

*Is your health  
and fitness  
routine  
broken? What  
to do when  
staying in  
shape feels  
harder than  
ever.*

The Marble Method

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# How to build a “system” that helps you get back on track.

A healthy lifestyle is never  
effortless.

Only for many of us, it feels  
unusually hard right now.

Shockingly so, perhaps.

Yes, stress, overwhelm, and  
depression may all be  
contributing factors.

But there's also a good chance  
something else happened:

# The pandemic just broke your “system.”

We know: That sounds like a plot twist from Westworld. Stick with us, though, because it’s about to make a lot of sense.

In this article, we’ll show you why your broken system is making it harder to:

**\*regularly exercise**

**\*eat appropriate amounts of nutritious foods**

**\*engage in other healthy behaviors**

More importantly, we’ll help you build a new health and fitness system—one that’s better designed for your (or your client’s) current situation.

But only when you’re ready. Because it’s also okay to grieve for what you’ve lost before even considering taking steps to move forward.

# **You have lots of systems already.**

In fact, you probably use systems to organize just about every part of your life.

Systems help us prioritize what to do and when to do it—so we can complete the actions efficiently and effectively.

Take grocery shopping. We all do it our own way, but most of us have a method—such as planning meals, compiling a list, shopping on a certain day, clipping coupons, or navigating the aisles in a specific order.

And that structured step-by-step process? It ensures we don't run out of essential items when we need them.

Like, say, toilet paper. Before COVID-19 turned our lives upside down, these systems helped many of us fit workouts and nutritious meals into incredibly busy schedules.

**Then everything changed.**

As a result, our systems were  
disrupted.

And that's causing many of us  
to struggle to maintain  
certain actions.

Like exercise.

Like meal prep.

Like sleep hygiene.

Like any semblance of  
productivity.

# The anatomy of system disruption

Take one of my clients. We'll call her Jane. She once had a fitness system that involved a series of steps.

- Each night, before bed, she packed a gym bag.
- She put it by the door, where she'd literally trip over it in the morning.
- The following day, she grabbed the gym bag as she raced out the door.
- She dropped her kids at school.
- Then she hit the gym before heading to work.

That system worked for her. It got her from home to the gym, without creating a series of “Nah, I don’t need to work out today” moments.

## Until:

- She no longer had to get up early to take her kids to school or get to work.
- The gym closed.
- She stopped packing her gym bag at night.
- She stopped setting her alarm to get up.

But she’s not doing it.

Instead, she’s binge-watching Tiger King and Ozark. Plus, she’s plowing through the gallon of ice cream that didn’t used to be in her kitchen freezer. And she’s feeling frustrated. If this all sounds painfully familiar, know this:

**You’re not the problem.** But your system probably is—because it’s no longer working.

# **Why systems matter now— more than ever**

It's pretty easy to understand the importance of a system during "normal life." But it may be even more important now, for three reasons.

## **Reason #1: Stress powers down our "thinking brains."**

These times are stressful, especially if we're worrying about the unknowns:

- When will grocery stores ever restock their empty shelves?
- Is my job secure?
- How long will this last? Will the kids ever go back to school?
- Will my loved ones survive?

Most people know that stress fires up the emotional fight-flight-freeze part of the brain.

But it also simultaneously shuts down the thinking-planning-decision-making prefrontal cortex.

All that makes it harder to keep our priorities front of mind. Instead, our emotion-driven reflexes take over. (This doesn't usually turn out well.)

It can also just make us feel drained.

**Without a system in place, we're nudged in a direction we don't want to go.**

## **Reason #2: We can only make so many good decisions in a day.**

Think of your prefrontal cortex—your decision-making command center—as the weakest muscle in your body.

The more decisions you make, the more fatigued this part of the brain becomes—making each successive decision a little bit harder.

And you're probably making more decisions these days than you realize.

