

*when the going
gets tough,*

keep doing *pilates!*

the last thing we should do when life goes
to hell in a handbasket is stop exercising

BY SUZANNE GERBER

here's a news flash: Times are tough, really tough. And when we are faced with extreme stress, we tend to have one of three reactions: We go into denial, we panic, or we take bold survivor action. Denial usually results in no action at all—at least not until the situation becomes so dire that we are forced to act. But by then we are usually so worn out that we take the path of least resistance, and in the end we've waited so long that we can't do much to save ourselves.

Panic is equally self-defeating, because when we shift into a panicked state, our vision narrows (literally and figuratively), and we think small instead of expansively—in a way that will actually ensure our long-term well-being. When we panic, we grab for the easiest-sounding solutions, seeing health-sustaining necessities as luxuries and giving them up in the interest of short-term survival. So to save money we cut

back on some of our most important expenditures: healthy food, personal training and soul-restoring vacations. Yet the stress remains, and we turn to less-healthy ways to try to mollify it: We eat expensive prepared foods (or fat-laden fast food), smoke cigarettes, drink premium hooch and hit the mall for a dose of retail therapy.

That's not all bad—we've worked hard for decades and have earned a comfortable lifestyle. But the collective we need a shift in our relationship to and perception of money—and many of us need a radical makeover when it comes to setting priorities. As the expression goes, the best things in life aren't things. When affluent people get ill, invariably they all say the same thing: They'd happily trade all their wealth for health. And yet, tragically, by the time they've fallen gravely ill, it's often too late. All the money in the world can't save them. All the "if

onlys" won't return them to health.

Why is it that we tend to wait so long to make these realizations? Shouldn't we be planning ahead now and spending our money wisely to preserve our precious health rather than wait for disease, dysfunction or disintegration to strike?

These days, thanks to a deeper understanding of the mind-body connection, we don't have to be an MD or a holistic healer to know the fundamentals of a long and healthy life. Here they are, in one easily digested list: a balanced diet favoring locally and seasonally grown organic whole foods; regular, vigorous exercise; the avoidance of toxic elements (including carcinogenic chemicals, cigarette smoke, excessive sun exposure and toxic people); close social connections; and a frequently indulged passion for something.

The top cardiologists and oncologists I have interviewed over the years all

agree that “luck” and “bad genes” are responsible for somewhere between 10 and 25 percent of our health, and that the above factors account for the rest. Good food costs money (unless you grow your own, and then it costs time *and* money), and it requires effort to purchase and prepare. But it’s absolutely the most fundamental building block of good health. Second to that, and we’re talking a very close second, is regular exercise—that is, not of the weekend-warrior variety. The best studies show that the optimum exercise regimen for a healthy person is an hour a day. This can include walking, running, gardening, cycling, weight-lifting, swimming, Pilates ... even vacuuming counts. And if there’s one thing we all know intuitively, it’s that the last thing we should do when everything else is going to hell in a handbasket is to stop exercising.

I’m not an ostrich, and I fully understand that with an economic downturn come other pressures: to work longer hours, and to personally do more cleaning, home repair, baby-sitting and cooking. I further realize that stress also leads to fear, which leads to panic and causes us to make nearsighted decisions. But that’s the fringe benefit of exercise: Not only is the movement aspect beneficial for our bodies and our brain function, but the neurochemicals that are produced through robust exercise literally fight stress and make us feel better about, well, everything. And staying toned, fit and limber always feels better than being weak, sick and bloated. Plus it puts us in a better frame of mind to deal with adversity.

If you think you can’t afford your Pilates sessions, I invite you do the good kind of creative accounting. For one week, keep a diary of every nickel you spend, down to your lattes, taxis, fancy clothes, big tips, facials, haircuts

(not to mention highlights) and salad bars. If you cut back on 50 percent of this, you’ll probably have enough for a weekly private session. Just commit to giving up your designer coffee, or don’t buy shoes till fall, or walk or cycle instead of driving or cabbing it. You might be shocked how quickly those incidentals add up.

I wouldn’t be writing this, and you probably wouldn’t be reading this, if we didn’t already believe that exercise is vital to our well-being. And yet I am hearing reports from all over the country that Pilates business is down. Whether we are the teachers or the students, it’s important to remember that we’re all in this together; we have a synergistic relationship that helps one another thrive. There’s nothing like a great Pilates instructor, and to get great, a person has to invest a great deal of time and money learning the craft. Our instructors have made many sacrifices so they can help us improve our lives. We the students are their sole means of support—financially and psychologically—and thus we have a role in their well-being too.

In his classic work *Return to Health*, Joseph Pilates quotes the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who said, “To neglect one’s body for any other advantage in life is the greatest of follies.” Survivors instinctively know to take that advice to heart, and to the mat, on a daily basis.

Suzanne Gerber is the editor in chief of ‘Pilates Style.’

simplest formula for good health

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