

Healthy Living

Amy Bickers Mercer took a break from her regular duties as Associate Home Editor (and single mother of two) to get fitness and nutrition know-how from the pros at Cooper Wellness Program.

10 Resolutions I Can Keep

I took a crash course that changed my life. These tips can work for you too!

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The Cooper Wellness Program in Dallas is like behavior modification boot camp. It's a condensed encyclopedia of all things good for you. Last year, I spent six days focused on health, nutrition, and fitness at the tree-shaded, 30-acre campus established by Dr. Kenneth Cooper, the man who introduced the aerobics concept—and launched a fitness revolution—in America in 1968.

Each 4-, 6-, or 13-day program is chock-full of workshops, group exercise, cooking classes, and personal training sessions. I opted for the 6-day session, and at week's end, I had a 2-inch binder filled with advice and recipes. I had a memorable experience. I had a wealth of knowledge. And I had a daunting task: Share these riches in one story.

You may not be able to spend a week focused solely on your



“How old would you be if you didn’t know how old you are?”

—DR. KENNETH COOPER

DAY 1: Executive director Connie Tyne focuses on each client’s personal goals during his or her visit and follows up afterward. “How much time do you spend planning your own health, your own future?” Connie asks.

DAY 2: Pilates is often associated with medieval-looking machines, but you also can practice on a mat. Benefits include strengthening core muscles, improved flexibility, and increased range of motion.



DAY 3: Water aerobics is especially good for improving lower body strength. Specially made shoes for water workouts provide traction for better stability and protect feet from rough pool surfaces.

health, but you can begin the journey with small steps. “Eventually you will have a new version of normal,” says Connie Tyne, executive director of the Cooper Wellness Program.

Here are 10 steps—culled from six days, multiple experts, and a three-ring binder—to get you on track to a new normal.

1. Change your mind. The Cooper program spends a lot of time excuse-busting. Get over all those preconceived notions you have about yourself. Write down every reason you have not to work out or eat healthfully. Then consider a solution for each problem. Give your body and mind the same consideration you give your automobile. Your workouts maintain the most important vehicle you will ever own. How far this body takes you is largely based on your choices. “Don’t die of something stupid,” Dr. Cooper says. “You are beautifully and wonderfully made.”

2. Evaluate yourself. The Wellness Program begins with a physical evaluation, which includes a mile-long walk, push-ups, crunches, and body fat percentage and flexibility assessments. This can be eye-opening. Before you kick-start your new lifestyle, find out where you stand so you can set realistic fitness goals. Many fitness facilities offer assessments for nonmembers for a fee. Most people, especially women, tend to judge themselves based on what the scale



DAY 4: The easiest way to begin a fitness routine is to take a walk. A 130-pound person can burn about 300 calories an hour walking at a 3.5 mph pace. “Dr. Cooper says you should walk your dog twice a day, even if you don’t have one,” Connie Tyne says.

Rick Salewske lost 300 pounds with the help of the experts at Cooper. He often speaks to people about what motivated him to begin his weight-loss journey and what keeps him going. (See his “before” photo, and read his amazing story at www.lost300.com.)



DAY 5: Exercise with a stability ball to strengthen core muscles and improve balance and coordination. Balls come in different sizes, so buy one that is right for your height. When you sit on it, your legs should create a 90-degree angle.



DAY 6: Registered dietitian Kathy Duran-Thal defies the belief that healthful food is bland. Over the six-day course, she teaches participants how to plan for meals out, cook well at home, and even have tasty desserts.

reads. This is a mistake! Get a true picture beyond mere numbers.

3. Eat breakfast. You already know you need to eat healthfully all day. This can seem like a daunting task. So begin with a healthful breakfast. Registered dietitian Kathy Duran-Thal emphasizes that food is fuel. Start your day by providing your body with what it needs to get going. Include protein. If your mornings feel rushed—and whose don’t?—Kathy suggests setting out the items you need for breakfast the night before.

4. Get up and move. You don’t have to jump into daily Olympic training sessions. Begin with reasonable goals. If exercise isn’t already a part of your life, the most important thing is to move. “Avoid inactivity. Notice I didn’t say exercise. Try to get a collective 30 minutes—break it up if you need to—of activity in every day,” Dr. Cooper says.

5. Change your shoes. If you’re like me, you’re wearing the wrong size of athletic shoes. On my last day at the program, Dallas podiatrist Allan Sherman checked my shoes and broke the news. “You should have about a thumb’s distance between your toe and the end of the shoe,” Dr. Sherman says. Who knew? I always thought blisters were just part of exercise. Shop for new shoes at the end of the day when feet are swollen, Dr. Sherman recommends. For optimum comfort, visit a shoe store dedicated to athletic shoes to find out if you need a neutral, stability, or motion-control shoe. (Because of my low arch, I need a stability shoe.) I’m trying to get over the fact that now I must buy tennis shoes in double-digit sizes that make me feel like Shaquille O’Neal.

6. Explore your options. Don’t let anyone tell you what type of exercise you *should* do. If you hate running—and I truly hate running—don’t force yourself to do it. I prefer power walking instead. If you think yoga is slow and boring, try ashtanga or

power yoga. Try out different forms of exercise. Explore activities such as salsa dancing that are both fun and beneficial.

7. Be consistent. You will only see results if you work out regularly and eat mindfully every day. You can’t take a four-day break and expect to see results that week. Exercise and eating right must become the norm, while indulgences and lazy days should be occasional treats. The good news is you will soon love the way exercise and good nutrition make you feel.

8. Update your routine. Stick with a workout routine for four weeks, and you will see a difference, says Chad Krisher, a personal trainer at Cooper Fitness Center. Then it’s time to mix things up. It can be as simple as lifting slightly heavier weights during your strength training routine or adding a yoga or Pilates class. Continue to challenge yourself every four weeks so you won’t hit a plateau. Plus you’ll avoid the boredom that can come with doing the same routine every time you work out. Chad suggests this budget-friendly idea: Meet with a trainer to help you set up a routine; then meet only once a month so the trainer can help you add something new or adjust your workout.

9. Enlist help. Recruit friends and family in your lifestyle change. Ask your spouse to join you on evening walks, or go to a yoga class with a friend. Let the people around you know that you are trying to change your life and you need their encouragement and support.

10. Reward yourself. Not with food. Let me repeat that: Not. With. Food. Get a manicure or a massage. (My week ended with a relaxing massage at the onsite Cooper Spa.) Buy yourself a new outfit or snazzy tennis shoes. If you’re like me, you might find you’re rewarding yourself with things that encourage you to work out more, such as a new exercise DVD, cute yoga pants, or a bright pink stability ball. I know, it seems crazy, but it feels so right. ●

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Download a worksheet from Cooper Wellness Program that will help you identify your goals and find ways to reach them: southernliving.com/your-goals