- What's the best way to check in on my parents? Phone? Video chat? Standing outside and yelling through a window?
- Should I get out of bed right now? Or just sleep a while longer?
- I wore this yesterday. Wear it again today? Hmm.
- Should I use my paycheck for rent? Groceries? Utilities?
- Should I check the news? Or will it make me too anxious?
- Where can I work without so many interruptions?
- Lunchtime! Should I eat something from the freezer? From the fridge? Or.... from the emergency stash?
- How do I get my kids to do their schoolwork?
- What should I watch tonight?

After a certain number of decisions, your prefrontal cortex fatigues. Rather than carefully weighing short-term desires against longer-term priorities, the brain spits out, "I don't know... whatever." And once that happens, short-term desires win.

## **Reasons #3: The pandemic wiped out some of our anchor habits.**

An anchor habit is something you do every day—without thinking about it.

For example, brushing your teeth is probably an anchor habit.

For many people, it's the first step in a bedtime routine. And when they don't brush their teeth, it feels wrong to go to bed, as if something is missing.

Before the pandemic, many of us had several anchor habits that functioned like the first domino in a series. Once that one domino tipped over, many other dominoes fell right after it, without much effort or thinking.

Let's say someone—we'll call him Gary—set his alarm for 6 a.m. every day (the first domino).

# He got out of bed and...

- wrote in a journal (second domino)...
- before his kids woke (third domino)...
- then he made them breakfast (fourth domino)...
- and got everyone out the door for work and school (fifth domino).

But now? There's no work or school to go to, so Gary's not setting his alarm. And without that first domino, his journaling? It's also not happening. Now his entire routine is disrupted.

# Build your new health and fitness system

These questions can help you repair old systems and create new ones.

## Question #1: What's important to you right now?

Over the past few weeks, many people have been pondering deep questions. One of them: Does any of this still matter?

Although that question sounds fatalistic, it's an important one to consider.

For example, the extra five pounds that used to seriously bug you? They might not seem like a biggie right now. But maybe other things have moved way up the list, like connecting with loved ones or doing everything possible to avoid getting sick.

## **So take a moment to consider: What are your priorities?**

In other words, what's most important to you? What's dropped in importance? And what's so low on the list it's not worth putting effort into at all?

Also worth mulling: Do your current actions line up with those priorities? In other words, are you putting effort into what you feel is most important?

If everything lines up: Rock on. You're doing great.

If not, let's take a look at what was once working for you (your old system) to see if there's anything we can use there.

## **Question #2: What was your old system?**

Take a moment to think about how your daily life looked pre-pandemic.

What were you doing consistently to stay healthy? Were you...

- Exercising?
- Connecting with others
- Eating produce with every meal?
- Getting seven to nine hours of sleep each night?
- Other stuff?

## **Question #3: What systems do you need now?**

Now that you're aware of your old system, you're ready to think about which parts of that system you want to re-prioritize, what parts you no longer need, and what new habits you might want to add.

### **What should you hold onto?**

How might your old system help you...

- Feel more secure?
- Get going in the morning
- Make it easier to live a healthy life?

## **For example, maybe you should still:**

- Lay out your fitness clothes before bed (to prompt you to exercise first thing in the morning)
- Pack your lunch the night before (even though you'll be eating at home)
- Connect with friends over video (since you can't meet them out)
- Create a workout space in your garage, basement, or bedroom —and exercise at the same time you used to go to the gym. (Here's a 14-day at-home workout to get you started.)

# What can you let go of?

Some tasks may not be worth the effort or even make sense anymore.

