

Today's Christian Woman

Series

LEADER'S GUIDE

Healthy Body, Healthy Spirit

What do hydration and adequate sleep have to do with living water and the peace that passes understanding?

Western culture sends some strange messages about bodies, especially women's bodies. They are to be thin but not skinny, toned but never sweaty, tanned but UV-protected, sexy but devoid of any signs of pregnancy. To make matters worse, as Ruth McGinnis points out in an article for TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, our media role models employ armies of stylists to help them look perfect at all times. No wonder we're tempted to look in the mirror and say, "Yuck!"

What does the Bible say about our bodies? How can we gain a godly perspective on beauty? Most important, how does our physical health relate to spiritual health? These are the questions we'll explore in this study.

Lesson #6

Scripture:

Genesis 2:4-7, 20-25; 1 Samuel 16:6-7; Psalm 139:13-14; Proverbs 31:30; Isaiah 53:1-5; Luke 8:43-48; Romans 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, 15:39-46; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 3:3-4; 2 Peter 1:5-7

Based on:

"Discovering a Healthier You," TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, September/October 2002, Vol. 24, No. 5, Page 76



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Discovering a Healthier You" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN (included at the end of this study).

In October 2003 a female student wrote an anonymous column for the Duke University student newspaper, hinting that Duke's expectations of "effortless perfection" from women in the campus community had driven her to the brink of suicide. Too scared to discuss her sense of failure with anyone, she hoped the newspaper would break its policy against anonymous articles and print her cry for help. Editors agreed, and "effortless perfection" became the campus watchword, spawning numerous letters to the editor, lectures, forums, and initiatives aimed at easing stress on women's bodies and minds.



Women encounter different stresses once they progress beyond college. Job schedules and family commitments make it exponentially more difficult to find time to exercise. Pregnancy and childbirth take a lasting toll on the anatomy. Healthy salads are replaced by the hot dogs and macaroni that the kids will actually eat. It's far too easy for women to let their own needs—for sleep, nutrition, exercise, time with God—slide to the bottom of the priority list. But as McGinnis warns, "Nobody benefits from a woman who doesn't take care of herself."

Discussion starters:

- [Q] How does the pressure of "effortless perfection" manifest itself in your world? From where do you feel this message the most? How do you deal with the pressure to be perfect?
- [Q] When was the last time you felt really healthy?
- [Q] On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your health today?
- [Q] What images and emotions come to mind when you think of trying to get healthier?
- [Q] What is one thing you wish you could do, but your body just isn't up to the task?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles**Teaching point one: God cares about our bodies.**

Read Genesis 2:4–7 and 20–25, Psalm 139:13–14, Luke 8:43–48, and 1 Corinthians 15:39–46. These verses show God to be intimately involved in every phase of our physical existence.



- [Q] What does it tell us about God that he puts so much effort into creating, sustaining, and ultimately resurrecting our bodies? What does it tell us about our bodies?
- [Q] What do other elements of Christian belief and practice, such as the Incarnation, Communion, and baptism, teach about the importance of bodily life? Why, for example, is it so crucial—and so difficult for many people to understand—that God himself, in Jesus Christ, became an eating, sleeping, sweating, aching, even dying man?
- [Q] Many non-Christian schools of thought, such as Manichæism and Buddhism, teach that the material world is evil and only the spiritual deserves attention. What are some likely consequences of these ideas? Can you think of any ways these ideas have infiltrated Christianity?
- [Q] How should a body that God cares about be treated?

Teaching point two: Godly beauty isn't always pretty.

Read 1 Samuel 16:6–7, Proverbs 31:30, Isaiah 53:1–5, and 1 Peter 3:3–4. The Isaiah passage, a well-known prophecy of Christ's sufferings, might seem brutal in juxtaposition with the other passages, but it underscores the same point: appearances can be deceiving.

- [Q] What are some synonyms for *beautiful* in Western culture? What kinds of synonyms does the Bible suggest? How do the values encapsulated in the two lists of words contrast?
- [Q] If Christ could have chosen any kind of body for his incarnation, why do you think he chose the one described by Isaiah?
- [Q] If you were to consider changing your diet or exercise regimen, would you be more motivated by looking better or feeling better? Why?
- [Q] Though the Bible provides a useful corrective to our culture's fixation on physical attractiveness, it is wrong to assume that God disdains beauty. He did, after all, create the beauty in the world, and many prominent biblical women (such as Sarah, Abigail, Rachel, and Esther) are described as beautiful. What are some good purposes served by physical beauty? How can we celebrate those good purposes without falling into beauty worship?

