

The Quest4Life Podcast Show Notes:

Season #3, Episode #18: Level-Up Your Social Fitness

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When we think of fitness, most people think “physical fitness,” which often is juxtaposed in our minds with health, wellness, and performance. It isn’t often, however, that when we think of fitness, we think of “social fitness.”

We all know that eating right, engaging in regular physical activity, getting enough sleep, and managing stress are important, which is more closely related to physical fitness, the health and quality of our relationships with others, such as partners, family members, friends, coworkers, and even ourselves is, arguably, equally as important...if for no other reason that deficiencies in our relationships can negatively impact our physical health.

So, what is “social fitness” exactly?

First, according to the Military Health System and Defense Health Agency, *social fitness is the ability to engage in productive personal and professional relationships and use resources that promote overall well-being.*

According to the Consortium for Health and Military Performance, *social fitness is the degree to which you assess, build, and optimize the relationships and interactions you have with others.*

Finally, according to an article published in the *Rand Health Quarterly* by Juliana McGene, *social fitness is the combined use of resources a person gets from his or her social world which encompasses the availability and maintenance of social relationships and the ability to use those ties to manage stressors and successfully perform tasks.*

Now that we’re all on the same page with the basic premise of what social fitness is, what follows are ways you can improve your social fitness to level-up your mindset and achieve peak performance both in relationships and the daily tasks you need to perform.

#1: Start with self-reflection.

If you think about it...by starting any new physical fitness routine, you discover there are muscle groups that are weaker than others. The same holds for kick-starting your social fitness routine. As you reflect, consider journaling, or download an app where you can track where you are devoting your time. From there, ask yourself: “What am I giving my time to and what am I receiving from that time spent?” “Am I spending enough time with family members?” “Am I having enough fun with friends?” “Do I feel like I’m getting enough emotional support from loved ones?” Answers to these questions and shifting how and where you spend your time can strengthen your social fitness muscles.

#2: Emphasize the relationships you value most.

The goal for improving your social fitness isn't necessarily to strive for a total social overhaul. Rather, focus on the relationships that bring productive value to your life. Once you identify who those people are, ask yourself, "Is there anything I can do to improve this relationship?" "What are some ways we can spend more time together?" "Are there ways I can communicate more effectively?" Answers to these questions and shifting how and where you spend your time can strengthen your social fitness muscles.

#3: Build a routine by creating standing, recurring touchpoints.

In contemporary America, most of us have overfilled our lives and schedules from the time we wake up until the time we go to sleep. Knowing that, it's difficult at times to connect with others spontaneously. By calendaring touchpoints, such as a weekly coffee hour with a mentor or a monthly Zoom call with a friend in a different time zone, you give yourself a shot at connecting with others more consistently. And doing so can strengthen your social fitness muscles.

#4: Send "I'm thinking about you" messages at regularly scheduled intervals.

Admittedly, this is something I've tried to do and, only until recently, have I been able to be more consistent. These messages take various forms and have led to nothing but positive results. One recent message I sent went like this, "Hey brother. Wanted to check in to let you know I'm thinking of you and hope all is well." Now, I sent that via text. You may consider being more intimate by sending a video message. No matter the medium, the act of sending a message like that makes you feel more connected to them. Plus, you get the added benefit of a deeper connection when they reply. And doing so can strengthen your social fitness muscles.

#5: Create new connections with others.

Expanding your personal and professional network is a wonderful way to get into "social shape." While putting yourself "out there" is never easy, there are, seemingly, an incalculable number of ways to do it. You might consider joining a running or hiking club. You might consider joining groups at your church or volunteering in your community. You might seek out opportunities to take classes, such as cooking or baking classes, gardening classes, or even an actual class at a local university or community college. What we know, and what the science informs, is that building new friendships while maintaining existing ones shapes your mental health and overall well-being. And doing so can strengthen your social fitness muscles.

#6: Practice random acts of kindness.

The next time you're at the grocery store and the person at checkout starts helping you, ask them, "How are you?" and care about their response. Look them in the face and show them you genuinely care how they are doing, as they spend most of their workday dealing with people who don't give a rip about them. You may also consider giving the homeless person on the corner some money or food or water. When these people say, "Thank you" say, "You're welcome. What's your name?" For most people, their name is the most important word in their vocabulary.

Follow this up by saying, “I hope you have a great day, *insert name*.” You may also consider stopping to help someone with a flat tire. I know this is crazy inconvenient to do, but the lasting effects are considerable for both you and them. And doing each of these things – and a whole host of other random acts of kindness – can strengthen your social fitness muscles.

#7: Put down the screen and find ways to have fun with others.

If you haven't connected with your mom or dad, brothers or sisters, sons or daughters, or friends in a while, figure out an excuse to spend time with them doing something fun. This could take the form of a family game night (however old fashioned that is). You could grab some friends and go to a movie. You could find fellowship with people at the local buffalo wing shop watching football or enjoying a beer. You could grab your brother or sister and go “people watch” at the airport. You could get some friends together and play Cards Against Humanity. If you've never done this, the laughs will be nonstop. The list of possible ways to connect with others and have fun doing it are voluminous. And doing so can strengthen your social fitness muscles.

Final Thoughts

First, rates of sadness, hopelessness, and loneliness are on the rise across all generational cohorts despite being more connected than we've ever been. There is hope, however, as there are practical things that you can put into your life *today* that can make a positive, measurable impact.

They are as follows:

- Start with self-reflection.
- Emphasize the relationships you value most.
- Build a routine by creating standing, recurring touchpoints.
- Send “I'm thinking about you” messages.
- Create new connections with others.
- Practice random acts of kindness.
- Put down the screen and find ways to have fun with others.

Further, I encourage you to explore additional ways you can enhance your connections with others, such as becoming a better listener, becoming more vulnerable, resolving past conflicts, apologizing when you've committed a wrong, or sharing good news and/or celebrating good news others share with you.

At the end of the day, none of this is rocket science, but it requires that we put forth effort. Just like the difficulty we face starting a new physical fitness program, starting or revitalizing a social fitness program won't be easy and progress may be slow, but the results will be worth it.

As usual, it's food for thought, Fellow Questers.