Chris Desmond

My Health
PLAN

How to get on top of your health and improve your

performance in the midst of a chaotic world

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Setting the scene

The last couple of years have given us all a cause to pause and contemplate what is important in our lives – which things should we spend more time, effort and attention on.

Our health consistently comes out near the top of those lists.

AND while trying to navigate a global pandemic and keep all the other parts of our lives operating at some capacity, how many of us have actually done much more than think that our health is something we should invest more in?

We live in a time and a world where our days, weeks, and years are filled with a myriad of important and urgent things to do.

- That report that needs to be written
- The emergency meeting that you have to squeeze into your schedule
- That client problem that fills up your day
- Trying to keep a business running in a hugely uncertain environment
- Multiple child related activities
- Trying to be a good parent
- Trying to be a good partner
- Trying to remember to take your dog for a walk

All of these conflicting priorities often squeeze looking after ourselves and our health out to the side. And when we do put aside some time for our health we feel guilty about doing it.

So many other things come first …..

…. and looking after our health sits near the bottom of that priority list. When we have an overfull schedule we often reach for the most convenient option when it comes to food, activity, sleep, or "relaxation". Unfortunately the most convenient option is often also one that doesn't benefit our health or performance.

Choices we could get away with in our teens and early 20's, now weigh us down (sometimes literally). Our increased responsibilities get in the way of the positive health actions we took back then, like walking everywhere, catching up with friends frequently, and living a lower stress life.

As a result we often put up with lots of health niggles; aches and pains, low energy, high stress, feeling out of shape, the list goes on. These are frustrating, but don't often cross the threshold where we are motivated to take some serious action to sort them out. **We accept them as a normal part of our lives.**

When someone asks us how our health is we respond in the typical Kiwi way with "*Not bad*" or "*It's OK*"

AND when we are asked if we would like it to be better our answer is invariably "*yeah definitely*"

And sometimes we wonder if our ability to give our best in the important areas of our lives is limited because our health is average?

What does Good Health mean to people?

When I asked my clients why looking after their health is important to them, these were some of their reasons

"I want to be a role model for my kids, and for the people around me. That includes being on top of my health" - Startup founder

"Improving my health means I'm better able to perform at work, and then come home and give the best for my family" - Senior manager

"I see the guys at the top, and out of the ones who have been there the longest, they are all really healthy" Manager about to step up to Director

"I know that when I'm healthier I just have so much more capacity to deal with all the difficult stuff that happens" - Project lead

Making healthy change in our lives isn't easy
- 6 things barriers to health and performance

Life gets in the way

Life gets in the way - as we've alluded to already, life is packed with conflicting priorities and we often end up down near the bottom of the priority list. And unfortunately when we do get some space to invest in our own health we often lack the energy to do so because we've been so busy giving to other people and getting things done. Despite our best intentions our plan doesn't play out the way we want it to.

We "should do it" instead of "wanting to do it"

Health is a should do instead of a want to - the narrative around improving our health is often one of "should do". I "should" eat more vegetables. I "should" exercise more. I "should" use that mindfulness app I paid for. But how often do we rebel against something we "should" do? When you're told you "should" do something, most of the time our natural response is to want to stick our middle finger up in the air and walk away. We'll fight against our inner rebel until we can change the should do to a want to.

Too many gurus

The internet is a wonderful thing when it comes to learning new information, it's just a click away. When we begin to search for health improvement information on the web things start to get overwhelming. There are an abundance of people promoting certain diets, certain workout routines, certain mental health practices. If we look at a broad range of information we'll often find that the messages are often contradictory, in one diet we should eat this, but in another we shouldn't. It's confusing when we just want to start or take the next step in our health journey and are searching for quality information to give us direction. There is a lot of great quality information out there, unfortunately there is also a lot of bullshit, and sometimes it is hard to tell the difference.

