

Kristen Swaften examines the way health and fitness is pursued in modern times.

- 1 Any observer of human development would notice that, until relatively recent times, people on the whole lived as their forefathers did. But that is no longer the case. Now, the populations of developed countries face countless choices in the things they consume, the lifestyles they follow, and with that, the ideals of health they believe in. Living is an art, they all proclaim; even medical science can afford an inspired makeover. 5
- 2 If there were an organisation called Healthaholics Anonymous, it would probably be immensely popular. A growing number of people are becoming more concerned about their health; they are becoming obsessed with it. These people are not just interested in exploring specific health strategies — they are “into” them. They are “into” macrobiotics, “into” massage or “into” yoga. Such people can become neurotic or needy kneaders and being “into” yogic postures can create special problems, because it may be difficult to get out of them. 10
- 3 There is a real difference between concern about health and obsession with it. Some people obsess about nutrition but oversimplify the subject and believe that there are only two types of food: those that cure almost everything and those that cause slow painful death. Some people obsess over stress management strategies, but spend so much energy managing their lives that they neglect to live them. And some people obsess over weight management programmes. They lose the pounds but add on health and psychological burdens. 15 20
- 4 Perhaps most dangerous for people obsessed with nutrition is the amount of *fear* that they ingest with their meals. Fears of pesticides, hormones, fluoridation, chlorination, radiation and heavy metals are ingested with every meal. While the negative effects of these toxic ingredients are very real, one can only wonder if the state of fear experienced by some people is poisoning them more than the foods and drinks they ingest. 25
- 5 Obsession with exercise is also common. Although this obsession may seem more beneficial than harmful, the dark side of exercise fanaticism is evident when exercise dominates a person’s life. Exercise addiction is particularly problematic when you become obsessed solely with workouts and neglect other valuable ways to build and maintain health. The athlete who eats junk food and the bodybuilder who cannot relax are two stereotypical examples of this obsession. Although there are certainly worse addictions than exercise, any action that limits a person’s good sense of judgement diminishes his or her health. 30
- 6 Still, fitness culture could not have changed more significantly since the late ’60s. Back then, residents of my small community would spot my father, an early jogger, and holler, “Keep running, hippie!” These days there are not that many joggers in my neighbourhood, but every other block there is another fitness centre offering boot-camp classes or modern martial arts clinics, with people inside punching, kicking and yelling at one another like drill sergeants. Freewheeling running disciples of the past have been replaced by packs of would-be commandos, sprinting up sandy hillsides with backpacks full of rocks strapped to their shoulders. 35 40

- 7 There is also a very modern day obsession with extremes at play: more is always better. If you're running just five kilometres a day and doing a few pull-ups, you're a wimp compared with the buff dude who is ready for an appearance on "American Ninja Warrior." It's hard not to feel awe when you watch a middle-aged woman in a T-shirt sporting an inspirational quote clean-and-jerk huge weights. 45
- 8 The whole notion of pushing your physical limits — popularised by sportswear ads, military mythos and celebrity athletes' cult of personality — has attained a religiosity that is as passionate as it is pervasive. The "extreme" version of anything is now widely assumed to be an improvement on the original rather than a perverse amplification of it. And as with most of sports culture, there is no grey area. You win or you lose. 50
- 9 The way we approach medical care has also turned things on its head. You wake up feeling a slight tickle in your throat. You try and shake it off and drink lots of water. After a few hours, it is still there. Instead of calling your mom or making a doctor appointment, you head to the internet. Today, anyone with a computer and a connection can get online and find a variety of results, ranging from simple sore throat to the more serious, like bronchitis and asthma. 55
- 10 Not only are the sick turning to online medical help, more and more members of the medical profession are embracing social media for sharing helpful medical information and providing patients with a listening ear. Social media is becoming increasingly utilised by hospitals and medical professionals as a means to convey general health information, sometimes even personalised help. 60
- 11 In fact, health professionals now need a strong social media presence to establish themselves as reputable sources as well as to properly point patients toward legitimate sites to be used as secondary sources. Of course there is a downside to doctors becoming *too available* online. The internet is almost always the opposite of private — sensitive subjects like physical and mental ailments can easily be revealed by the person suffering from them or the doctor treating them through a tweet or a comment. Social relationships between doctor and patient can also be easily muddled; many health institutions discourage staff from "friending" patients on Facebook and other social media platforms at the risk of jeopardising treatment as well as reputations. 70
- 12 Some things, perhaps, have never really changed: Cleopatra bathed in the milk of asses, the sixteenth-century Hungarian countess Elizabeth Bathory smothered herself in the blood of virgins, women of the Khoikhoi tribe grounded the leaves of the rooibos into a paste for a flawless complexion. Across Europe today, tens of millions of people will cover their faces this morning and tonight with creams whose incredible expense is only matched by their total ineffectiveness. For as long as men and women have suffered the ravages of time, they have desperately searched for ways to escape them. The appearance of wrinkles, sagging skin and grey hairs has throughout history made ordinary people obsessed with finding a mythical "elixir of youth". 75 80

- 13** Mythical until now, that is. In the past few years, doctors have become increasingly 85
successful in developing drugs and techniques that actually do turn back the signs
of ageing, and can routinely make people look fifteen years younger. Anti-ageing
medicine has grown out of quackery and into hard science; it has, as it were, come
of age.
- 14** But just as it is becoming more scientific, so the industry is set to grow inexorably 90
into one of the biggest money-spinners of modern medicine. The genuine ability to
combat the appearance of ageing is coming at a time when the populations in
many countries are themselves ageing, becoming increasingly affluent and more
than ever obsessed with the cult of youth. We celebrate youth and all their follies.
We cling to shiny new things, and whine when we can't afford them, we stare at 95
altered photographs, and wonder why we don't measure up.
- 15** It is certainly healthy to be concerned about your health, but obsessions and
addictions fragment the wholeness of health and ultimately disrupt the quality of
your life. As members of Healthaholics Anonymous might someday say, "Grant me
the serenity to accept the health conditions I cannot change, the courage to heal 100
myself of the ones I can and the wisdom to know the difference."