

Making the connection: Trainer writes book strengthening both mind and body through exercise

By Kathy Uek / Daily News Staff
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While many follow the sports dictum of no pain, no gain, personal trainer Jeff Rutstein feels the first step for many in achieving physical fitness is a mental leap.

It's a message that hits home for Marie Cotton of Hopkinton, seriously injured two decades ago when a drunken driver plowed into her, damaging her right knee and leaving her with limited mobility.

"I've tried gyms before, rehab and personal trainers," said Cotton. "Everything would start out wonderfully and then I would have to stop because I was hurt. I was also self-conscious in big gyms with all those gorgeous people or women my age wearing a size 8, but Jeff was different. He understood."

Cotton, under the advice of her doctor, needed to lose weight. She went to Rutstein's gym, Custom Fitness in Boston. "I learned about his program; that (it) was going to be slow and consistent, and would bring me to a point where I could function and be healthy."

Returning home, Cotton talked to her husband Robert and said, "We can pay for a funeral or pay for this." Cotton soon started the program.

Rutstein's understanding comes from personal experience. Addicted to alcohol, street drugs and steroids by the age of 22, Rutstein tried to quit. His cold-turkey approach almost killed him. Facing death was the beginning of his long road back. That bumpy road included facing uncomfortable truths about his life such as using alcohol to anesthetize the pain of feeling inferior, lifting weights to bulk up and become more popular and using steroids to help achieve the results he desired faster.

On Rutstein's road to recovery, feeling depressed and listless, he continued to exercise but reached a new awareness: that exercise was not all about getting buff.

Knowing he needed to improve his emotional, spiritual and physical well-being, he carefully designed a new workout, not focused on how he looked but how he felt. He used light weights and slow, focused movements, and used his mind to concentrate on his breathing and rhythm. Through this "meditative workout," he became more self-confident and his depression began to fade.

"I knew the only meaningful workout was one in which I could begin to build myself from the inside out," Rutstein writes in his new book, "Rutstein on Fitness: Strengthening the Body to Heal the Mind."

In 1990, he started Custom Fitness based on his mind-body approach.

"When you exercise, you feel a muscle make a connection to a group of muscles, which awakens your mind and gives you more energy," said Rutstein.

Rutstein's approach caught the attention of Dr. J. Alexander Bodkin, chief of the Clinical Psychopharmacology Research Program at McLean Hospital in Belmont. Bodkin began referring patients to Rutstein at his gym. Bodkin also wrote the foreword to Rutstein's book.

Rutstein wrote the autobiography/weight trading guide for people, like Cotton, who are intimidated by gyms but want to get in shape; for professionals in shape who want to manage stress and increase productivity; and for those who want to improve their mental outlook. His book makes it clear that everyone can attain physical fitness.

Photo Gallery



Jeff Rutstein working with Ted Todd at his Boston gym. (Photo: Bill Thompson)

Bodkin talked about depression recently. "Over the course of their lifetime, about 17 percent of Americans will get depressed at some time," he said. "Jeff is a sensitive and knowledgeable guy. He is tuned into people who are suffering."

Rutstein passionately tells the reader how he rediscovered the essential relationship between body and mind. He outlines in the book three exercise programs for the beginning, intermediate and advanced exerciser, with a section on diet and nutrition.

"The book will change your perception of exercise," said Rutstein. "It doesn't have to be painful. You'll feel good and have more energy. The Surgeon General Report recommends exercising 20 minutes three times a week. Some people can't even do that," said Rutstein. "Try to do something."

A determined Cotton followed that philosophy when she began her training.

"One minute on the treadmill and I thought I was going to die," said Cotton. "I hadn't exercised in a long time. Every time I get a little more confident. I'm not afraid because he watches every exercise."

Cotton continued her training. "Two months ago, I walked up 12 stairs to a landing at the White Cliffs in Northborough, followed by another 10 stairs and entered the room to my daughter's wedding reception," she said.

During the reception, the mother of the bride danced four times with her husband of 37 years. "Including our song, 'Two for the Road,'" said Cotton.

Today, Cotton has a new goal: To go sailing for her birthday. "I've been afraid to get on a boat," she said. "I couldn't get my leg over the boat. For years I walked with crutches. I don't even know where they are (now)."

"Rutstein on Fitness: Strengthening the Body to Heal the Mind," published by Custom Fitness in Boston, can be purchased for \$14.95 at Barnes & Noble, Borders Book Shop, Amazon.com and www.Rutsteinonfitness.com. Rutstein will be signing copies of his book at several upcoming local appearances: Wednesday, April 6, at 7 p.m. at Whole Foods, Bellingham; Thursday, April 7, at 7:30 p.m. at Barnes & Noble, Framingham; and Saturday, April 16, at 11 a.m. at Barnes & Noble, Bellingham.

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