



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 017 – How to Boost Vitality  
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Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that prides itself on sharing practical wellness and life solutions for busy people.

Hello and welcome to Episode 17. Thank you so much for joining me. Today is the start of a series of discussions on more traditional wellness topics. The spark for this episode is the changing season. It's interesting to me that even when I was working in a climate controlled office and following the same work schedule throughout the year, I could feel the change in the seasons, most profoundly in March as the days got longer and October when the days began to get darker earlier.

It's during those two periods of the year when I take a look at what I call the three components of vitality and make adjustments for the upcoming seasonal change. I found it helpful to align with the seasonal shifts, harnessing the energetic momentum of spring and preparing for some quiet time to rejuvenate in the fall.

Today we'll be talking about what vitality is, its three components of nutrition, movement and rest, and suggestions for adjusting each component for a vitality boost. So sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence and let's get started.

So let's start with the basics. What's the difference between wellness, well-being and vitality? I like to think of wellness as the choices we make and the actions we take that comprise our lifestyle. It's an ongoing journey that comprises mind, body and spirit and evolves over time. Well-being is the experience of the positive wellness actions that we take. It's how we feel as a result of our choices and actions.



The characteristics of optimal well-being, which is where we want to head directionally, go beyond physical and emotional well-being. It includes things like social well-being and life satisfaction. In other words, happiness - how engaged are we with life?

The decisions we take toward optimal well-being result in vitality. The word vitality comes from the Latin word meaning "life." Think of health, energy and that boundless feeling of aliveness. Vitality is the essence of life.

While a lot of what we'll be discussing will positively impact our wellness and well-being, the focus of today's episode is how to boost our energy and that feeling of aliveness as the seasons turn from winter to spring.

Here's an overview of the three main components of vitality:

One: nutrition. I know you already have a sense of what is healthy for you to eat. So our conversation will be less about what to eat and more about what energizes us and why we should eat it.

The second is movement. Have you ever hit a plateau? Those times when you're exercising consistently but not moving the needle on whatever goal you may have set for yourself? If you're like me, your instinct is to push harder, but that can just make the situation worse. So we'll be exploring how to get a good return on the investment of your time and effort.

The third is rest. This component has two aspects, sleep quality and stress management. And both of these will support your body's ability to strengthen and regenerate itself, critical elements in the vitality equation.

Before I get to each of the components in more detail, let me remind everyone that while I'm a certified wellness coach, I'm not a doctor, I'm not a nutritionist, and I'm not a trainer. So please consult with your health professionals before considering any change to your health and wellness routines.

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Let's talk a little more about the three components starting with nutrition. Whenever possible, I try to eat whole foods that are rich in nutrients and non-inflammatory and are easy to assimilate. Aside



from the high nutritional value of the food, easily digestible food reduces the work that the body has to do to absorb the nutrients and that results in less stress, which is a key factor in maintaining good health. It also reduces fatigue after eating and keeps sugar and starch cravings in check.

Foods that are high in nutrition also assist in cell regeneration, keeping our body biologically young, a key factor as we age. It also helps rebuild our muscle tissue after we exercise or train. By conserving digestive energy, the body can focus on fortifying the immune function and cell restoration.

I've also noticed that my energy levels remain consistent throughout the day. When I ate more processed foods, even those considered healthy like protein bars or shakes, it wasn't unusual for me to experience a midafternoon carb crash. By providing the body with the nutrients it needs, I feel satiated and my hunger is triggered when I'm truly hungry.

I want to share a food experiment I did probably 10 or 15 years ago. My partner at the time and I tried a raw foods diet. For about eight or nine months, we only ate food that hadn't been cooked at all. This eating style does allow the food to be heated gently below 118 degrees Fahrenheit or so. And there are other techniques that you can use in food preparation such as soaking or sprouting. Those techniques aid in ensuring that the enzymes in the food can help in the easy assimilation and the optimal use of the food nutrients.

I know this can sound like a prison sentence, only eating fruit, veg, nuts and seeds, no alcohol, no caffeine, nothing processed. But our energy levels were off the chart - we felt amazing. There was a kind of inner glow that you get when you eat this way. And raw food is naturally hydrating and anti-inflammatory to the body. This can help counter a whole host of things like arthritis, joint pain and circulation problems.

As far as variety, you'd be surprised at how many chefs have taken this way of eating to gourmet levels with just a food processor, a high speed blender and a dehydrator. Ten years ago there were a number of wonderful raw food restaurants in New York City. We filled our bookshelves with raw food cookbooks, or uncooked books, and took classes. It was really a fun experiment.

