

Chapter 1

Maximizing Your Potential—in Body, Mind, and Spirit

Whether you have a naturally athletic build, a figure that's curvaceous, or one that's willowy, there's good news: you can develop some of the physical attributes you've always wanted but didn't get from Mother Nature or your gene pool. The truth is, with strategic work, every woman can become fitter, stronger, more toned, more self-assured, and sexier. That's an outcome that's realistic and healthy. That's a goal - that's achievable and believable. That's a goal that's right for everyone. With the right physical and psychological moves, you really can turn the body you have into the body you want, losing inches, dropping pounds, and developing a stronger, more sculpted look and greater mental fortitude in the process.

If the goal of getting fit and strong has seemed too daunting and complicated in the past, you were probably going about achieving it the wrong way. Sorry to lay that on you, but it's the unvarnished truth. Maximizing your fitness potential really isn't as difficult or taxing as many people make it out to be. It involves just three critical elements: a blend of strength-training workouts (a.k.a. resistance training), cardiovascular exercise, and the right moves to enhance flexibility. It really is that simple. Combine these cornerstones of fitness with healthy eating habits—upgrading the nutritional quality of your food choices, using food primarily as fuel, eating regularly, snacking strategically, and exercising “liquid” intelligence (choosing your drinks smartly)—and you'll soon be on your way to a leaner, stronger, fitter physique.

You won't just look better; you'll feel better, too. If you're active enough to break a sweat and get breathless during any given workout, your brain will release endorphins and other feel-good chemicals. Your body will burn fat and extra calories during the session and afterward. Your circulation will improve, and you'll likely get better muscle definition, smoother digestion, and greater strength and stamina for physical activities and the activities of everyday life. By building lean muscle mass through strength training, you'll rev up your metabolism, which will help you burn calories faster and get and stay slim and sculpted for the long haul. Plus, even a brief workout can help regulate your appetite and put the kibosh on your cravings for Girl Scout cookies or other foods you desire. A review of studies published in a 2013 issue of *Sports Medicine* concluded that a single bout of exercise suppresses ghrelin (a hormone that stimulates appetite) while increasing levels of other hormones that inhibit food intake. Really, by exercising regularly, you have nothing to lose except your inertia, lethargy, and body-image blues. So get going already!

The reality is you can work out until you're lobster-red in the face, but if you're eating poorly, it won't make enough of a difference. To see the results you want, it's important to supplement your training with clean eating, which will fuel your body appropriately, while also cutting out unnecessary (and unhealthy) fats, excessive calories, pro-inflammatory foods, and yucky toxins. Get enough sleep, manage stress effectively, and talk kindly to yourself, and you'll make the journey that much easier and more pleasant. These are the essential ingredients that will help you restore, recharge, and refresh your body and mind as you embark on your goal of getting fitter and stronger.

Your body is an incredibly powerful machine—that is, when it's operated and

maintained properly. Few things work better the more you use them, but your body will if you take the right steps to restore, recharge, and refresh—the new three Rs—it on a regular basis. Just like your car needs good-quality gas and oil to run properly, your body needs essential fuels and fluids in the form of clean, anti-inflammatory, -health-promoting foods and lots of water. Your body also needs daily breaks for maintenance and recharging: because our bodies are powered wirelessly—we don't have the option of plugging into an external power source—we need to let our internal power source recharge us physically and mentally by getting adequate sleep and rest. The third R—refreshing yourself—can come from resting and relaxing, pampering yourself, giving yourself a well-timed pep talk, and other energy-boosting activities. Taking steps to restore, recharge, and refresh yourself will pay off handsomely as you embark on the Strong Is the New Skinny program.