It's not fun

Let's be honest, there are a lot of health activities out there that just aren't that fun for us. We'll have a crack at the generic advice we read in the article with a clickbait title. We'll test out that thing that lady taught us at the last "wellbeing" training that work put on. We'll sometimes even have a go at the thing our mother-in-law mentioned - not that we'd ever tell her. But often we don't find them enjoyable, or worse yet, they aren't meaningful. Now I'll admit that there are cases of health activities (often exercise) that aren't enjoyable to begin with and often we do need to work through a period of discomfort until we find some joy further down the track. Getting back into exercise after an extended time off is always tough for me, but I know that in three weeks I'll be starting to enjoy it again. But when we're trying to stick to healthy changes that don't offer up any fun, or any meaning then it's really tough to be consistent.

Great gets in the way of good

It's all about optimising, right?

If we're going to do it then we are going to do it THE BEST - but that often isn't helpful for us. The search for what great looks like is time consuming. The science around health and wellbeing is expanding at an incredible pace. No one can keep fully abreast of it, or even keep fully abreast of one area of it, even people whose life's work it is to study these areas. There is so much information out there, much of it conflicting (or at least interpreted in a conflicting way by people explaining it to the public), that it's near impossible to understand what "great" looks like across all facets of health. When we are looking for great straight away we run the risk of spending all our time and energy in the search and none on actually taking any positive action. And "great" is often quite far away from where we are right now. That distance to travel can at times seem overwhelming and de-motivating.

Lack of self-compassion

I have a lot of conversations with great people about how they have "failed" at implementing healthy behaviours into their lives. They have started out with great motivation, all excited and have set some targets for themselves, whether numbers on the scale, amount of workouts per week, or a new diet. Then life happens and knocks them off course (#hottip - it happens to all of us on a regular basis). And all of a sudden because they haven't stuck to their plan, negative self-talk starts to come out. **"This is too hard" "I'm not good enough" "I have no self-discipline"**.

Instead of just shaking it off and starting again, we spiral downwards away from the healthy behaviours. It's not falling off their program that's the problem. It's the negative self-talk and the emotional response to falling off the program that stops people taking consistent healthy action. I think the most underrated skill in living a healthy life is self-compassion. If we can have self-compassion then we can acknowledge that things didn't go the way we hoped, understand that it sucks but doesn't make us a bad person, then we get back into our program or some modified version of it.

With self-compassion we can process the emotional response to "failure" quickly, instead of getting wrapped up in it and having it drag us down, then we can decide to take a helpful action to get back on track.

All of these factors and more mean that making improvements to our health is often difficult to start, and even more difficult to sustain.

How health relates to performance

HEALTH SPECTRUM

POOR HEALTH   GOOD HEALTH

The most simple way to think about health is that it falls on a spectrum, with a negative side and a positive side. Two important markers on the spectrum are "poor health" and "good health". These aren't end points on the spectrum, but rather points to measure ourselves against. Continue on the negative side past "poor" and soon you'll hit dead where you don't get to keep playing the game. Continue past "good" and you'll end up at "great" or "excellent" or another one of Bill and Ted's adventures. But I'm not sure if anyone really knows if there is an end point on the positive side of the spectrum. If you're reading this, your health probably falls somewhere between poor and good.

When it comes to thinking about how our health affects our ability to function at life, it's helpful to change the names on the spectrum. We switch "poor" for "pain" and "good" for "performance"

When we experience poor health, pain is a natural consequence. We experience physical pain as a symptom of the illness, injury, or health challenge we are facing. We often experience mental pain with the associated stress and frustration. And almost everyone I have worked with experiences some emotional pain tied to their poor health and the restrictive effects that it has on their lives.

Most of us end up somewhere around the middle of the spectrum. We're far enough away from pain for that to not be motivating urgent action, but everything else gets in the way of moving towards good health and performance.

Good health sets the scene for good performance (while Poor health caps potential)

HEALTH SPECTRUM

PAIN   PERFORMANCE

HEALTH MENTORS
BETTER HEALTH FOR
BUSY PROFESSIONALS

Sport science has progressed greatly over the past few decades. We understand the effects of lots of different health variables, and health actions on athletic performance. *Poor sleep, it's harder to perform at your best.*
Burger and chips for lunch before a big game, not the best performance food.
A BIG night out on the weekend, training is harder than usual for the start of the week.

