

# FITNESS, STRESS, TRAVELING, AND STAYING HOME:

## A PSYCHIATRIST'S VIEW

By Howard Wolin, M.D.

Physical fitness has become a national preoccupation. Runners, swimmers, cyclists, and tennis players dot the North Shore landscape during the warm months, and myriad forms of indoor sport and exercise are pursued year-round in homes, schools and offices. Generally, however, the national preoccupation with fitness has been symbolized by the health club.

These clubs range from specialized facilities for a single sport or activity to multilevel complexes where members can use a variety of exercise machines, lift weights, swim, run, or eat a healthful lunch. Since the early 1970s athletes, professional and amateur alike, have been flocking to these new gymnasiums, which offer not only the equipment for enhancing fitness and appearance and perfecting athletic skills but also the opportunity to make social or sexual contacts and to engage in competitive activities. In fact, a salient characteristic of health club activity is that even when participating in an individualized exercise, one is always in a group milieu.

For some amateur athletes, the public environment of the club is stimulating: they are motivated by competition, both during athletic play and in their daily work. The fast-paced, demanding, and stressful aspects of their lives afford challenges and pleasures.

For others, and I believe their numbers are increasing, the pursuit of fitness becomes a kind of frenzy: their trips to the health club become as compulsive and ritualistic as the activities required during working hours. Their goals for performance and achievement become unrealistically high. The result? Burnout—periodic physical or emotional exhaustion. These fitness buffs may retain their well-shaped bodies, but they are drained and depleted and their emotional responses are flat, dull, and disinterested. In extreme cases, states of depression characterized by the desire to escape and retreat will occur.

The relevant question involves solutions: how can we retain the undeniable benefits of physical activity while avoiding or repairing the damage inflicted by that old bugaboo stress?

Obviously, getting away from it all will help. Those suffering from stress symptoms must first be able to recognize their condition, then acknowledge that "time out" is needed. Short vacation periods scheduled throughout the year often afford relief; in other cases, two or three weeks will be needed for revitalization.

Another solution takes the opposite approach: we can simply stay at home, using the home as a retreat in the same way we enjoy the facilities at a spa or resort. Because the radio, television, and

computer have reduced the world to the dimensions of a global village, we can stay in touch without being directly exposed to the challenges and stresses of the public environment. At the same time, the home can serve as a haven, a cocoon of sorts, from which we emerge in a new form, relaxed, prepared, and revitalized.

Whoever said that "home is where the heart is" probably wasn't thinking about the cardiovascular system or the pursuit of fitness but must have been aware of the home as a locale for privacy and love. Fitness goals, when pursued in a private environment, are more likely to subsume more of a play/recreation function than a work/performance/achievement function. Yet exercise in the home, if done properly—using well-designed equipment, professional training methods, and competent advice—can provide family members with the pleasure of gradually enhancing their body contours while building stamina and self-esteem.

Neither the home gym nor the vacation retreat, nor even the health club, can meet every individual's physical and emotional needs at all times. The pursuit of fitness is, after all, a process of error and discovery that continues as long as we do.