

# The man in the mirror - honing in on your health

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It is 2006 and I'm driving to class. I stop at a doughnut shop and pick up a cruller and a cup of coffee. On my way back from class, I pull into a burger joint and grab a cheeseburger, fries and diet cola. Do you think I was feeling good by the end of the day?



MATTHEW STANLEY

And that's just it. Maybe I thought I did feel good. But in reality, I think that a lot of us don't know what feeling good feels like. It was only after I started to make changes in my diet and lifestyle that I started to understand what it means to feel healthy — to be energetic, well-rested, positive and able to maintain healthy relationships.

That last one, healthy relationships, always reminds me of the Michael Jackson song that goes, "I'm starting with the man in the mirror." How can we create positive daily experiences with our family and community if we aren't healthy and strong ourselves? The song goes on, "If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change."

So where to start? The following is a list of steps you can take to start to make improvements to your health and well-being. I want to mention that it is always important to check with your doctor or a licensed practitioner before beginning a new diet or exercise program. But I've found these simple steps can make a big difference in how I feel:

## Read nutritional labels

It is very important to make a habit of this. Look to avoid artificial flavors or preservatives, hydrogenated oils and artificial sweeteners. All of these things can be associated with not feeling good, from headaches caused by aspartame to high blood pressure from hydrogenated oils.

Keep an eye out for added sugars too. You are looking for any type of "free sugars." These are sweeteners that are added to foods, and can include honey, maple syrup, fruit juices, and juice concentrates. The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition recommends that adults consume less than 30 grams of free sugars per day (7 teaspoons). For kids, no more than 19 grams is recommended.

Naturally occurring sugars, such as those found in milk and fruit, are fine to eat plenty of, as they contain plenty of nutrition, and in the case of fruit, fiber, to go along with the sugars.



## Eat organic

This is especially important for certain food categories, including fruits and vegetables and animal products. At the Co-op, I like to show shoppers two lists of fruits and vegetables.

First, the Dirty Dozen. These fruits and vegetable tend to have the most pesticides sprayed on them and are best avoided.

The Clean Fifteen list contains items that are typically grown without much need for pesticides and herbicides. This list comes in handy when you are shopping on a budget and cannot afford to buy everything organic. Find the list here: [http://www.ewg.org/foodnews/clean\\_fifteen\\_list](http://www.ewg.org/foodnews/clean_fifteen_list).

Does eating organic make you feel better? First, I want to mention that the conventional apple can contain up to 40 different chemicals on the fruit's skin. Most of the chemicals are not tested for safety in children. If our bodies are busy processing all these synthetic chemicals, how can we expect them to stay focused on optimizing our energy levels and overall health?

Furthermore, a recent United Kingdom study found that organic meat and milk products contain 50 percent more beneficial omega-3 fatty acids than their conventional counterparts. They also showed that organic crops and crop-based foods are up to 60 percent higher in a number of key antioxidants. We're all leading busy lifestyles

— we need all the help we can get from brain-nourishing omegas and free-radical scavenging antioxidants.

## Exercise

Back in 2006, I had poor posture and chronic back pain. I started doing some simple weight training and resistance exercise. I made a goal to be able to complete an unassisted pull-up. I built a stronger core and quickly eliminated the back pain. You'd be surprised at what as little as five minutes of light exercise can do for your long-term health.

You won't end up with six-pack abs (I certainly didn't), but you can build bone density, reduce risk of injury and stress, improve sleep and boost energy levels. The best part is that just by deciding to exercise you boost your happiness.

Overall, these simple changes can really make a big difference and it is never too late to start. Changing a habit for as little as a year can erase decades of bad habits. Our bodies have an amazing capacity to rejuvenate if we give them a chance.

So take a look in the mirror and think about some changes you could make. Your family, friends, and community will thank you for it. And practice your Michael Jackson moonwalk, too; the exercise will be good for you!