Something similar plays out in our lives as well.
While most of us don't need to deliver professional level athletic performance on a regular basis, we do want to be performing well across multiple areas of our lives. We want to be performing for our families. We want to be performing at work for our clients and colleagues. We want to be performing for our mates. We want to be performing in our chosen hobbies. We want to be performing in the bedroom.

Performance in these areas can be harder to measure (arbitrary kpi's aside), but when we take negative health actions over a period of time, our performance suffers for it. We become more lethargic, we don't feel our best, our aches and pains increase, our stress levels can be harder to manage.

In short, we need to expend more effort to operate at the same level we would if our health was better.

How to improve your health and performance

There are so many different specific tactics we can use to improve our health that I could bore you to death with them.

Because there are so many ways to "good" health, deciding on WHAT you would like to do is usually less important than HOW you go about actually doing it day in and day out.

Improving our health and performance sustainably comes down to three main components
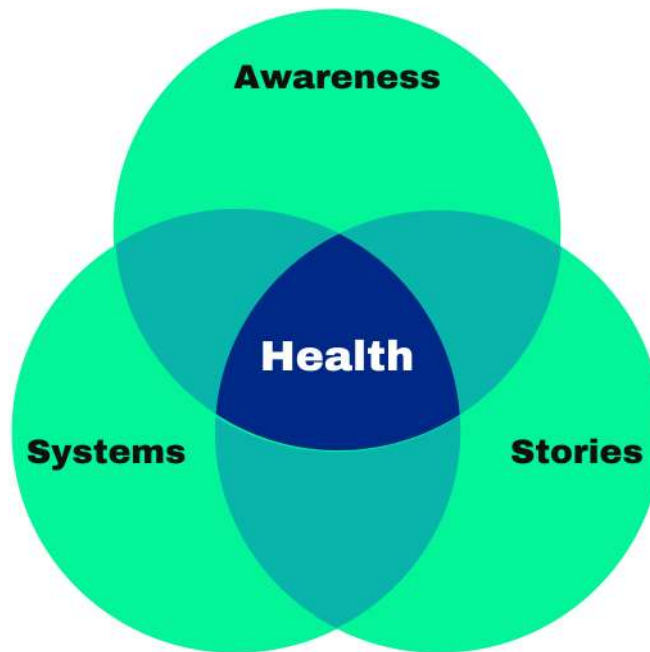
Awareness

Awareness is the honest recognition of your current health status, the understanding of what "Good" health looks like for you, and knowing what to do and how to do it to bridge that gap. It's about paying attention as you make changes so you understand how you respond to each action and what is standing in your way of making the healthy choice the easy choice. It's about learning when you need to makes changes, and developing a deep understanding of why these changes are meaningful to you and your life.

- Understanding what good looks like for us is vital as we look to improve our health and performance. When we start with good in mind it helps us set meaningful directions for our health improvements. We're working towards things we actually care about and are going to make our life better, not just what some guru tells us.
- Understanding where we are at is important. Often we look at our health through rose-tinted glasses, we downplay the amount of negative choices we make, and think we make more positive choices that we do (sometimes it's the opposite, which is a slightly different problem set that needs addressing)
- Creating a H.E.A.L.T.H. plan tailored to you sets you up for successful implementation of health activities in a sustainable way, including when life smacks you in the side of the head.

H.E.A.L.T.H. Plan

Health Opportunity

You understand what "Good" health looks like for you, then select some health opportunities (or goals if you'd rather) to pursue that take you towards that

Expected principles

The high level principles that you expect will take you towards the health opportunity. e.g. want to get strong – you'll need to move some heavy stuff around.

Applied Tactics

The specific tactics that sit under the high level principles. These are your training programs, your meditation apps, your meal plans etc.

Life Context

How, When, and Where do these tactics fit into your life the way that it is?

Threat Management

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face" – Mike Tyson
Plan for those moments when you do get "punched in the face. Identify potential barriers, or places you've fallen down in the past. Come up with ideas to avoid, manage, or mitigate these potential stumbling blocks.

Here we go

It's time to put this plan into action!