And it was hard to sustain. We didn't have a supportive community around us and it was hard to socialize with family and friends, nevermind business lunches and dinners. A decade later, I still incorporate many of the recipes and techniques I used back then and tend to eat more raw food as



the weather warms. For me, it's still the cleanest and healthiest way of eating. But I also include other types of meals such as vegan and Ayurvedic as examples.

And lastly, a word on caffeine and alcohol. I've experimented with drinking them, cutting them out of my diet completely, and using them in moderation. Here's where I am today. I love coffee. In my college and corporate days, I overused caffeine. In those days, my activity and stress levels were always elevated and caffeine fueled me. These days I drink coffee for the pure pleasure of it - strong, dark French roast. I have a caffeinated cup at 5am. If it's a writing day, I may have a half-caffeinated/ half-decaffeinated cup mid-morning. If I drink any coffee after 12pm, I drink decaf. I've been getting my beans from the same place for years, a family-owned micro-roaster that brings me joy every time I open the bag. I get that there may be a health trade off, but I'm okay with that

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Onto alcohol. As I mentioned in a previous episode, in my half-Italian/half-Irish upbringing, food and drink were celebratory - a way to gather and connect. And I still feel that way today. Admittedly, I "celebrated" a little too much in my 20s and 30s. And I cut out alcohol entirely whenever I was training in my 40s and 50s.

These days, I'm more in tune with my body and can feel the aftereffects of alcohol - how it impacts the quality of my sleep and how I feel a little rundown the next morning. If I do drink, it's usually when I'm socializing with others and I don't have an early morning workout planned. And I try to make sure I stay well hydrated on those days.

I'll close this section with two quotes. The first is from Ann Wigmore, founder of the Natural Health Institute. She said, "The food you eat can either be the safest and most powerful form of medicine or the slowest form of poison."

And the second is an Ayurvedic proverb. "When the diet is wrong, medicine is of no use. When the diet is correct, medicine is of no need."

Now onto movement. Physical exercise is defined as the performance of some activity in order to develop or maintain physical fitness and overall health. When we move in this manner, our body tissue breaks down and then grows back stronger. Among many benefits, regular movement has been shown to boost mood and sharpen focus, reduce stress, increase energy levels, reduce body fat, reduce the risk of disease and improve sleep.



Despite all the benefits, it can be difficult to stick to an exercise program. Forcing yourself to do exercise that you don't enjoy will only last for so long before your willpower will get depleted. Conversely, if your view of exercise is something that can release stress and be fun, you'll be more likely to do it. Once that endorphin release is experienced on a regular basis, it will fuel the desire to do that activity again.

Both the CDC, Centers for Disease Control, and WHO, World Health Organization, encourage a wide range of activities, including things that don't feel like exercise, such as gardening, playing with your kids, dancing or walking the dog. And both organizations agree on activity guidelines, which are getting between 150 to 300 minutes of moderate to intense aerobic exercise and at least two muscle strengthening activities a week.

Here's what that looks like for me. These days, I'm not training for any endurance events. So I consider my weekly activity more exercise than training. And here's what I do. I lift three times a week and I run three times a week.

Specifically for strength training - Monday is a lower workout, Wednesday is upper and Saturday is an overall functional circuit workout. Workouts last about 40 to 50 minutes on average. And for cardio - on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I run three miles using intervals, and on Sunday, I take a longer run of at least five miles.

These days I work out at home. So for strength, I mostly use dumbbells, a barbell and a pull-up bar. For the circuit training, I might incorporate a kettlebell or a sandbag, maybe a medicine ball, I've got a Bosu ball, jump rope and resistance bands, and a TRX bodyweight system along with the same pull-up bar. For cardio, my preference is trail running, but I do most of my running on a treadmill in the winter. As a bonus, I get out for an afternoon walk whenever I can, from 20 to 60 minutes, depending on the day. It sounds counterintuitive, but taking that break actually boosts my daily productivity. And it's not unusual for me to solve a problem I was working on that day, just by changing the scenery and getting present while walking - kinda magic.

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My physical activity has a very different look if I'm training for an event. For several years, I was super focused on my fitness to be able to cycle and run for long periods of time. Through endurance sports, physical rest and recovery, while always important, became crucial. I learned a



lot about making consistent small gains, what to do when I hit a plateau, the value of cross training to stay healthy, the dangers of overtraining, which I fell victim to once or twice, working smarter and not harder, and always striving to get a good return on my energy investment.

In those days It was all about regenerating and recovering throughout the long training process. It's been said that food can account for the majority of the recovery process. So I was laser focused on how I could lower nutritional and life stressors to help me perform at peak levels. Sports massage and acupuncture were pillars of my self-care when I trained as well. These days, my endurance sport is running Athena Wellness, my newest form of ultra-marathoning that I love.