Teaching point three: Health and godliness both require self-discipline.

McGinnis acknowledges that committing to a healthier lifestyle will be hard work, but she argues that the physical and spiritual rewards are more than worth the effort. The New Testament makes this point abundantly clear in passages like Romans 5:1–5, 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, James 1:2–4, and 2 Peter 1:5–7.

- [Q] Why is physical exercise such a good metaphor for spiritual discipline? Where does the metaphor break down? Does it work as well for women as for men?
- [Q] What are some obstacles to attaining greater physical health? Which of these are also obstacles to attaining spiritual maturity?



- [Q] Which is easier to hide: poor physical conditioning or poor spiritual conditioning? How will each deficiency catch up to you eventually?
- [Q] What are the attributes and capabilities of a physically healthy person? What are the attributes and capabilities of a spiritually healthy person?
- [Q] Sometimes injuries or disease make physical health unattainable. Thinking of people you know in this situation, how do physical infirmities affect their spiritual health? Why do some people lose ground spiritually when their bodies take a hit, while others grow spiritually stronger as they become physically weaker?

PART 3**Apply Your Findings**

In his modern classic *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard writes, “Faith today is treated as something that only *should* make us different, not that actually *does* or *can* make us different. In reality we *vainly* struggle against the evils of this world, waiting to die and go to heaven. Somehow we’ve gotten the idea that the essence of faith is entirely a mental and inward thing.” His solution is to rethink our theology of life and the body and to reintroduce disciplines, like meditation and fasting, that combine spiritual concepts with physical actions. Far from being a detriment or a distraction, he writes, “The human body was made to be the vehicle of human personality ruling the earth for God through his power.” We humans simply cannot commune with God or serve his purposes without engaging our bodies as well as our minds and spirits.

- [Q] Among the practices McGinnis advises are going to bed and rising around the same time each day, taking time for walks, drinking more water, and engaging in activities you enjoy. How could following these practices enhance both your physical health and your spiritual health?
- [Q] How should a distinctly Christian approach to wellness differ from the advice one might get from a fitness show or a secular women’s magazine?
- [Q] How could you serve God better if you were physically and spiritually healthier? How could you enjoy life more?
- [Q] What physical and spiritual health goals would you set for yourself in the next three months? How can you work on both sets of goals simultaneously? How will you keep yourself accountable for reaching them? What will be your reward?

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, graduate student and former managing editor of *CHRISTIAN HISTORY* magazine.



Additional Resources



[Christian Bible Studies](#)



Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster (Harpercollins, 1988; ISBN 0060628391)



Greater Health God's Way, Stormie Omartian (Harvest House, 1999; ISBN 0736900616)



Health 4 Life, Jody Wilkinson (Gospel Light, 2002; ISBN 0830730516)



If God Is in Control, Why Do I Have a Headache? Bible Lessons for a Woman's Total Health, Debbie T. Williams (New Hope Publishers, 2004; ISBN 1563098199)



10 Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health, Donald S. Whitney (NavPress, 2001; ISBN 1576830969)



The Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Willard (Harpercollins, 1990; ISBN 0060694424)



“Effortless Perfection?”

http://www.chronicle.duke.edu/vnews/display.v/ART/2003/10/24/3f990e408e48f?in_archive=1



Today's Christian Woman

Series

ARTICLE

Discovering a Healthier You

Christian wellness professional Ruth McGinnis offers tips to help you feel better and more balanced physically and spiritually.

By Amy M. Tatum, for the study, “Healthy Body, Healthy Spirit.”

Does finding the motivation, energy, and extra minutes in a day to stay healthy seem impossible in this spread-yourself-too-thin world? You're probably thinking, *How could I possibly have time to go to the gym between work, dinner, and my kids' soccer practice? And even if I had time, where would I start?*



To help you get on the right track to better health, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN talked to certified personal trainer and professional musician Ruth McGinnis, author of *Living the Good Life* (Revell) and *Breathing Freely: Celebrating the Imperfect Life* (Revell). Ruth shared her expertise on how to take better care of yourself—and, surprise!—even urges you not to feel guilty if you don't have time to hit the gym. Check out her practical tips to rejuvenate your vitality and live more abundantly starting today.

If you haven't been taking care of yourself, how on earth do you find the motivation to begin?

First of all, nobody can motivate another person. You have to have that inner desire for a healthier life. But one motivation that works for almost everyone is fear—the fear of losing your range of motion, the fear of high cholesterol or high blood pressure.

