

case study: my health journey to the Life Fitness Personal Trainers to Watch Competition

Personal trainers and practitioners are not superhuman – we must take care of ourselves as we would counsel our clients. **Charlene Hutsebaut** shares her health journey as she prepared for the 2015 Life Fitness Top 10 Personal Trainers to Watch Competition in Barcelona. Viral meningitis and a family tragedy play major parts in her need to adjust her lifestyle and self-care in the run up.

Exhausted again, I drag myself to the tube station for my evening personal training (PT) clients, thinking; “no, you shouldn’t have those again”, “how can you need them again today?”, “you are not leading by example”, “you don’t need that hit this afternoon”, “who is going to take you seriously?”, “what kind of personal trainer are you?” I was so tired that I could have curled up in a ball right there on the pavement and my sugar craving for M&Ms was so strong that I could have bitten off my own hand. This had become a daily ritual of self-loathing and a struggle to keep moving. My body didn’t feel like my own, it wasn’t what it used to be, my clothes didn’t fit, I was padded around my middle and I was on the edge of burnout, wondering whose body this was? That was my state of mind when I found out that I was chosen as one of the Top 10 in the Life Fitness Personal Trainers to Watch Competition. It was a turning point that I badly needed after a challenging five year period.

I am not an elite athlete, but some weeks my job makes me feel like I am training as one. At the time of being nominated, I was a 44-year old educated, seasoned health and fitness career woman. I knew that my body was different to 5-10 years previously: my energy was in the basement and I had gained unexpected weight after having been a steady consistent number since I was a teenager.

My overwhelming thought after being nominated was an emotional one: “I don’t want to make a fool of myself!” This was my motivating anchor for the next six weeks. I wanted to be taken seriously at



the competition, allow the old me to shine through and to be a strong example of health, vitality and energy. I collaborated with Ian Craig on best nutritional and lifestyle practices for a short term goal like mine. This was not a fitness figures competition, but one focusing on our strengths as educators and motivators. I wanted to feel my best on the day of the competition.

Here are the two points that we needed to address in my recent health and lifestyle history that had led to this frustrated unknown me:

Viral Meningitis

In May 2010, when I was 39, I ended up in hospital for seven days, having been diagnosed with viral meningitis. A shocking

experience with no explanation as to why it occurred, just a calm, informed and gentle reminder by the doctors when I was released to take it easy and not go back to work too soon. No recovery strategies were offered, just a follow up appointment with my GP who offered no real guidance either. I was so exhausted and shocked that self-care was the furthest from my mind. The following two years were a challenging test of my will and knowledge of myself. I wanted to get back to working out quickly as any lover of movement would, but in the early days when I tried to run or even do long walks, I found that I couldn’t – my body felt like lead very quickly. I guess I just expected to bounce back as if nothing had happened. I would never have expected a client to do this, but because “I



THE SUPPLEMENTS PROTOCOL

- **The Multi** – a specialised multi-vitamin and mineral with a focus on blood sugar control (allowing me to train with more steady energy and improved insulin control)
- **Adrenal support** – an adaptogenic product for energy and training focus and also to take some pressure off my thyroid gland
- **Thyroid support** – a support for metabolism, energy and weight management
- **Liquorice** – reduces the breakdown of cortisol, so assists morning energy levels during adrenal fatigue

am an expert”, I was supposed to snap back immediately. The pressure I put on myself to ‘be perfect’ leaked out in other ways...I needed props, like my old friends sugar and alcohol, to sustain me: it was a vicious, discouraging cycle.

It took until the following January to do a gentle 20 minute walk/jog and to this day, I still don’t jog a full twenty minutes. I saved my precious energy for client sessions and even then, seeing two clients each morning would completely floor me. I was napping a lot in those days and having been a steady body weight and shape until this point in my life, I was shocked when I gained two stone in weight. Lack of my normal movement was a key factor.

Emotional trauma

After finally having gotten some of my mojo back post-meningitis, in 2013 my older brother died of a sudden cardiac arrest in Canada. His death was traumatic, unexpected and unbelievable. I had to navigate my own grief and at the same time, try to be a support to my devastated family while living overseas. I remember going through months of wondering why I did my job if everyone dies anyways. A daily glass or two of wine became a part of my sugar addiction.

Two years later, when I was nominated to the Top 10 finalists in the Life Fitness Competition, I was still feeling like I was living in an alien body, saving my valuable energy

for my client sessions and leaving nothing for myself. Being included in this exclusive group of PTs was such an honour and privilege – deep down I knew I belonged there because of my knowledge and experience, but I still felt a bit of a fraud because I wasn’t caring for myself as I would guide a client to care for themselves. I wanted to hit the competition date feeling full of power and vitality and continue my life afterwards with a renewed energy that I had previously lost. I finally realised that I needed to reach out for support so I could rediscover my energy and body.

The competition nutritional preparation

Ian and I met via Skype and went through my plan for the next six to seven weeks. Having

known each other as friends and colleagues, there were habits we knew I needed to address. Nutritionally, we felt that a short term break from possible inflammatory and hormone imbalancing items such as dairy, gluten, sugar and alcohol would benefit me in many ways. I knew what I needed to do, I just needed to bridge the gap from knowing to doing. This was more about the behavioural changes.

