

Battling with the Online Lifestyle: How to Improve Your Habits and Well-Being

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SPEAKERS

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Brian Chen 00:09

Quarantine. Week five. The entire house is silent as you watch the last lecture that you missed. This one wasn't even an asynchronous one. You had just caught up with those before you had started catching up on the live recordings. There's this haze, this seems to have sealed itself into your skull, blurring all the thoughts that you try to develop. There's an acute pinching right between your upper thigh and hips, that's been there since week two. Your back keels over as your shoulders slump forward, towards the dim screen on your laptop, where stagnant PowerPoint slides sit as the lecture goes on. Your phone is in your hand. It's 1:30am already? You swear it was just seconds ago when you'd just finished eating dinner. Or did you eat dinner today? You know you ate something today, but you can't really remember. You're laying back in bed, phone raised above your face as a video suddenly starts playing. Your eyes are glued to the screen as your favorite show's theme song starts to play. It floods out into the sounds of the room. Wait, weren't you just watching a lecture or something? Okay, fine. Just one episode. Your eyes feel heavy and dry. Strained from staring at your laptop for the entire day. You know that staring at a brightly lit phone isn't helping either, but you make an exception, because it's not an hour-long PowerPoint lecture. And besides, don't you get a break? At some point you doze off. But it doesn't really matter. Because by the time that you open your eyes, you will be back on that dreaded computer, the same uncomfortable chair and the cycle drags on.

Brian Chen 02:12

This is Triton Tools and Tidbits. I'm Brian Chen. Join me on this journey as we talk to UCSD recreational experts about improving our well-being through strong, sustainable habits. I have a confession to make listeners. This quarter hasn't been the best for me. I feel it's a combination of being in my parents' house - a place that I associate with long, carefree summer days - mixed with the general increase in stress due to the current times, which has left me feeling, well, kind of hopeless. It's just been really difficult to focus on my academic life, when my home life and family life are right at my room's doorway. I spoke to several of my friends, many of them students reporting from whatever they call this hybrid space between a home and a classroom. They all reported feeling similar struggles that I was facing, some of them reporting feeling hazy in the mind, having sporadic sleep schedules, and

tension from being sat at a computer all day. But it wasn't all bad. All of them were finding small things that they could do to improve their day-to-day lives, like taking small routine breaks, assessing their mindsets, or even just getting dressed in the mornings. In hearing this, I decided to start thinking about what I could do to overall improve my personal well-being and spring back from the bad habits of this quarter.

Brian Chen 03:45

I spoke to Alexia and Erin, both of whom worked for UCSD Recreation. Alexia is the Director of Fitlife, a program that incorporates elements related to fitness and wellness, while Erin is the recreation's Registered Dietitian, and also a Clinical Dietitian at UC San Diego health. I have to ask you guys, how are you guys staying healthy right now during shelter-in-place?

Alexia Cervantes 04:08

I'll start. I love my schedule. I know we - even before the podcast - we were talking a little bit about our schedules, and things like that. But the one thing that I have found that's been really helpful for me is to just pretty much stay on the same schedule that I had before, as far as sleep. So, you know, sleep is such an important element to health. So going to bed at the same time, waking up roughly... And I've actually been sleeping a little bit longer, because I don't feel that urgency to get up and have to start moving right away, because I don't have to commute. So, I have been getting a little bit more sleep. I feel great. You know, this is one thing - man, I don't know when this whole, you know, pandemic is over, I've got to figure out how to actually keep a little - just that extra half an hour has made such a big difference. But keeping that good sleep going. I get up every day and I start with movement. So, I start with something. I start with either a yoga practice or I go for a walk, or I just I get some bands and, you know it helps. I do have some equipment at home. So, I'll get up and I'll just do a little movement, you know, and then I get to work. I eat, you know, I eat plant-based, so I'm eating lots of - I'm cooking at home more. So, I think I'm eating better. And, then at the end of the day, I'm very good about really shutting my computers down. So, like, when I am done working, I close my computers. I get off the screen. I try to practice, even throughout the day, not looking at the screens, and I look out at the trees. During the day I practice the Get Up Tritons. So, we get our Get Up Tritons emails three times a day. And I get up at least one time during the day. And I do one of those Get Up Tritons videos. And then I exercise a little bit in the afternoon as well. And then the last little piece is just the social connection. I have regular lunch, or after-work meetings with some of my family, with my kids, who are grown up, and my sister, and you know - and we have a work happy hour. So, I just try to stay connected with folks. Yeah, so that's my recipe.