Gaining a stronger, healthier body and mind will help you live to the fullest extent, taking on each day with vigor and giving you the confidence to challenge yourself to reach new physical goals. These three assets—getting stronger, living larger, and gaining confidence to challenge yourself further—really do work in tandem. After all, becoming strong and fit is inherently motivating: once you start seeing results, you'll want to keep up the good work to maintain them or to ratchet up your fitness level a notch or two. Feeling fit and empowered can become practically addictive; after you get it, you'll want to do whatever you can to perpetuate that healthy high. When Jen was a trainer on *Shedding for the Wedding*, a reality show where engaged couples who were fairly overweight competed against each other to see who could drop the most pounds, she saw this effect firsthand. Initially, getting the couples to work out hard and cultivate internal discipline and motivation was challenging, even though they all wanted the prize (an all-expenses-paid dream wedding). But, as the participants started seeing their bodies change and felt themselves getting stronger, they became more and more driven and competitive (with themselves and other couples) to see how much fitter, faster, and stronger they could get.

The truth is, a strong, healthy body leads to a strong, healthy spirit and a more inspired, upbeat attitude toward life. Who wouldn't love that?! Don't worry, though: you won't have to spend half your life working out in a gym or jogging around a track to get a stronger, slimmer, sexier body. The plan outlined in this book provides a range of multidimensional, compound exercises and workouts that are designed to build strength, stamina, and other aspects of fitness in the most efficient manner possible. You really can do this without turning your life upside down. Instead of challenging individual muscles one by one, as many programs do, we combine moves in a way that delivers multiple muscle-strengthening and muscle-sculpting, -fat-burning, and body-toning benefits from your neck all the way down to your feet. This is the very best form of multitasking—and it will help you get in the best shape of your life.

The key is to rely on four essential principles of fitness training:

- Finding the right formula for you. This involves making the plan personal, then taking ownership of it. Every woman is different in terms of what she likes to do, what she can do, and what she wants to get out of exercise. Before you begin any new venture, it's a good idea to know where you're going or what you're aiming for, don't you think? How can you arrive at your destination if you don't know where (or what) it is? To do that, you'll want to think about how to give your goals our STAR treatment.

By that, we mean making them

Specific with a clear, measurable target so you know what you're working toward;

Time-based with a set deadline to keep you on track;

Action-oriented with steps that will help you reach your goal;

Realistic and achievable for you, given your current level of fitness.

If you want to run a 10K race in three months, you might frame your goal this way: Set a specific goal (do the race and cross the finish line) and a time-based deadline (the date of the race is set, so that's a no-brainer); develop action-oriented steps (create stepping stones such as jogging for 20 to 30 minutes five days a week for the first month, bumping it up to 40 minutes the next month, and increasing your running time to 50 to 60 minutes the third month); and keep it realistic (don't aim to achieve a blistering speed during the race if this is your first 10K, or decide to run a marathon instead). If you start with a goal that feels realistic for you to achieve, you'll build confidence that will prepare you for future goals that are more ambitious. You'll learn how to do all this on the pages that follow.

- Changing up the challenges. To do this, you'll want to manipulate the lengths and sequences of your workouts, or change the weights you use or the number of repetitions you do on a regular basis. The reality is that sticking with the same old, same old workout routine day after day (a.k.a. exercise monogamy) may seem easy and convenient, but it can lead to exercise monotony, as well as overuse injuries, mental burnout, or a plateau in physiological benefits. It's best to switch up your routine so that you're trying a new cardio activity and fresh strength-training moves every six weeks. This will help keep your workout life interesting and stimulating—and get you better results. It will also help you make continuous progress, without risking injury or boredom. By changing up your workouts, you will challenge different muscle groups, which will force your body to work harder and get stronger.

- Shocking your body fit. How? By progressing the intensity of your workouts as your body adapts to each phase. As you get stronger and fitter, you'll notice that the workouts you've been doing have gotten easier. That's a good thing—and a bad thing, too. The good part: It means that you've made lots of progress; it means that what used to be challenging for your body is no big deal now. Congrats on that! The bad part: It means that your muscles, lungs, heart, and other body parts have adapted to the exercises and you are no longer getting as much out of them in terms of cardio-boosting, strength-building, or calorie-burning benefits. This means that you need to take your workouts to the next level, or else you'll end up on an exercise plateau (stuck, in other words).

