KEEP MOVING

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Lessons on Staying Young in Mind and Body from India's Fittest Family

Milind Soman,
Ankita Konwar and
Usha Soman

with
Roopa Pai

juggernaut

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INTRODUCTION

How do you count your age? In years and experience, and the wisdom they are supposed to bestow upon you, or by your body's strength, stamina and agility? Does youthfulness have more to do with how you feel in your head – how curious, how fresh, how hopeful, how engaged with the world and its wonders – than how many times you have circumambulated the sun? Does old age come to us, whether we are 17 or 70, when we realize that we are unable to do as much physically as those we share our birth years with? Is good health a credible marker of youth?

Which begs the obvious question: what is good health, anyway? Where does fitness, that much-bandied-about word, erm, *fit* into this picture? Which is a subset of which?

This book sets out to find some answers to these and other important questions about age, health and well-being by exploring these themes with three remarkable individuals separated in age by over half a century, all of them part of what is arguably India's first family of fitness.

The age-defying Usha Soman, who became a social media sensation at 77 when a video of her running barefoot on a highway in a saree alongside her famous son went viral, is 84. Her son, Milind Soman, now 58, was a teenage national swimming champion who came to running at 37 and went on to wow the country with the endurance challenges he took on and completed, including, when he was 51, the gruelling Ultraman Triathlon. Milind's wife, Ankita Konwar, whose life was rocked by devastating personal tragedy, depression and addiction in her twenties, fought her way into the light, chose fitness and now matches her husband step for step, whether it is summiting Mount Kilimanjaro or completing the Mumbai marathon. As a qualified yoga teacher and practitioner, she has also moved out of his shadow into her own sphere.

These three individuals have, at first glance, very different lifestyles, fitness regimens and food habits. They also grew up very differently from each other. Born in pre-Independence India, Usha had never heard of 'exercise' as a concept. As a young man, Milind rode the wave of India's economic liberalization in the '90s and became the country's top male supermodel, kicking back into the louche alcohol–nicotine–substance lifestyle that came with the territory for over a decade. As for Ankita, she spent much of her noughties childhood in a boarding school in small-town Assam, where

she thought very little about fitness or sport, dreaming instead of finding a job that would let her travel the world.

And yet, despite traversing such disparate routes, the three are now at the same summit, the one we all wish we could scale – peak fitness at their respective ages.

What does fitness look like from the perches of 84, 58, 32? What insights into the nature of health and well-being have each of them garnered along the way? What advice can they give the rest of us who admire and want to emulate them? Dozens of in-person interviews, WhatsApp questions, voice notes and phone calls later, straightforward, even commonsensical, lessons, based on a remarkably similar philosophy, emerged. Here they are.

1. Fitness and health are subsets of a larger and more holistic concept – well-being. It encompasses physical, mental and emotional health, none of which can exist without the others. You have to work on each of them consistently – no cheat days!
2. It is never too late to begin the journey to physical fitness, but embarking on it early gives you a head start. If you enjoyed an active childhood and good nutrition, thanks to opportunity, environment and encouragement – lucky you! – you are already halfway there.
3. We all lose ourselves a little as we grapple with all the stuff life tosses at us; the challenge lies in pulling

ourselves back from the brink, asking ourselves what well-being truly means to us, and pursuing it single-mindedly. Health goals! Fitness goals! Less-life-drama goals!

4. Getting back on course is difficult, but staying the course is harder. To set time aside, day after day, to move, lift, stretch and centre yourself, no matter what the demands of the world, will feel like a chore. Do it! The rewards are inestimable.
5. There is no magic-bullet diet, no miracle regimen, to peak fitness. All learning, understanding and wisdom of what food and activity works best for each of us can only be figured out by . . . each of us! Bummer!
6. However clichéd it may sound, age IS just a number. The body changes with age, there's no help for that, but if you listen to your body closely and tweak your diet and exercise based on what it is telling you, you will enjoy good health at every age.
7. Let go of negativity, don't be judgemental, practise gratitude, open yourself to new and uncomfortable experiences, be kind to yourself, accept the things you cannot change without bitterness. Ta-da! You have brewed the other secret sauce to wellness!
8. It is spectacularly unintelligent not to make our health and well-being our No. 1 priority. Our survival, our very

existence, depends on it. Why in heaven's name haven't you done it yet?

9. The trick, if there is such a thing, is to keep moving – moving on from past regret, moving forward towards the next adventure, moving old ideas along to accommodate new ones, moving your goalposts, moving your limbs. Fight lazy, keep moving!