Brian Chen 06:16

What about you Erin?

Erin Kukura 06:18

It's gonna sound really similar to Alexia.

Alexia Cervantes 06:21

This is why we work so well together.

Erin Kukura 06:22

I know we are very similar. So yeah, kind of same thing is, that schedule, that routine. I think, you know, we're all kind of creatures of habit. And so, for me it's helpful to kind of get that same routine in. And also, for me, I personally do better in the morning - like I'm most productive earlier. So, I try to use that to my advantage, like in terms of trying to schedule certain things in my day. But yeah, kind of the first thing we do is we'll get up, and my husband and I will take the dog for a walk. So, it's kind of just nice to have that time together and getting outside, getting that movement. And then coming back, eating breakfast. I'm a dietitian. So definitely try to focus on those balanced meals. I tend to cook a lot already, but it's been nice to have more time to cook. And just for myself - having consistent energy during the day is really, I think, reflective of sleep. But then also like what you're eating and how often you're eating- it's really common for people to not eat, right, because they're so focused on work or what they have to do. And that time can just go by. So, kind of making those breaks in the day to eat. And then with that I'll go eat outside, like take a break, you know, get that natural sunlight in - super great. And then like Alexia too, you know, getting some movement in. So, if I can kind of carve something in that afternoon, once the workday is over of going for a bike ride, you know, doing a yoga practice outside, anything where I can move and then try to get outside - it's just been - so immensely grateful. And then also that social piece, so Zoom happy hours. And then my husband and I have kind of started to - after dinner - walk in our neighborhood as well. So, it's been kind of nice, just spending that quality time. Just kind of winding down and getting some more fresh air is really nice. So, think, kind of just incorporating those foundations. Even with all of the chaos sometimes. And just the building that structure, within as much, I think is really essential.

Erin Kukura 07:25

In both of their responses, there seemed to be four main categories that each of them were focused on satisfying. Their sleep, their food, their movement, and their socializing. This reminded me of something that Tiffany O'Meara, a CAPS Counseling Psychologist, had spoken about in episode two. She said that when she first sits down with a patient, the first thing that she checks on is how they're sleeping, eating, and moving.

Alexia Cervantes 09:10

I mean, students - you guys are very specific demographic, but you're human. We're all humans. And those are the primary things that all humans need, right? Humans need sleep, they need food, they need to move, and they need to socialize. So absolutely, I would say that those are the four pillars for leading a good life. The specificity of the kinds of things that you should eat, or the kind of movements that you should do, it's really going to depend on the person because -- Brian, what you would do as far as your diet and your movement is going to be different than what I do, you know what I mean? And what I really believe in is that we all just need to find the things that speak to us. So, whether that is somebody who wants to lift heavy weights and push heavy things, or somebody who would rather go cardio dance, and go move their hips around and put their arms up in the air. But you know what, they're both just as valid to me. I don't really care what you do as long as you're moving.

Brian Chen 10:19

So, if I want to improve my well-being, it seems that moving towards the direction of these four pillars is key. But how do you actually go about pursuing these results? Erin mentioned it earlier. If we're going to look at behavior, we have to talk about habits.

Erin Kukura 10:34

What I said early on is that we are the culmination of our habits. So, what it is that we do day-in and day-out is going to give us a certain result. You can imagine, if we were going to talk about health habits - somebody who eats cheeseburgers, smokes, drinks a lot in the course of [a] year, may not see a whole lot of change in their health, or their health markers, like their blood pressure, their cholesterol, and things like that. But if they continue that, in 10 years, 20 years, there's gonna be a huge difference between that person-- More than likely, there's gonna be huge difference between that person's basic health compared to the person who ate a lot of fruits and vegetables, didn't drink very much, and was a nonsmoker. You're going to see over time two completely different people.

