Have I Got News for you!
For seven years, I have been meaning to finish an article about how I got rid of my lower back pain and summarize it in a way that would be easy for people to remember. It has been on my list of good intentions. Recently, I met a woman at a State Farm meeting with back problems who inspired me to finish this article. Why keep it a secret when so many people can benefit?

My Back Problem
Starting in college and in the 20 years since, the pain in my lower back would return every several months. The only thing I could trace its origin to was a little wrestling match that I had with a friend in which I fell over a chair backwards. My back never seemed to be the same.

I learned over the years that it was a bulging disk in my lumbar spine that twisted my lower back slightly out of alignment. This put a lot of pressure on the nerves in that area and caused my right leg to be shorter than the left. I walked funny for a while, but after a week or two (in most cases), the pain eventually passed. When it didn’t, or when I wanted to speed up the process, I paid a visit to my chiropractor so that he could work his magic to loosen the muscles. The pain would come and go for years, but it was manageable.

Finally, an episode occurred that was so painful and debilitating that I couldn’t take it anymore. The pain got progressively worse and eventually developed into a condition called sciatica, sending a shooting pain down my right leg. It not only hurt to walk and stand, it hurt while lying in bed. I’d especially cringe when I had to roll over. This was the worst bout ever. It was so excruciating that it literally brought me to tears. I had to find a better solution.

Take four steps to get rid of back pain — and be healthier.

By Mickey Straub // President & Founder, Sales Activity Management
I needed to take responsibility for my present condition and future health.

I ended up getting a CT scan (that's a CAT scan for us laymen) and being examined by an orthopedic doctor who confirmed the culprit was indeed a bulging disk between my L4 and L5 vertebrae. I was further diagnosed to have a slight case of stenosis, a narrowing of the nerve openings around the spinal cord or nerve roots. The prognosis was not very promising and even included possible arthritis in my joints. Much to my surprise, I received no real suggestions on how to keep it from recurring or how to get over it, other than to ice it, warm it, take some pain medication and wait it out.

The Solution

Many times a solution is invented, created or developed after years of study and toil. In some ways, I wish that were the case here, but it wasn’t. It came to me as fast as one of those ideas that just pop into your head in the middle of the night. Suddenly, the formula that I needed, the solution to my problem, came like a flash of lightning. And it came in two parts.

The solution I was seeking wasn’t contained in a bottle or a pill, a visit to a doctor or the waving of a magic wand. The answer was within myself.

First, I had to accept the responsibility that I was in this condition because of my own actions and inactions. Even though I got temporary relief from the medical profession, any treatment that I received was only treating the symptom, not the cause. The answer I was looking for rested in the undeniable fact that I needed to take responsibility for my present condition and future health.

The second part to my remedy was that I needed to take better care of myself in four specific areas of my life. Luckily, the formula arrived in the form of an acronym that would make it easier for me to remember: NEWS.

The Four Areas for Back Health

Here are the four areas of my life that I needed to improve, my NEWS: Nutrition, Exercise, Weight and Stress. They require effort, but here is the good “NEWS”: they are all voluntary. Barring any unusual medical condition, we can control them.

Nutrition. When it comes to nutrition, I have a storied past. Raised on junk food and Pepsi, I avoided vegetables ever since I threw up eating succotash as a kid. I was practically introduced to milk in college, fruits while living in California and the value of drinking water from a woman at work while in my forties.

You have probably heard the old saying, “You are what you eat!” Well, I’m here to tell you that it is true. If my back is acting up or I find myself getting sick easily, I almost instantly feel better after I start improving my nutritional intake. It’s simple math. I eat more fruits and vegetables, minimize the junk food, cut out the soda, avoid too much red meat, eat fish and I don’t eat too much or too late at night.

One of the most important things that I did was increase the amount of water that I was drinking daily, which lubricates the body and keeps the muscles and joints more lubricated. (To learn more about the value of water, read Water: For Health, for Healing, for Life: You’re not Sick, You’re Thirsty! by F. Batmanghelidj, M.D.1)

Nutrition is probably the easiest part of my new formula. If you feel that improving your nutrition may be a challenge for you, you’re not alone. But here is some more good news: You already know what you should and should not eat. You just have to do it. And don’t fret too much if you don’t eat your six helpings a day of vegetables or drink eight glasses of water. No one is perfect (nor will they ever be), and tomorrow we all start with a clean slate.