Out the door yet to beat your own path to peak fitness? Hang on a minute. Maybe it's best to read the book before you go, for as Usha, Milind and Ankita tell us, they arrived at these secrets to well-being over years and years of experimenting, experiencing, rising, falling and picking themselves up again. No shortcuts, remember?

And that's why this book is as much a memoir as a self-help book or a meditation on the nature of fitness and health. Walk beside the Somans on the paths they travelled by, seeing their very different journeys through their own eyes, hearing their stories, often extraordinary in their ordinariness, watching them role-model 'best health' practices for the rest of us. In doing so, you will be inspired to become, and remain, like them, ageless.

WHAT DOES FITNESS LOOK LIKE AT 84?

'In your seventies and eighties, your body is most certainly in decline. Your metabolism slows, making digestion difficult. Balance becomes a problem. Your joints begin to wear down palpably. You may slowly begin to lose faculties like hearing and short-term memory. At this stage, adapt your activities to the changing state of your body, but don't stop moving. Include a low-impact exercise routine like age-appropriate yoga, stretches and swimming to keep the joints lubricated and improve mobility. Walk as much as you comfortably can. Cut out heavy foods like red meat from your diet. Eat fewer meals a day. As for the mind, don't allow it to dwell in the past. Don't let anyone tell you that you cannot do something because of your age. People around you, especially your children, mean well when they tell you to slow down, but they don't know what you're capable of. Why, YOU don't know what you are capable of! Stay positive, stay cheerful, stay curious and set yourself new challenges – and you may end up surprising yourself, as I did.' – **Usha**

WHAT DOES FITNESS LOOK LIKE AT 58?

'60 may be the new 40 according to lifestyle magazines, but Nature has her own rules. You are at your prime between the

ages of 20 and 30, ripe for procreation, which is the only thing Nature cares about. After 30, both body and mind go into slow, imperceptible decline. The most we can do is to try and arrest that decline. At 58, what becomes important is efficiency – you may not have as much energy as you did before, so you must use what you have in the most optimal way. One way to do that is to identify weaknesses and work on those instead of trying to do everything. As you age, for instance, you begin to feel the effects of gravity – counter them by moving your body against gravity, with pull-ups, squats, headstands. Adaptability takes a hit – you are no longer as agile in body and mind. It takes longer to acquire new skills, cope with changing technology and recover from injuries and setbacks. Push yourself every day but in a way that is comfortable. Let go of the ego, focus on being at peace, and make the experience and wisdom of your years work for you.' – **Milind**

WHAT DOES FITNESS LOOK LIKE AT 32?

'In your twenties and early thirties, your body is in its prime – all you need to do to keep it functioning at its optimum capacity is a little maintenance from time to time. But your mind – ah, that's quite another matter. At this stage of life, the mind is most fragile and vulnerable and needs your full

attention and nurturing. Make building a strong, empowered mind – often accomplished through an active body – your primary responsibility. Everything else will flow from there.'
– **Ankita**

SECTION 1

STARTING STRONG

The Launch Sets the Course

How much of 'good health' is nature, hardwired into our genes? What fraction of a strong body and mind do we owe to nurture, especially in terms of what we grow up eating and what habits and disciplines are inculcated into us in childhood? How significantly can each of us, by thoughtfully and assiduously cultivating ways of being and living in adulthood, fashion the course of our health destinies? The jury is out, and will probably always be, on the exact proportions of these three determining factors, but one thing is for sure – a good, solid start is a treasure not to be scoffed at.

USHA

My Bombay Childhood

'Exercise? My generation had never heard of the concept. Stretches, bends, lifts, squats – they were all part of daily routine. Exercise had to be invented for the generation that came after, newly freed from physical labour.'

I had just turned eight when India became independent – I'll leave it to you to figure out the year of my birth. My parents traced their family roots to Goa, but my five siblings – an older sister, two younger sisters and two younger brothers – and I had a proper Bombay childhood.

I suppose our household of ten was a little unusual by today's standards. There was my father, a well-respected doctor. There was my mother, who had had very little formal education, and would go on to birth six children – in two lots, as it were. Kumud, Pushpa and I were born between 1935

and 1940, with me in the middle, and Vinayak, Surendra and Kalpana came after an eleven-year gap, between 1951 and 1954. There was my mother's young sister, our aunt, just eight years older than Kumud. My father had sent for her from my mother's ancestral village, so that she could attend school with us in Bombay and be educated. That accounts for nine people.

The tenth, and we come now to the unusual part, was my father's second wife, much younger than my own mother. This was before the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 was enacted, so there was nothing illegal about it, but thinking back on it now, I'm surprised that my mother didn't feel – or at least never showed – any resentment towards her, especially considering the way in which she entered our family.