When you're in your 40s, as I am, you start to realize maintenance is crucial. If you don't start maintaining the health you've already got, look out, because it doesn't get easier. Investing in your health isn't a luxury. Often I've found a woman with a husband and kids to care for feels guilty making that investment in herself. But when you start to lose muscle mass, gain weight, and feel tired all the time, you can't give something you don't have. Nobody benefits from a woman who doesn't take care of herself.



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So how do you get started?

It's not easy, especially for women with small children and hectic lives. But the first big important step is getting enough sleep. Keeping regular sleeping hours is crucial, because the more disciplined things, such as eating right and exercising, are harder to implement if you're exhausted.

Go to bed at the same time every night and get up at about the same time every morning. That's a tried-and-true method for improving your sleep. The problem is, many of us get involved watching television, or suddenly have a spurt of energy to clean the kitchen at the end of the day. Those things distract the body from preparing itself for sleep. Look at the way you manage your hours, especially late in the day, and make wiser choices to help you get to bed earlier and to give yourself more time to wind down so you can sleep.

Any suggestions?

Turn off that television and computer! Artificial light from the computer stimulates your nervous system, so it makes it harder for you to fall asleep.

Some people take a bath or read; others turn down the phone ringer. Turn off bright lights and lower the noise level even for 30 minutes.

Our culture expects us to run ourselves ragged on an inhuman schedule. Lots of truly exhausted people still have trouble falling asleep because their mind's still going. Maybe they've worked hard mentally but haven't exerted their body all day, which makes it tough to get a good night's sleep.

Many of us sit all day at work. How can we exert ourselves more?

You have to look for opportunities to move around. For example, if you work on the second floor, use the stairs instead of the elevator. One of the greatest exercises for your backside is to go up stairs two at a time. By lifting your leg that much higher, you really engage your rear-end muscles. Over a period of time, the difference between taking the stairs versus taking the elevator has a significant impact on how much muscle you use and how many calories you burn. Building and maintaining muscle mass, especially later in life, is extremely important.

Also, taking a 15-minute walk during your lunch hour or break time can have huge benefits. Even if you don't have time to change clothes and go to a gym, you still can accomplish something by just going out and walking. Grab a friend, and make it fun.



You're suggesting we change the way we think about an exercise regimen?

Exactly! A regimen doesn't mean you have to go to the gym or a weight-loss program to experience some benefits. Those things are great, but a regimen can be as simple as being aware of crucial areas—staying hydrated, getting sleep, being more active, eating right—and applying small steps daily to make a difference in your health.

Our generation grew up during the fitness revolution. We've been taught we need to have an ideal fitness regimen. But what's been lost in that message is that even if you don't have time to do an optimal fitness routine, there's still lots you can do everyday to make a huge difference in your health. Integrating little spurts of activity during the day, even if it's just taking the stairs, helps.

Many health clubs today have terrific deals for women to help with exercise and motivation. Several offer free childcare. Try visiting different gyms to find the one right for you, or partner with a friend to exercise together.

One of my former clients, who wanted to feel more fit, didn't want to join a health club. Instead, she signed up for ice-skating lessons. She got regular exercise and worked all the muscles in her body—plus she loved it! Discovering something you love to do, even if it doesn't sound like a typical fitness routine, is a great way to maintain your motivation.

What if your energy wanes in the late afternoon or evening?

I know what you mean. At the end of the day, lots of women say to themselves, *I should go on a walk before I have to start dinner, or do push-ups and crunches*, but they feel too fatigued to do it. That's where you have to take a leap of faith and believe that making the effort actually will make you feel less tired and will help you sleep at night.

There's a mental game you can play to help get motivated. Think to yourself, *I'm just going to put on my walking shoes*. Then, after you do that, tell yourself, *I'm just going to walk for 5 minutes because I'm so tired*. Usually those 5 minutes turn into a 20-minute walk. I can't count the number of times I've done that for myself.

Also, being dehydrated can cause you to have low energy. Most people don't drink the eight to ten glasses of water they need daily. Always keep water with you so you're hydrating your body.



Once a woman's motivated to live more healthily, where can she turn for encouragement to keep going?

Turn to Scripture for encouragement. Psalm 121:1–2 says, “I lift my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” That’s my motto. I remind myself of all the things I can’t control, and of who is in control.

Also, there are Scripture references that remind us God didn’t design us to be couch potatoes. For example, Isaiah 40:31 says, “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” God designed us with an incredible body. He designed us to thrive, to dig into our human resources and use them. That verse in Isaiah reminds me that investing in my physical well-being can be a spiritual pursuit.