- Focusing on neglected muscles. This involves building strength in an even, systematic fashion so that you can avoid developing muscle imbalances. If you've ever noticed that the right side of your body is stronger than your left (or vice versa) or that certain exercises that require balance are especially challenging, you're personally familiar with muscle imbalances. And you're in good company because we all have them to varying degrees: some people's quadriceps muscles are stronger than their hamstrings; others have an imbalance between the muscles in their

abdomen and their back or between their biceps and triceps. (By the way, people tend to focus on building the muscles they can see in the mirror, but it's the ones you don't see that really change your overall physique. That's what we'll be hitting with this plan.) Besides, if you continuously rely on one set of muscles to pick up the slack for another, you can burn out the ones that are doing the most work, which then causes trickle-down stress for adjacent muscles.

By heeding these fitness principles, you'll push your muscles to get fitter, stronger, more flexible and resilient. Strength is yours for the taking. But you will have to work for it, if you want your body to change. With the approach we've outlined, you'll build strength and fitness in a continuous fashion. You'll also avoid falling into the trap of risking acute injuries, overuse injuries, and boredom because you'll be shaking up your routine and the way it makes you feel on a regular basis. By helping you build strength in a systematic, balanced way, you'll also sidestep the problem of developing inequities between different muscle groups.

Bringing Your Head into the Game

Remember, getting stronger isn't just a physical challenge. It also involves an attitude shift and certain changes in your behavior. The desire and drive to change your body and your habits really starts in your head. And the fact is that your mind-set can work with you or against you in this respect. Think about it: would you be more inspired by an upbeat, encouraging coach or a cruel, critical slave driver? We're betting the coach will win this contest. So check in with your thoughts and see which personality they most closely resemble—be honest! As a starting point, consider whether you would ever talk to a friend the way you talk to yourself in your head. If your internal voice belongs to a nasty, negative slave driver, give her the heave-ho and invite a more positive, motivating cheerleader into the picture instead. You can change the conversation that takes place inside your head from one that focuses on your body's deficiencies to one that embraces what's right and what's possible and encourages you to enhance and build on your strengths or natural potential. Making the switch can mean the difference between maintaining the status quo and reaching for and attaining your goals. How you think about and talk to yourself really is a choice, and it's one that's within your control.

But getting and keeping the right mind-set also requires training, just like conditioning any other part of your body does. That's because mental fortitude is like a muscle: it needs to be challenged with worthy goals, flexible thinking, and a positive, supportive attitude to grow and develop and get stronger. (You'll learn how to use the right psychological tips and tricks to develop that crucial mental grit and can-do spirit in the pages that follow.) If you haven't pushed yourself in small ways on a regular basis, you may wilt when life gets really challenging. Without mental fortitude, it is nearly impossible to make meaningful or significant changes in your life—like revamping your health habits. To strengthen your mental resolve, it's best to start small by setting attainable goals for yourself: you might vow to eliminate soda from your diet (perhaps by switching to seltzer with a splash of juice, if you like fizzy drinks) or to do 25 burpees or 20 push-ups on a given day, even if you need to take breaks between sets in order to finish them. Once you achieve these small milestones and continue to do them, they'll eventually become second nature to you, and you can then up the ante by setting larger goals, such as working out five times in a week or running six miles without stopping.

The reality is your body and your mind are both much tougher than you think; the key is to tap into their hidden strengths and put them to good use to better the state of your health, your fitness, and your life. The best way to do that is to rely on smart - strategies—like exercising first thing in the morning before life’s unpredictable nature has a chance to interfere with your good intentions, or stocking your kitchen with wholesome foods rather than junky stuff you tend to eat too much of, or choosing a mantra that inspires you to give the SINS program your best effort—rather than relying exclusively on willpower. This way you’ll be setting yourself up to succeed, not fail. Indeed, a recent study from Dartmouth College found that chronic dieters are likely to have greater success if they avoid situations—like viewing lots of desirable foods—that challenge their self-control; the study also found that when perennial dieters overeat, the parts of their brains that balance impulsive behavior and self--control become disrupted, making it harder for them to resist temptation. This isn’t surprising given that “willpower, like a muscle, becomes fatigued from overuse,” as psychologist Roy Baumeister, PhD, and John Tierney note in their book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, “but [it] can also be strengthened over the long term through exercise.”