When World War II broke out in 1939, people did not at first realize how much displacement it would cause of people and materials over the next six years. Bombay emptied out, and doctors were among the first professionals to be dispatched to remote locations. At some point during the war, my father was sent off to Goa. He returned just after the war ended, with a young woman doctor in tow. I was only six or seven then, so I don't remember how exactly he broke the news to my mother, but from that day on, we had a stepmother.

I cannot say that my mother and stepmother were friends, but there was absolutely no discord between them. There was a clear division of responsibilities – the younger stepped out each morning with my father, to work alongside him at his dispensary; the older took care of the house and the children. Kumud, Pushpa and I, along with my aunt, helped my mother with the domestic work in the day, and read and swapped books with my stepmother when she returned from work, enjoying the discussions that followed. It was all very pleasant and harmonious. Things might have been different if my stepmother had had children of her own, but much as she wanted them, it never came to pass. I daresay that it was we children who benefited most from the situation.

We were a well-to-do family, and ours was a happy, comfortable childhood, with lots of friends in the neighbourhood. My father never restricted his daughters in play – in an age when it was unusual to see girls on bicycles, the three of us spent our weekends cycling down the leafy lanes around our home with abandon. We were first sent to a girls' school and then to a co-ed one, where we participated in all kinds of sports and athletic activities – running, three-legged races, langda (you hopped on one foot to 'catch' the others, who were running circles around you), kho-kho, hu-tu-tu (or kabaddi – very popular when I was young and

very popular again these days). We didn't play volleyball or throwball in those days – those were 'foreign' games.

Oh, there was also skipping rope! I was very good at it, quite the champ. My talent in this department came into full flow during Ganesh Utsav, at the skipping competitions held in the pandal near our home – the last one standing, or in this case, skipping, won the prize, and that girl was usually me. I could go up to 500 skips without a pause at those contests!

In my time, as I remember it, everyone was active, even in a city. Owning a car, or even a scooter – in fact, scooters came well after cars – was not a common thing, so people simply walked from place to place. Plus, there were no gadgets to lighten your load, whether it was housework or anything else. If you are doing all the housework yourself, where is the need for a gym? The word exercise was unheard of – it was only wrestlers and bodybuilders and serious sportspeople who, to use a phrase from today, 'worked out'. There was never any mention of yoga either, leave alone an International Yoga Day.

I have always been blessed with good health – I was seldom ill as a child. I rarely even felt out of sorts, because of, say, a change in weather, like other children did. I don't remember my parents being unwell either, or having any kind of predisposition to respiratory or digestive conditions. My

little brother Surendra contracted polio as a child of seven or eight – remember this was a time before American virologist Jonas Salk developed the first effective polio vaccine in 1952 – and was treated with ayurvedic oil massages. To everyone's delight – but not their surprise, for everyone trusted the treatment implicitly – he recovered completely.

Surendra went on to become a surgeon in the UK. He has only just retired. My older sister Kumud lives in Goa and continues to have an active life. Pushpa is a lawyer – she represented BEST (Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport) and MMRDA (Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority) in her day, and still goes to court for them on occasion. I myself was very keen to be a doctor, but did not manage to secure the marks needed for admission. I studied biochemistry instead. As for the others, Vinayak became a civil engineer, and the youngest, Kalpana, is an occupational therapist.

'The healthy food "rules" that everyone proclaims these days as if they were brand-new scientific discoveries – Eat fresh! Eat local! Eat seasonal! – were simply part of our lives. Eating healthy was our default mode because there was no store-bought "junk food" to be had.'

This may be an anecdotal memory, but it seems to me that there were fewer diseases then. Or maybe they hadn't been named yet. The BCG (Bacillus Calmette-Guerin) vaccine was already available, as was the smallpox vaccine, so children were protected to that extent. Typhoid was rare, cholera absent in the city. Even influenza wasn't common.

Maybe that was because everyone followed some time-honoured traditional practices, like washing their hands and feet before they entered the house. Maybe it was because no one ate out, and there was really no 'fast food' or 'junk food' to be had.