I have a long and complex relationship with sugar. My colleagues who have worked with me in London over the years probably remember me walking into studios first thing in the morning with a Starbucks Mocha in hand – gosh, a caffeine and sugar buzz! My poor clients having to listen to my non-stop sugar fuelled rambles on workouts, food, life and the like. I can now look back on my teenage years and twenties and clearly see an ‘addiction’ to sugar, whether that was via food or alcohol.

My first ten days off sugar and alcohol were challenging indeed – my usual 5pm craving for the M&Ms or glass of wine still occurred, so I had to sit with it until it eventually passed. In some of these moments, I would pick up my dumbbells at home and perform a few sets of movements so that my body and mind were occupied. I have had success with this strategy with clients in the past.

My negative feeling, “I don’t want to make a fool of myself” popped up regularly, but I was able to shift it to a positive feeling, visualising how I wanted to perform on the

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- day in Barcelona. I found that this was a powerful driving force in staying on a healthy path. Ex-addictions therapist Lou Lebentz makes a great point about this type of behavioural change: “making the future reality more valuable than the current moment by asking ourselves ‘what will you feel if you do this (lose weight, stop overeating, decrease alcohol etc)?’, can set a vivid and positive future.” This encourages use of our frontal lobe which is thought to represent emotion and reward in decision making.

My exercise

The exercise was generally the easy part for me. If I had a day when I didn't feel like getting to the gym, I would stir up the thought, “I don't want to make a fool of myself.” This was my coaching anchor tool. As soon as the words passed through my mind, it would push me into positive action. Once in the gym, I would do around 20-30 minutes of cardio exercise at 50-70 per cent max heart rate. Then I would do 20-30 minutes of weight training, mixing body weight training, machines and dumbbells. I followed a protocol of high reps (12-16) with challenging weights. These gym workouts were combined with walking between 10,000-15,000 steps daily.

My DNA fitness tests from a few years previous had shown that I tend towards being better at endurance. Reflecting on my fitness history, I could see patterns of success when I was active for longer periods; whether that would be cardiovascular exercise, or resistance training with an endurance approach.

Recovery time

We all know the importance of proper periodisation for workout schedules, but how many of us factor this downtime into our work/personal lives? I certainly wasn't doing this in the lead up to my viral meningitis diagnosis. I have seen so many personal trainers pushing themselves to their limits, some working with clients for 8-12 hours per day on top of their own personal workouts. This can either lead to burn out, injury, illness, or leaving our profession all together – I've seen every scenario.

My recovery from viral meningitis has taught me a lot about proper, worthwhile restoration time. Although it was forced on me during that period, it is something that I try to include each day even now. This includes anything from reading a book, sitting quietly looking at the skyline, a restorative walk in a London park, or cooking, which for me is very relaxing. I allow for 10-20 minutes per day and on the weekends, I do my best to have several hours away from the computer. Funnily enough, relaxing is sometimes more challenging than going out for a movement session. Within this



“NOTICE, ASK FOR HELP, EDUCATE, PLAN, AND TAKE ACTION.”

concept, I also include slight adjustments to my work schedule, only having two 4:30am starts per week, whereas I used to do four.

The competition

What an exciting and nerve wracking day we had in Barcelona! I was pleasantly surprised by the down-to-earth nature of the other nine finalists; all real, dedicated people, making a positive impact to their clients' lives. Running on overdrive most of the day, I was pleased that my focus and concentration were excellent for the group teaching, client session/planning and story sharing circle. The only element that I struggled with was the morning workout – I would have liked to have been lighter in my body so that I'd felt fitter during this fun, challenging session. I know that in the years prior to viral meningitis that this part would have been straight forward.

Conclusions and lessons

As technically expected, my body didn't change much in the first five weeks of intervention. My body weight shifted in small increments and during week six (competition week), my girth measurements started coming in. My journey lasted well beyond the competition, though, because I had needed to make these positive changes long term. At week nine, I had lost nine kilos and felt much lighter.

Our bodies change after illness and with age. Learning where we are in our life cycle, along with specifics of whatever illness we may have had, is essential to moving forward and enjoying our life. Acknowledge where you are and mesh it with strategies on how to be the best you at any age. Consistency and balance of self-care are essential as we get older to achieve sustainable energy and health.

After much reading and research, I now

realise that one of the reasons I contracted viral meningitis may have been a weakened immune system linked to high levels of stress and over-work at the time of contraction. If I had done tests on nutrient deficiency and adrenal and thyroid fatigue, plus followed an anti-inflammatory food approach and taken probiotics at the time, I feel that I would have been in a healthier place when I was nominated for the competition five years later – in other words, I should have asked for help sooner.

It has been a thought provoking journey and sometimes I still feel that my body isn't my own, but I am working on it, day by day. I am not superhuman, but I am trying to be the hero in my own story. **fsn**

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hours and 24 years of experience in the fitness industry. Charlene personal trains in London at the St Pancras Hotel, delivers online fitness programmes, creates corporate health initiatives to engage employees and is a sought after inspirational speaker. In 2015, Charlene was the only UK woman to make the Top 10 Finalists in the Life Fitness Personal Trainers to Watch Competition. She also won a Mayor of London Volunteers Award for getting her community moving. She has been featured in CAM mag, What Doctor's Don't Tell You, The De-Stress Effect and How to Hygge.

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