Alexia Cervantes 10:49

While she gives a food-based habit as an example, it's easy to see this applying to other habits too. It is really the difference between an amateur and professional. One has made it a habit and a routine to practice something to perfection, versus someone who only does it occasionally. Comparing them would also reveal very direct differences. I then asked about the importance of self-awareness and developing new habits. Alexia followed up with this.

Alexia Cervantes 11:53

Well, I think that you really give me a great segue there, because awareness is the biggest factor in starting to make some behavior change. Unless you recognize that the behavior is leading to X, Y or Z, you know that you're not going to make a change. So, you have to know that there's an issue in order to take some steps to correct it, or to change it.

Brian Chen 12:20

It's one thing to make habits, but it's another thing to sustain them. That's a common issue that I had, when trying to diet - it would last maybe a week or so. But at some point, I would just lose the willpower and stop altogether. What can be done to make sure these habits will last? Speaking more towards eating healthier, Erin had this to say:

Erin Kukura 12:39

Something to add to that is - I think, especially when it comes to food - people oftentimes might feel really overwhelmed, right? Well, like, Oh, I'm eating this way. And what she said is completely over here, right? So, what I would really encourage is start with those small changes, right? It doesn't need to be like I have to overhaul everything. Because going back to kind of what we were talking about earlier, in terms of making this sustainable. We want to eat foods that yes, fuel us, but also that tastes good, right? That we enjoy, because you're not going to eat something if you don't really like it. And where can you start small. So maybe it's just starting with a I'm gonna start like trying to eat throughout the day. And maybe I'm going to add like a veggie, you know, to like three times a week, because I'm

right now doing it, maybe once you know, so I think that's another thing too. Even if you're, you're out there and you're like, Whoa, I'm not eating like that, you can start with those small little changes.

Brian Chen 13:33

Alexia agreed with the notion of small steps and expanded upon it.

Alexia Cervantes 13:37

My advice would be to think about what it is that you want. Really ask yourself deep-down, what do you want? What is it that you want? Do you want to just feel better during this quarantine during isolation? Are there some [specific] results that you want? Are you looking to gain some muscle? Are you looking to lose some weight? Are you looking to improve your nutrition? What is it that you really want? Once you know what you want, then you can start to kind of plan how you're gonna get there. The in the planning process - just like with all things - you want to take small steps. You want your steps to be measurable. You really want to set yourself up for success by not trying to make too drastic of a change. I think that a lot of times people expect that they can go from zero to 60 and that they can maintain that for a really, really long time. And that's just not realistic. If you want to make change, you want to start small. Say you decide "Alright. Even during this time of quarantine, I want to get stronger. So, what am I going to do? Am I going to add some push-ups? I can add some squats. What am I going to do in my daily routine?" Don't say, "Well, I'm going to do 100 squats every day and 100 push-ups every day." Because unless you were already doing that, if you have been doing zero - you can't go from zero to 100. You have to say, "I'm gonna start with 10, and then every few days I'm gonna add one or two more." And then just being consistent. I think accountability is really important. The most impactful thing is just being accountable to yourself - just being accountable to oneself, that's the most impactful thing. Some people work really well with having an accountability partner. So having a friend or family member - and this might be a really powerful way to connect with somebody else right now, is "Hey. I need something, will you help me? Will you do this with me like? Will you do this in partnership with me?" That can be a really great way to have that accountability piece.

Brian Chen 16:03

So, once you decide on a habit that you want to pursue, you should make a plan that starts small and then works its way up; then it's time to execute, taking the time to actually do the legwork. But with trying to accomplish anything, there will always be difficulties that raise their ugly heads. What is something that can be done if a habit is particularly difficult to get started?