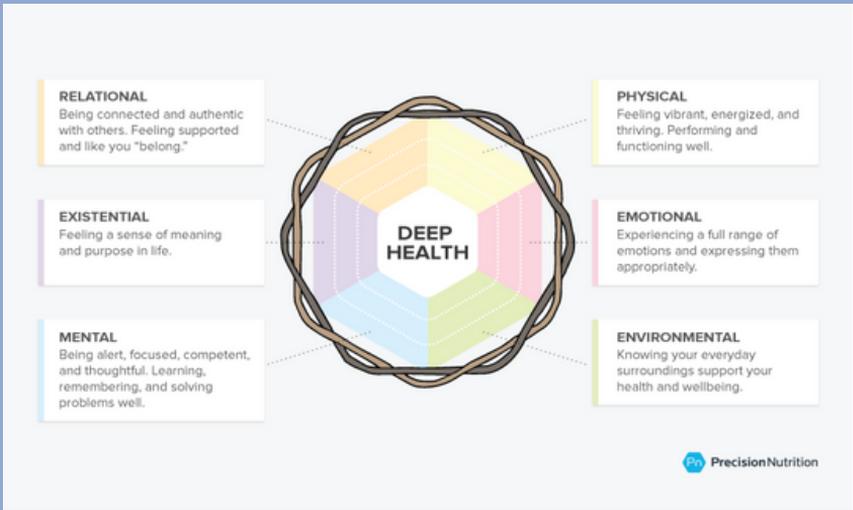
Maybe you suddenly don't care as much about the body comp goal you set for summer. So you quit weighing and measuring your food.

Or perhaps you stop using your workout journal because the details seem pretty meaningless right now.

If you simply don't have the capacity for something, it's okay to release your grip on it.

You might also need to shift more attention to another area of your health.

For example, take a look at the "deep health" graphic below. Even though healthy nutrition and lifestyle behaviors are often associated with physical health, the reality is this: All the areas of deep health are interconnected.



Suppose you're lonely and feel disconnected from others (see: relational health). You might eat or drink more to comfort yourself, which negatively affects your physical health. And that might lead to feelings of anxiety or anger, which challenges your emotional health.

So in this case, taking more time to connect with the people you care about (even if remotely) might mean less time for other actions. But ultimately, it could provide a bigger benefit to your overall health.

# What new systems do you need?

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, your need to go to work or shuttle kids to school probably served a reliable anchor that organized your entire day. Now, without that anchor, you may need a new one.

To find one, think about your day from beginning to end.

What would make staying active, eating nutritious foods, restful sleep, and other priorities easier and more automatic?

# Consider your:

- Daily schedule: Could consistent wake times, meal times, exercise times, meditation time, or bedtime help
- Surroundings: What changes could you make to your kitchen, workout space, and other aspects of your physical environment?
- Reminders: How might setting alarms, using a to-do list, or time-blocking (more about this below) make things easier
- Planning: Would you benefit from a two-week meal prep and grocery shopping plan
- Support: Could you lean on people around you for motivation, accountability, and help? How about trying exercise or playtime with your family, so all of you can stay fit together
- Routines: How might you stack healthy habits on top of something you already do? For example, could you take work calls while going for a walk?

## The power of time blocking

Jhonatan Ramirez first turned to time blocking during a hectic time of his life. In addition to managing a gym and coaching clients online, he was also studying for his Precision Nutrition Level 2 certification.

To stay on track, he blocked out time to study, work, read, journal, exercise, and even eat lunch.

End result: He got more done and spent less time on things that weren't important to him.

And while the time-blocking technique's upside is pretty clear for busy people, this method can be just as helpful—perhaps more so—when you have lots of free time, he says. "It's even more important right now because I wake up with a purpose," he says.

Ever feel dissatisfied on a day off when you get nothing done? 'Where did the time go?' you might think. Well, that's what can happen on any day that's not structured. Thus, time-blocking.

To try it, create a schedule for your whole day, starting from the moment you wake to the moment you go to sleep.

Include everything you want to get done, even meals and especially personal time. Read: It's not all about getting work done; it's about making use of your time in a way that makes you feel good at the end of the day.

# Think of your new system as an experiment

The only way to know for sure whether your new system will work?

Try it.

Give it seven days.

See what happens. After seven days, reassess.

Ask yourself: "How's that working for you?"

This can help you determine if you need to make an adjustment.

If it worked great, keep it up.

If it didn't work, see what you can learn.

Make a few changes and test again.

Besides helping you get back on track and be more consistent, the structure and familiarity of a routine can help you feel more grounded.

**This weird, scary, unprecedented time will eventually come to an end.**

When it does, your new practice of building and testing systems will help you transition back to work and other old “normals” much more smoothly.

And wouldn't that be a welcome change?

**You CAN do this!!!**