Lastly, given the times that we're in, I'd like to note the link between exercise and the immune system. Research shows that exercise increases white blood cells that are necessary to fight off infection and decreases stress hormone levels that can have a detrimental effect on immune function. An integrative review of current literature was conducted in Brazil last year. It was called "Physical Exercise as a Tool to Help the Immune System Against COVID-19."

Here's the review's conclusion: "The practice of physical activity strengthens the immune system, suggesting a benefit in the response to viral communicable diseases. Therefore, regular practice of adequate intensity is suggested as a tool in strengthening and preparing the immune system for COVID-19." I'll put a link to that paper in the show notes.

Above all, I suggest finding an activity or group of activities that uplift and energize you mentally, physically and spiritually. Enjoy the feeling of moving your body and have fun.

Now, let's move on to rest. It's important to give ourselves adequate time to recuperate from our daily activities. It's during these rest periods that we can assimilate the work that we've done and our bodies can repair the stress it's endured.

The length of rest is related to the intensity of stress. For example, I'm placing far less stress on my body today than I was when I was training for the ultra. As a result, my recovery today is more routine and can be incorporated in the normal course of life, versus something I need to focus intensely on. As I get older, though, I do make it a point to warm up and cool down and stretch using rollers several times a week to maintain flexibility and reduce soreness.



A crucial part of recovery, of course, is quality sleep. Neuroscientist and UC Berkeley Professor Matthew Walker offers this: Sleep is the Swiss army knife of health. When sleep is deficient, there is sickness and disease. And when sleep is abundant, there's vitality and health.”

While sleep abundance is important, what's crucial is sleep quality or deep sleep. It's the phase of sleep where the mind and body regenerate, process and detoxify. How do we consistently reach that level of depth? Through stress reduction. If our stress and cortisol levels are high, deep sleep can be interrupted and our recovery impacted.

There are two types of stress: complementary and un-complementary. Complementary is stress that benefits you in some way, such as exercise, or meaningful achievement, like writing a book or starting a business. Un-complementary stress doesn't have a benefit and can come from the mind, body, spirit, family, community and even the environment. Some examples can be making unhealthy food choices, being sedentary, feeling mental overwhelm, being in an unsatisfying job or relationship, or feeling the effects of environmental pollutants. Although we can't eliminate stress from our lives, it's beneficial to create strategies to help reduce it.

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I thought it would be interesting to close this section by demonstrating how these three vitality components are so interconnected. For example, good nutrition creates a stronger body, fuels exercise, reduces overall stress and improves quality sleep. Exercise facilitates cell regeneration, increases energy and mental outlook, lowers stress and improves sleep quality. Sleep leads to more energy, supports quality exercise, reduces overall stress, lowers cortisol levels that results in less food cravings. And lower stress levels lead to fewer food cravings, lower cortisol and improved sleep.

When you think about the hundreds of choices you make in these areas each day, it's easy to see how just a few adjustments in your habits can yield big gains in vitality.

So here are some suggestions on a vitality boost for each of these components. I'll share a few of my favorites. But my overarching guidelines are: experiment and keep it simple.

I love experimenting with all different types of food, the timing of when I eat, the seasonality of produce, new physical challenges, sleeping habits, morning and evening routines, and then



changing it all up from time to time. And each time I do I go back to the business mantra I learned from a mentor, which is: What is easy look like?

With that in mind, let me share some of my favorite things to experiment with for each component.

**Nutrition.** Turn up the veg and fruit intake, eat as many options as possible. I usually switch to fruit before lunch in the spring and summertime. You can try a new seasonal recipe each week. I like to go to the farmers market, select the produce that's most appealing to me that week, and figure out how to prepare it when I get home. Find the right level of hydration for you. I target 32 ounces a day, given the amount of fruit and veg I eat, that works well for me.

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**Movement.** Focus on movement you love. If it energizes you, you'll want to do it more and make it part of your daily routine. Walk and stretch daily whenever you can, whatever that means for you. Get outside and enjoy the fresh air, sunshine, and green space that's available to you. And go ahead and play a little.

**Rest.** Set yourself up for success with a simple evening routine. Decide how you'll reduce the stimuli of the day, including caffeine, shutting down the computer, and powering down the phone as well as setting your optimal bedtime. Find the right sleeping environment for you. Comfortable surroundings, cool room temperature and free of blue light. Consider ending the day with a little gratitude. It can range from a formal practice to what I do - a little mental review of the day noting all of my blessings just before I fall asleep. And I like to start the day that way as well.

I'd like to leave you with a quote from dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham. "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action. And because there's only one of you in all time, this expression is unique."

A vital life force is what enables us to live our best lives and do good work in this world. How might you give your vitality a boost? What might happen as a result?

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.





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Until next time, be well!