In our home, as in other middle-class homes like ours, my mother cooked for the family. We enjoyed our vegetables, along with chicken and mutton, except on Mondays and Saturdays, which were meat-free. My mother, as I have already mentioned, was from Goa, so there was a lot of fish (five times a week, on average) and a lot of coconut in our food. We ate more rice than chapati when we were young – chapati was added on slowly as we grew up. We had no refrigerator, of course, so every meal was cooked fresh. I do think the quality of fruits and vegetables was better in those days, and we only ate seasonal vegetables and fruits. The kind of obsessive conversations around food that happen these days, and the 'rules' that are routinely dished out as if they were brand-new scientific discoveries – Eat fresh! Eat

local! Eat seasonal! – were simply part of our lives. These food practices were so universal – and so commonsensical – that no one found the need to talk about them.

Families were large in themselves, and many lived under the same roof as the extended family, in the joint-family system. People met each other a lot more, casually, not just for work or on special occasions. We visited people often, dropped in when we felt like seeing friends and relatives – there was never any need to 'plan' a visit. Even though there were very few telephones, leave alone smartphones and social media, we knew what was happening in people's lives, and were there to support each other in times of joy and grief. If someone was ill, a relative would come to stay for as long as she was needed, and take over the cooking and the children. Mattresses would be rolled out on the floor, and overnight visitors would be accommodated without a second thought in tiny homes – people shared space, food and time generously with each other.

These days, people's lives are so overscheduled that there is no room for impromptu meetings – my sister and I, even though we live in the same city, do not meet for months on end because of the planning involved in making it happen. Wishing people 'Happy Birthday' on WhatsApp may feel like a connection to young people today, but it doesn't to me. I would say that we were certainly a lot more

'connected' when I was growing up – with our families, our neighbours and the larger community – than we are now. Those connections may also have been a factor in promoting good health, especially mental health.

It is robust mental health that helps one deal with difficult life situations, and that is helped along by making deep human connections. When you interact with other people closely, as a young person – spending time at their homes, eating their food, observing how other families interact with each other – you understand that although people are different, that doesn't make them or their way of life superior or inferior to yours. You become less judgemental of other people's choices and motivations; you simply accept them. That kind of acceptance of differences, in itself, goes a long way towards lightening one's mind, for most of our stress is caused by our inability to embrace people and situations for what they are.

'Eating dinner together every day is a great family bonding exercise for sure, but what makes it vital is that it allows parents to observe their children closely, and become aware of small changes in mood and behaviour.'

I have not lived the life of a young parent in the twenty-first century, and I am sure they are trying their best, but it seems to me that what I understood as parenting doesn't exist anymore.

It was different in our time. Children had fewer distractions, and were around the house a lot, which made it easier to manage them. Parents had fewer distractions, so there was more opportunity to observe the children and catch subtle shifts in behaviour and mood. The shared evening meal was a daily bonding exercise – with 'eating out' not an option, family members had no choice but to be present at dinnertime. Conversation was easy and casual, rarely about logistics and scheduling. Even the youngest child had some awareness of what was going on in everyone else's life, because it was all shared during the meal.

Today, people living under the same roof seldom eat a meal together at home in a relaxed manner, discussing their day. Significantly more worrisome, children rarely have a childhood. Sure, they know a lot – I would say too much! – more than their parents did at that age, but all that 'knowledge' leads inevitably to a loss of mental and emotional innocence. When you know and have too much too soon, the natural fallout is boredom. That is why everyone is constantly seeking something new – a new gadget, a new kind of food, a new experience. The real problem is that

while children have the knowledge of things, they have no idea *how* to use that knowledge, *what* to do with it, or *in what ways* it may affect them.

Parents are always saying they have no time, but I often wonder if the truth lies in the disruption of the routine that used to rule our lives. There is so much choice now, in terms of what one can eat and where one can go and what one can do with one's time, and that choice can be exercised without too much planning. On a whim, you can have food delivered, call a cab, book tickets for a movie – why wouldn't you do it when it's all so easy, so convenient, so *exciting*? More importantly, it is what makes the kids happy! But that kind of unpredictable lifestyle also leaves the mind fragmented and anxious. No wonder so many parents feel so helpless and overstretched all the time. The thing is, being truly present for children involves the kind of immersion and calm that is not easy to summon up when you are simultaneously checking your phone for updates on pizza delivery, or being badgered by the cab driver for directions.

What a lot of young parents do have today is more money than parents did in the past, and in their keenness to compensate for the lack of quiet, involved time with their children, they spend money on them instead. Very often, they give money to the children themselves, as pocket money, to spend as they wish. That, in my opinion,

is ill-advised, unless you balance the independence and freedom – both wonderful things – that you are offering your child with appropriate amounts of responsibility and accountability. One without the other is a recipe for disaster, but in my limited observation, I find that this is what often happens.

Life is significantly simpler, and temptations more easily warded off, when you are only ever given enough money to cover the bus ride to school.