How so?

When I’m too busy, it’s hard for me to balance my spiritual life, to connect with God. That’s why quiet time for reflection is monumentally important.

A lot of times, I’ll make a concentrated effort to pray for the concerns of my heart, then stop and listen to God. It’s interesting to be present with God without an agenda. Being open to receive comfort or an answer or direction takes time.

But I’m just like everybody else—I wake up in the morning with expectations for the day. I know I’ll have challenges in terms of time management, and disappointments in areas I can’t control. I went through a process of relinquishing control before I felt as though I could surrender to God. I’m trying to make that leap from my will be done to thy will every day. Every morning I get up, surrender my schedule to God, and try to celebrate each day.

That’s tough to do in our culture.

When I turn on the television and see people who’ve had the benefit of a make-up artist, hair stylist, special lighting, or cosmetic surgery, I realize our culture has lured us into believing people with outer beauty have it all together. What we really need are role models to share that there’s beauty in the aging process. We read about the celebrity culture and the amount of time they devote to looking perfect. We need to be reminded how very empty that is. In the process, they’re losing time they could be investing in other areas of life, such as relationships. And ultimately, we fight a losing battle with aging. Your body’s going to change, and your skin’s going to get bigger than your body. You’re not supposed to look 20 when you’re 50.



But we can make choices to stay healthy.

Yes. A healthy lifestyle is a lifetime pursuit. It's not something you just get one day and have forever. Put a healthy lifestyle together in a way that works for you, and don't feel bombarded by the messages from the fitness world, infomercial world, and talk-show world.

My message isn't a thrilling, cutting-edge breakthrough. It's not the kind of regimen that's going to make headline news, because it's simply a reassuring message that the basics have worked and continue to work. That's why I love the ice-skating story so much. When I heard about that woman's workout routine, I thought, *Good for you for finding something that's a passion for you.*

We each have a better idea of what's good for us than we give ourselves credit for. And pop culture is largely to blame for that, because we have these insidious messages always coming at us to tell us we're not thin enough, not young enough, not rich enough, not organized enough. Martha Stewart makes me break out in hives. She should see my kitchen floor—it's always a mess!

But there's so much freedom in being able to see the beauty and uniqueness of your own life and body. Investing in your well-being is investing in your life. Putting on a pair of shoes and going for a walk is a wonderful way to make you feel healthier. But to be able to practice being who you are and celebrate your unique gifts—to be able to discern what matters and what doesn't, and to be committed to a meaningful life—that's what life's all about.

For more information about Ruth and healthier living, check out Ruth's website at www.ruthmcginnis.com.

"Discovering a Healthier You," TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, September/October 2002, Vol. 24, No. 5, Page 76



Tips for Getting Fit

6 THINGS YOU CAN DO DAILY TO IMPACT YOUR WELL BEING

Avoid falling for fitness-revolution hype. Between unrealistic body types, skimpy clothing, and all the machines purporting to keep you fit, there are many reasons to feel discouraged. Observe fitness industry images with detachment; remind yourself the best reason to exercise is to stay healthy, and you already have everything you need to be physically active.

Keep track of your efforts. Record your activity so you can fine tune your approach to exercise by discovering what works for you. Another benefit: It's motivating to see results from the efforts you make toward better health.

Make deals with yourself. When you don't have the desire to tackle a 20-minute walk, give yourself permission to do 5 minutes, and let yourself off the hook. Usually a 5-minute walk will turn into 20 minutes. Getting started is the most important step toward physical activity as a way of life.

Find a fitness professional. It's possible to hire a qualified trainer without breaking the bank. Most can design a safe and effective exercise program for you, work with you for a few sessions, then follow up when needed. Try to find a fitness professional with certification from ACSM (the American College of Sports Medicine), NASM (the National Academy of Sports Medicine), ACE (American Council on Exercise), or another nationally recognized fitness trainer organization.

Make exercise enjoyable. Choose an activity you look forward to doing; otherwise, it won't become a consistent part of your life. For me, running with my sister or my dog is always more compelling than running alone.

Give yourself permission to start over. When it comes to exercise, nothing's more defeating than an all-or-nothing attitude. Remind yourself, *I can negotiate my goals and my good intentions as often as necessary.*





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From cover to cover, *Today's Christian Woman* is written with you in mind. Each issue is brimming with lively and trustworthy articles, stories, and regular features that cover so many meaningful areas of your life—your family, career, children, health, and friendships. And each article provides you with fresh inspiration and biblical insight that helps you meet the pressures of your life with greater confidence.

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