Alexia Cervantes 16:24

So that's definitely a technique for helping to change your habits, is to change your environment. That's a big one - your environment really says a lot. Another thing that I would say to somebody who wanted to - maybe exercise more, especially right now - even to go outside for a walk would be "Well, where are your shoes? Can you put your shoes someplace that is in your line of sight?" That way when you're working, you can be like, "Oh, my gosh, there's my shoes over there, I need to get up and take a 10-minute break and go outside for a walk." You know what I mean? Something needs to change in order for you to change,

Brian Chen 17:00

There're also just going to be those days when you just can't bear to get yourself to do anything. Erin had this to say about these tough days:

Erin Kukura 17:09

I would say you - do what you can, right? We've talked about, there is this piece of sometimes not going to feel like you want to go move, sometimes you're not going to feel like you want to go reach for that fruit for a snack instead of the Cheetos. But maybe stop and think about how you're going to feel in an hour. You're probably going to feel so much better, if you just did even 20 minutes of that workout video, or same with the food, you probably might have more energy. So kind of trying to just do the best you can while also - we are in these very unsettling times, it's not going to - it's not supposed to look any certain way, so kind of having compassion for yourself, but like, it's not gonna be perfect, but where you can, try to really embody, you know, what are those things that I know are gonna help me. I know, for myself, even yesterday I was not in a great mood. And I was like, I do not want to do a yoga class right now. I made myself do it, the whole time, I was like fighting it, I'm like, just get to the end, and afterwards, I felt so much better. And like my mood, everything changed. So even just something like that can literally change, how you're feeling the rest of the decisions you make for the rest of your day.

Brian Chen 18:24

Now that the general concept of forming habits has been given, what are some habits that people can try to improve their well-being during quarantine,

Alexia Cervantes 18:31

In general, whether it's during quarantine, or at any time, and since we've been talking so much about habits and things like that, I think the more that any of us whether - and actually whether you're a student, or you're a staff member who's listening to this podcast - doing your best to create and stick to a schedule, doing your very best to create a schedule that incorporates some of these health habits, these positive health habits that we're talking about. So, trying to do things like going to bed at the same time every night, waking up at the same time every morning, starting your day with some movement or starting your day with some breath practice, some simple breathing techniques. Making sure that you are stocking your refrigerator in your cupboards with nutritious easy things. I eat very simple. I eat super, super simple and I think that people think that in order to eat well it has to be really, really complicated. I think that that's really important is that you try to keep it simple. I also think that it's important that at some point during the day that you take breaks away from the screen, like you actually plan those in your schedule. You plan to take a break at exact times and maybe that during those times you are shutting the screen down, looking - even if you can't go outside to look outside. One of the things that - here's something specific that is a recommendation that we make is, it's called the 20-20-20 rule. And that is every 20 minutes, you look up from your screen, and you look away, like about 20 feet out away. So, whether it's like looking outside the window, or even if you're, if you can't look outside window, even looking across the room, you know, at something that's 20 feet away for 20 seconds, that'll help your eyes so that your eyes aren't gonna get too tired from staring at the screen all day.

Brian Chen 20:33

Aaron also put an emphasis on not just eating healthy, but just making the time to eat in general during these times in quarantine.

Erin Kukura 20:40

So, I'm an alumna of UCSD as well. I was a human bio major. I know exactly - I can really relate to what the atmosphere is like. And just looking back in my experience as well, and kind of what a lot of my friends and other people struggled with, I think making time to eat is such, it's going back to the basics. Like it sounds so simple, but I think for a lot of us - it's not just students too - I see it with staff and faculty. I think we tend to just become so overworked and busy, that it's really easy to kind of not feel hunger. We don't maybe notice some of those sensations, but I try to really encourage people to focus on one, yeah, maybe building that routine and trying to eat so you're not going eight hours without a meal. But also starting to tap into some of those other hunger cues: lack of concentration, low energy, and moodiness. So, getting hangry is a real thing. So, if you notice any of those things, when you're like, Oh, it's you know, been like six hours, you know, you probably need a meal. So I think really just even something as basic as that sounds, when people have started to kind of add that into their day, they'd noticed, wow, I am actually studying better and focusing and I am not resorting to grabbing whatever's just available, because when you're really hungry, you really can't make like a balanced decision.

Brian Chen 22:11

So, at the end of all this, habits are powerful and have the ability to affect your behavior, whether that be in a good way or a bad way. If we are to do our best to thrive during these times of online classes, we should be reflecting on our current daily behaviors critically and identifying problems as we see fit. From there, utilizing the method of starting small can ensure that any habit that we try to start will grow and last in the long term. If getting more movement is a goal that you'd like to accomplish, or just improving your physical health in general, then you should definitely check out what UCSD Recreation has to offer.