Exercise. Next is exercise. Here is where the old saying of “use it or lose it” really comes into play. I found the less I exercised, the stiffer my back and all my joints became. Conversely, the reverse is true. Exercise can be separated into three categories: cardiovascular, muscle tone and stretching.

As far as cardiovascular, my favorite saying at the health club for years was, “If you’re not careful around this place, you’ll break a sweat!” While that may not be as true for me today; it really does not have to be at a breakneck pace. But it does need to be frequent — on average, two to three times per week for at least 20 to 30 minutes (at a decent heart rate) in order to gain any real benefit. I personally had trouble being disciplined at cardiovascular exercise until I started setting goals in miles and recording them weekly with the help of an exercise journal that my wife encouraged me to design. (To see one, visit www.MileBook.com.)

When it comes to your back, muscle tone and stretching are vital. Unfortunately, the thing that most guys hear while growing up is to build up chest and arms. That becomes their battle cry: the bigger the better. There is some talk about “washboard” abs, but once again it is mostly to impress the ladies. It wasn’t until seven years ago that I learned just how important your abs are to your back. Because the back has little muscle to support it, I needed to strengthen my stomach muscles to stay mobile and healthy and to lessen the risk of injury.


Note: Reprinted by permission of the author.
At the same time, though, I had to stay limber and loose by stretching every time I exercised. This is where most Americans seem to cut corners, perhaps to save time. What they don’t realize is that if your hamstrings are too tight, they will pull on your lower back like a rubber band and pull things out of alignment. Stretching is really a great use of time. (If you are looking to read a great book on goal setting and exercise, read Getting Physical: Powerful, Easy-To-Learn Techniques for Motivating Yourself to Stick With Regular Exercise by Art Turock.2)

**Weight.** It is difficult to say how much of a role excess weight plays in lower back problems. All I can say is that the times that I have packed on a few extra pounds, the incidence of my back problems seemed to increase.

This would seem to be more than coincidence, and it makes sense: it is a matter of gravity. The harder your joints, muscles and tendons have to work, the greater the chance of strain. Though weight probably plays a larger role with knees and ankles, the impact on your back is probably not a positive one. And if most of that weight shows up around the waist line, it’s likely to be accompanied by loose stomach muscles and poor posture, neither of which is a good thing.

Luckily, weight has never been a big problem in my life or that of my siblings and family. But once again, it is a choice. We have all chosen to not overeat nor underexerci-se, at least not for too long. Heredity may play a part, but I believe that weight is largely a byproduct of the first two components of my simple formula: nutrition and exercise. It is not rocket science, it is a matter of mathematics. We all have to balance the number of calories that we take in and burn off. That responsibility falls squarely on our own shoulders.

**Stress.** The last letter in the formula stands for stress, and it is probably the most difficult one to identify and remedy. Like the other components of the formula, it builds up gradually and before you know it, you can go over the edge.

If I have too much stress in my life, my body just doesn’t feel as healthy. My back is one of the first places it shows up. When that happens, I look for telltale signs and possible causes, which usually have a ripple effect. I self-analyze and ask myself some tough, honest questions: Am I working too many hours? Am I going to sleep and waking up thinking about work? Is my family time balanced? Do I have some alone time? Am I pursuing my passion? How’s my spiritual life? How’s my diet? Am I exercising and stretching?

Stress is a double-edged sword. A little bit of it is healthy and helps you push yourself. It is what I call “positive tension.” It helps you reach your potential and live life to its fullest. But too much of it can be overwhelming and throw the other three components of this powerful little formula into a tailspin.

**Good NEWS**

One of the most embarrassing moments of my life occurred during my worst outbreak of back pain. It happened when I had to call my wife to the guest room, where I was sleeping because I didn’t want to bother her. I needed her help walking me to the bathroom, because I couldn’t make it on my own. What it must be like for the elderly flashed in front of my eyes. “Is this what it is like for them?” I wondered. “If it is, then I don’t want to have anything to do with it.” I prayed for the answer.

Seven years have gone by, and I continue to rely upon my simple formula of NEWS to keep my back pain at bay. I am thankful it arrived in the form of an acronym, making it easier to remember the four key areas of my life that I need to keep in check.

Improving nutrition, exercise, weight and stress may not relieve everyone’s back pain, but if you’re looking to live a more balanced, healthier life overall, “Have I got NEWS for you!”

---