response to stress.

Conclusion

As you gradually create healthy habits, you will begin to feel the positive impact on your overall health and performance. Making positive changes to your nutrition, conditioning, and mental performance will help you maximize performance, attain goals, and sustain long-term health and wellness. This can be life-saving for you and those you serve and protect daily. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alison Levy is the Marketing Director for O2X Human Performance. O2X Human Performance provides comprehensive, science-backed training and education so tactical athletes can finish their careers as strong as they started. The results driven O2X EAT SWEAT THRIVE curriculum encompasses all areas of human performance: nutrition, conditioning, sleep, stress management, and resilience. Learn more at www.O2X.com

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