Systems

Systems are the processes we run which lead to our health actions. There are external components to these processes like the cues that trigger habit loops, and internal components like the decision process we run through when we come to a choice point. These processes are influenced by our environments and the complexity of the action we are trying to perform. We need to apply awareness to them as they often need refining as circumstances change.

- There are so many ways that we can enhance our environment to make the healthy choice the easy choice. Some of these require small tweaks but deliver BIG changes.
- A lot of us don't actually use our support network for support. People love helping out if they are able to. Using our support networks (or seeking out support networks to use) in the right way has been shown to make us healthier
- The contexts of our lives are changing on a regular basis. We often need to develop specific systems which apply to specific contexts rather than just relying on one generic system across the board (there are helpful simple systems which work well over multiple contexts).

Stories

Stories are the narratives we run internally which define who we believe we are, and the actions which we take. They sit on a spectrum from helpful to unhelpful. We often tell these stories to ourselves without being aware of them. We need to apply awareness to them as they often need redefining.

- Our identities are built on stories. Who we believe we are is based upon the stories we tell ourselves on a consistent basis. The stories are our interpretation of information that has come to us at some point in time. They are the narratives that run through our consciousness which then inform the actions we take. The action that we take usually then reinforces the story that we have been telling ourselves and so the behavioural pattern that the story drives gets stronger over time.
- It's unhelpful to think of our stories as "true" or "untrue". Your stories (and mine) are all "true", because we believe them and they influence our behaviour. A more helpful question to ask is are they helpful or unhelpful? Do our stories drive helpful behaviour? Because even a scientifically "incorrect" story can be helpful if it enhances our ability to take healthy action.
- The trick then becomes to identify and change our unhelpful stories, the ones that hold us back from our quest for healthy behaviour change. This requires us to pay attention to the internal narratives that sit around our health behaviours, and then begin to redefine the story into one that is more helpful

How can you help me and my organisation improve our health and performance???

Coaching Program

Health Mentors provides one on one health mentoring for busy professionals who want to dial in their health and perform at their best across all areas of their life.

They help to build your awareness around your health and assist you in creating a comprehensive (yet simple) health plan.

They help refine the systems in your life to make the healthy choice the easy choice. The plan might be beautiful but if it isn't implemented then it doesn't work. They also assist with strategies for navigating those ever present conflict points where real life butts up against our best laid plans.

And they help you redefine your stories as you build a new health identity so that the practice of good health becomes easier and easier.

If this sounds like what you need (or someone you love needs) please book a no obligation conversation to discuss with Chris https://calendly.com/healthmentors/30min

Or send an email to Chris at chris@healthmentors.nz

Workshops and Workplace solutions

"People centred strategies are a competitive advantage"

One of the most important people centered strategies for business to focus on is the health and wellbeing of their staff.

There are multiple reasons for this

✅ it's the RIGHT thing to do

   a healthier workforce is a more productive workforce

   a healthier workforce delivers better customer service

✅ employers who focus on the health and wellbeing of their workers are more likely to attract and retain great talent

What does wellbeing in the workplace look like?

1) equipping people with the skills and knowledge they need to look after their own wellbeing (cause most of us didn't learn this in school)

2) creating a culture and systems that support wellbeing for individuals, teams, and communities

If you want to improve the wellbeing of your organisation then please book a no obligation conversation https://calendly.com/healthmentors/30min

About the Author

Chris Desmond is a health and wellbeing coach and trainer for high performing teams and individuals.

He has 15 years of clinical experience as a physiotherapist, over 6 years of leadership and management experience in the health and rehabilitation industry, over 300 recorded episodes of a mental wellbeing and performance podcast "Uncomfortable is OK", a love of ultra-running, and 4 and a bit years of having his resilience sorely tested as a Dad.

He is passionate about helping people improve their capacity and performance through enhancing their health and mental skills, so they can do their best work, navigate challenges, and feel good while they're doing it.

He has a broad knowledge of health and wellbeing but his superpower is making the science practical for application to unique situations. He helps people implement health and wellbeing knowledge in a consistent, sustainable way.

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