



Exercising the Soul

BY MARIE E. OWENS

A few years ago I realized that I had neglected my responsibility over my physical health. I have always known that I am a cherished child of God, that He has given me talents and abilities, and that I should not define who I am in terms of my physical body. However, I had difficulty with my third pregnancy and was beginning to feel pain in my back and knees. Due to my lack of attention to how I was treating my body, I found myself 120 pounds overweight in my early 30s. I decided to try some lifestyle changes to see if I could at least slow down the process of gaining weight. I didn't think I could lose it all, and I didn't concentrate on reaching a particular dress size or number on the scale. But I did recognize that the sooner I stopped gaining, the less damage I would do to my body.

The lessons I learned on my treadmill helped me better understand physical and spiritual laws.

This journey has taken several years and continues even today. I now enjoy exercising, in part because I have felt the Spirit tutor me during this time. I have been amazed to discover that the same principles that have helped strengthen me physically are also applicable spiritually. Here are some things I have learned from my time on the

treadmill.

Natural laws govern all things.

There was no way to lose weight without understanding and working within the law that I had to consume fewer calories than I burned. Even though I had ignored this law for years, it continued to be true.

The extra calories became extra weight. “When we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:21). Likewise, laws for our spiritual health don’t change. We can ignore them for a time, but they continue to exist and are true whether we use them for our benefit or allow them, in our apathy, to ultimately condemn us.

Pacing yields endurance.

Like many others, I had tried faster and easier (and unhealthy) options for losing weight. Many already know that these do not work and often make matters worse. There is no way around the natural law; it demands that we personally

sacrifice and persevere. But we do not need to do it alone, and there is no deadline. We have been counseled by the Lord, who understands the timing of all things better than we do, to “see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27).

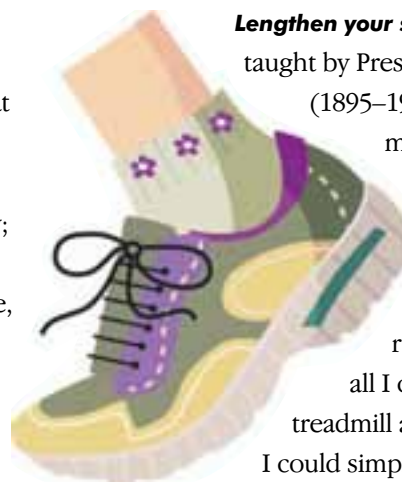
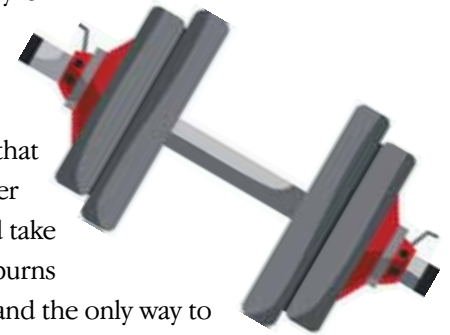
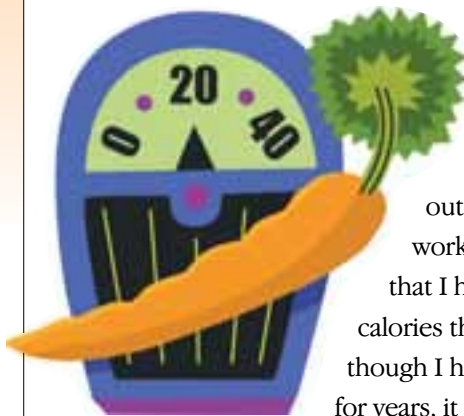
I did not begin with the end in mind; rather, I focused

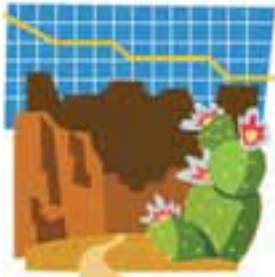
on changing my direction. As long as I stayed on the correct path and was moving forward, it did not matter how fast I was moving. In fact, pacing myself was vital in not giving up. Just as I found that I could run farther when I turned down the speed on the treadmill, we can go farther toward the kingdom of God if we do not push so hard that we feel compelled to stop our efforts for long periods of time. In this, the journey is as important as the destination.

Resistance builds strength. I soon found that scrutiny and control over my caloric intake would take me only so far. Muscle burns more calories than fat, and the only way to increase muscle is to exercise. I started slowly with nonimpact activities, 20 minutes a day. Over the course of months, I began to build both my intensity and duration. What was important was not what I did but that I did just a little bit beyond what I thought I could do—and that I did it regularly. Allowing my body to sweat and work has increased my physical strength. Likewise, working through adversity builds spiritual strength. Resistance training is the only way to build muscle—be it spiritual or physical muscle.

Lengthen your stride. I knew this counsel taught by President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) encouraged us to do more. I used to think that meant “go faster.” But he didn’t say that. He said to “lengthen your stride,” or, in other words, run smarter. When it was

all I could do to not fall off the treadmill at a given setting, I found I could simply take larger steps. Lengthening my stride allowed me to accomplish what I didn’t think I could.





Plateaus will happen—continue anyway. In weight-loss programs, the term *plateau* refers to the times when you are doing all of the right things but the weight loss stalls. Plateaus are common

and even expected. A variety of things change to help your physical body become healthier; a lower number on the scale is just one of them. The trick is to stick to your plan even though you are not receiving outward feedback of its effects. This is true for our spiritual growth as well. We may feel that we're not progressing—or even that we're losing ground. Sometimes the spirit needs to rebuild from within before we see the outward manifestations. Be patient and continue anyway.



Variety helps. Since this was such a slow and long process for me, I became bored with both the foods I was eating and the workout routines I was

doing. It was important for me to adjust things every once in a while to keep motivated and make the process more fun. This life is the time to be tested, but we are also to enjoy the experience. I truly believe that the Lord wants us to find happiness in our time on this earth. He wants us to explore the many possibilities and wonders around us. This variety helps satisfy the appetites of our souls.

Toning happens through correct form—not just additional repetitions. After a lifetime of being heavy, I found that there were some areas where my skin did not shrink proportionally to my body size. After losing more than 100 pounds, I needed to focus on toning. This involved slowing down and focusing on how I was working individual muscles. I am



learning, too, that we often have to slow down and focus on the fundamentals to tone spiritual attributes. Often, after going through the same motions for a time, we become so familiar that we take the movement for granted. This familiarity can lead to complacency, making the exercise less effective. Occasionally reflecting on why and how we are to live a certain principle can produce a deeper understanding and testimony of it.



Our natural state is not our best state. Even though losing the weight was difficult, keeping it off has required just as much effort. Every time I thought I had “made it” and could relax, I immediately began to lose ground. It soon became clear to me that my body and my spirit will not remain naturally healthy and strong without effort. “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and

has been since the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man” (Mosiah 3:19). If left unmonitored and unexercised, both the body and the spirit will revert—surprisingly quickly—to a state of lethargy. In this life there is no such thing as maintaining. Our actions (or lack of them) will result in either our moving forward or falling backward.

Our souls are the union of our bodies and our spirits (see D&C 88:15). They are integrally entwined, and one cannot thrive while the other is neglected. While each of us is given a different degree of physical health in this life, it is our Heavenly Father's plan for all of us to work to improve what we have received. Both our bodies and our spirits must be nourished and exercised to be healthy and to help us reach our full potential. ■

If you or someone you know has a problem with overeating, the Addiction Recovery Program, sponsored by LDS Family Services, can help. For more information, contact the LDS Family Services office in your area or visit www.ldsfamilyservices.org.