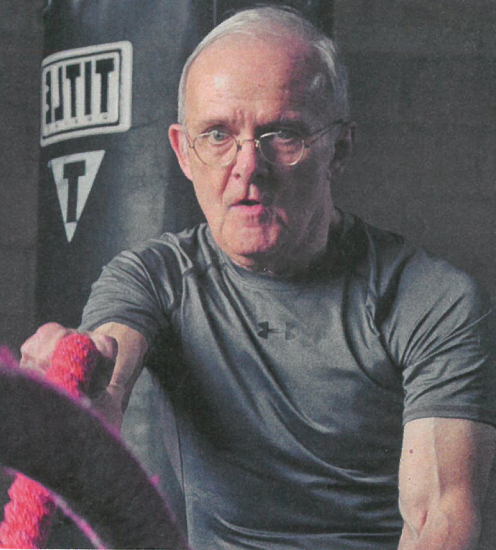# It's never too late to get fit

How one man changed his life by starting to exercise at age 70.

James P. Owen
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Producer of the documentary *The Art of Aging Well*

I always wanted to be an athlete, but it took me until I was 75 to succeed. I went from being wracked with pain to feeling better than I did in my 30s, and you can, too.

My first attempt to get fit didn't go as planned. In my 50s, I became a "weekend warrior," alternating long weekdays sitting at a desk with an intense workout schedule. I ran up hills on the weekends and hired a personal trainer to help me push my limits. But instead of feeling better, I felt pain: Everything in my body protested. Dispirited, I put away my plans for exercise and didn't think about it again for decades.

A passion project

In the early 2000s, I began traveling extensively, giving more than a dozen lectures each month, living in hotels, and eating late-night restaurant meals. I was mentally fulfilled but physically depleted. When I turned 70, I saw a video of myself and thought, "I'm an old man!" My knees were shot, my rotator cuff was frozen, and I had excruciating back pain. I couldn't stand up straight, and I was overweight.

I came across a statistic that changed my life: It said that if you make it to age 70, you're likely to live another 15 years. I thought, "If I'm in this bad of shape now, imagine how I'll feel in 15 years." I knew I had to do something.

Getting started

I began by thinking through my goal. I wasn't after big biceps, but I wanted to be able to carry my suitcase without throwing out my back. I wanted to complete normal activities without pain: climbing the stairs, squatting down to pick something up, staying mobile, active, and energetic.

So I set a goal for myself: In five years, I wanted to be pain-free—what I call "geezer-fit." I knew there were no quick fixes and that I was bound to have setbacks, but I persisted.

On day 1, I couldn't do a single push-up. It took me two weeks to do even one. Once I could do that, I thought, "In time, I might be able to do two or even three." I took it slow and steady. I knew that when people try to do too much too fast, they are liable to get hurt. But small steps, taken consistently, lead to success over time.

Ready, set, go!

Getting fit is a journey at any age. Here are some practical tips to get started:

1. **Set a goal** and know what you're working for. Fitness affects more than appearance.

2. **Plan for setbacks** so they don't derail you.

3. **Include all of the dimensions of fitness:** strength training at least twice a week, cardiovascular work for 30 minutes on most days of the week, stretching, and balance training.

4. **Look ahead.** No matter how old you are, your best days can lie ahead if you're willing to work it.

Goal achieved

When I turned 75, I could do 50 push-ups. My pain was gone and I had finally found my inner athlete. So then I set a new goal. I wanted to be "80 years young," which to me meant having a wellness age younger than my chronological age. I kept up my fitness routine and increased my focus on healthy eating. A week before my 80th birthday, I underwent a battery of tests and was happy to learn that I'd met my goal. My doctor said I have the vitals of someone 10 years younger.

I'm now working toward being what I call a "super-ager." That means living life to the fullest and making the most of whatever gifts I have for as many years as I can. To do that, I work out for an hour a day five to six days a week. It might sound like a lot of work, but it's much easier than dealing with the infirmities of old age.

Intrinsic motivation

A lot of people exercise because the doctor said they should. It's external motivation. But I think of my exercise routine as training to fight off old age. I have internal motivation. So many people, when they turn 70 or 75, they look at the world and say, "My best days are behind me." But I don't agree with that at all. You can't give in and say, "I'm old. I'm feeble. There's no hope." In my heart, I know that my best days still lie ahead. ∎

Bottom Line Health interviewed **James P. Owen,** author of *Just Move: A New Approach to Fitness After 50* and producer of *The Art of Aging Well*, available at www.theartofagingwell.com.