Alexia Cervantes 22:52

Heck, yeah. So, if you haven't been to the Rec Playground at recreation.ucsd.edu, you need to go check it out. There's a bunch of stuff that you can connect with there. The first one is online classes. So, before the shutdown happened, we had the opportunity to go into RIMAC and to actually record a bunch of classes. So, we have things like World Dance, which is super popular, it's getting a bunch of hits. The thing that we're super stoked on right now is called Recreation Live. And that's a series of zoom classes. We have zoom classes six days a week, Monday through Saturday. It's everything from yoga to circuit, like circus circuit, to meditation to sketch classes, barre classes, just a whole bunch of great fun stuff. And those are all people are recording those from their homes. So, we have student instructors, we have our professional instructors that are from their home doing zoom classes, and they're great. The other thing that we have is Get Up Tritons, which is our video subscription service where if you want especially tips on things to like and break up the monotony of sitting all day long, is you get a video three times a week at 10am, 12 noon, and 2 o'clock. The last thing is you can get our newsletter and our newsletter comes like every other week with just reminders about the things that we have going on. We're gonna have an Instagram challenges starting pretty soon for things that folks can

do at home. And yeah, and then eSports if you haven't heard about eSports, I know that we're trying to talk about activity and movement on this podcast, but eSports is a brand-new thing for us and recreation. So, we're super excited about that because I'm sure you guys have all heard about eSports, everybody knows about eSports, so we're really excited to actually launch that right during this time, so pretty exciting for us.

Brian Chen 24:58

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Triton Tools and Tidbits, I'd like to extend a huge thank you to the people over at UCSD Recreation, especially Alexi and Erin. Stay tuned for a bonus clip from Maria, one of the wonderful student Fit Life instructors on how she's handling the struggles of shelter in place. We hope you found this information useful. If so, consider subscribing. If you have any questions or ideas for a future episode, send us feedback at Bitly or bit.ly/ucsdpodcast2020.

Ria Coen-Gilbert 25:36

Hi, everyone, my name is Ria, and I'm a second year here at UCSD. I'm currently studying sociology concentrated in law and society. And I've been working in the FitLife Recreation department as a student instructor since the winter quarter of my first year. A few tips, I guess that I would give to stay healthy and just overall have some peace of mind while we're all stuck at home: I think the biggest one is just being patient with yourself. I personally am someone that gets incredibly antsy and restless. And it just makes me annoyed and frustrated with my family even when I'm not. And that just comes from not being able to move my body as much. So, I really made it my goal to get outside, I'm really lucky to live somewhere where I can walk around my neighborhood and keep my distance from everybody. And so, I pretty much go outside for a walk or run at least once a day. And my favorite thing to do is listen to a podcast while I do that. That's actually been a really, really nice way to, I don't know, stay distracted while also getting to be outside, get fresh air. If you guys follow the Fit Life account, on Instagram, I'm posting a lot of these workouts that I've been doing. They're all super quick - 15, maybe 25 minutes tops. But it's just a really good way to get your body moving and find a lot of lengthening and toning for all of your muscles. So, I recommend checking that out. It's been really fun to create those for you guys. I think another big part of it, just for my mental health has been kind of accepting that I have a lot more time on my hands and then deciding what I want to do with that time. To kind of make this feel more meaningful, because that's something that I've been struggling with, it feels like my year has just been paused. And that's really, really difficult for somebody who likes to stay so busy. So, I like. And so, I started cooking and baking a whole lot, which is something I've never really had the time to do before. But now I might have like an hour to try a new recipe and I'm really into trying to make things look super pretty. I don't really know why it's just, I like my meals now to be aesthetically pleasing, I guess. And so that has been a lot of fun. I highly recommend if you're interested check out my favorite food blogger is the Minimalist Baker. She just has like amazing recipes. A lot of them are more plant-based. And she's a lot of how-to's as well. So super helpful to learn new things. And I also love the food blogger And Love And Lemons. And she also is more plant-based because that's kind of my style right now. But those are just a few things that I've been doing to stay well, to stay healthy. And by all means I have bad days as well. But those have definitely been things that are mood boosters and kind of getting me through these difficult times.