

Take Excellent Care!

Health & Fitness for Musicians



swinging for as long as possible?

Based on years of research and experimentation, I recommend the following four ideas:

- 1) Maintain a *lifelong* health-priority mindset.
- 2) Understand that every healthy choice has a positive effect.
- 3) Develop a set of practices to stick with consistently, at home and on the road.
- 4) Embrace the power of teamwork.

A health-priority mindset means energizing your mind to feel strong and healthy 24/7, and embracing the joy and power of that feeling. Being weak is no fun, and being strong is awesome! It also guides daily choices, like taking the stairs and not the elevator, walking instead of standing on the escalator or moving sidewalk, skipping the french fries and ordering salad or a baked potato, selecting brown rice over white, or waking up a few minutes early to do calisthenics. You can train your mind by setting clear health goals. Then take actions to support those goals: visualize (imagine how you want to look and feel), enact mental/verbal affirmations (“I am strong!”), read solid health information and engage with inspiring people. Naturally, feeding your body excellent food also invigorates your mind.

Understanding the power of each choice means you can start health-positive actions right now, regardless of your current condition, and gradually get stronger and healthier. Even small actions help. You achieve the goal of doing 10 (or 100) push-ups a day by starting with one push-up—then keep going.

Developing healthy practices that stick involves knowing yourself and being able to distinguish the things you actually love from those to which you are addicted. It also involves knowing what motivates you, and understanding your personal process for building new habits. The right diet or exercise plan—the one to which you would actually commit—can be very helpful. Most importantly, it involves keeping your daily activities consistent with your life and health goals. All these things require self-reflection, discipline and solid information about healthy, strong living.

Embracing the power of teamwork means that interacting with the right people can be great for your health and fitness. In general, humans are far more effective in pairs

The most important thing we can do to enhance the quality of our music is to take excellent care of ourselves. This maximizes our natural energy, confidence, longevity and sense of well-being. It contributes to both the joy of expressing music and the efficacy of the *work*: studying, practicing, performing and traveling. For me, taking excellent care means consistently making smart choices that lead to healthy, strong living, and therefore creative, productive and fun music-making.

Central to all this is eating clean (healthfully) and exercising regularly, but making good choices is not always easy. Our stressful, yet sedentary, modern lifestyle means that we regularly eat for convenience, not health, and that we too often choose not to exercise because of limited time or energy. Furthermore, the standard American diet contains significant amounts of processed foods laden with refined wheat and sugar. These are tasty and addictive (and unhealthy), and therefore influence our decision-making.

Changing and sometimes conflicting information about diet and exercise in general adds more confusion. The net result is that we often do not properly feed or move our bodies, which increases the odds of gaining extra body fat—and of facing conditions such as obesity, chronic inflammation, diabetes (type 2), cancer and atherosclerosis. It also decreases our energy and our will to make better health choices.

Baseball legend Mickey Mantle famously said: “If I had known I would live this long, I would have taken better care of myself!” That idea is consistent with my observations during years of touring. Some people, like Roy Haynes, Avery Sharpe and Robin Eubanks, for example, decided early on to stay healthy and strong for the long term, and the good results are obvious when you see (and hear) them. However, most of us have struggled with our health and fitness, and as we have aged, the challenges have increased. How do we face these challenges, make better choices and keep

or groups than alone, just like on the bandstand. Find a workout partner or class, a fellow health-conscious musician, a mentor or mentee, someone to cook or shop with, etc.—you will motivate each other. If you fear lack of discipline in yourself, which is common, find the right teammates.

I developed this approach in response to my own bad health habits, which included eating sweet or starchy “comfort food” to feel better. As I aged, this led to increased body fat and lowered energy. I got a further shocker when I had a potentially career-ending medical situation: a cyst inside my jawbone had to be removed surgically by literally opening the jaw itself. Happily, it ended well, and that experience further inspired my health journey. My time as music director of the Litchfield Jazz Camp also has proved invaluable because of its focus on health and fitness in addition to jazz.

The excellent results I have experienced—I’m in the best shape of my life at 54—galvanized my belief that we must commit to a *long-term* vision of taking excellent care of ourselves. That means we address, among other things, those central components of healthy, strong living: eating clean and exercising regularly.

EATING CLEAN

Like all living things, we function best with food from the Earth—“real” food. Eat and drink a variety of nature-based, nutrient-dense foods, mostly plants, that are as minimally processed as possible. Organically grown is best. This food has thousands of micronutrients that the human body needs for optimal function and stress management. Examples are vegetables, fruits, nuts (raw or sprouted, especially walnuts, cashews, almonds, pistachios), fresh fish (especially those high in omega-3 fatty acids), poultry and eggs from their natural habitats, and organic dairy products in moderation, if your body can handle it.

Avoid food/drinks mainly created in factories. They can taste good, be convenient and cheap, and have a long shelf life. However, most have very little nutrition (even those “fortified” with vitamins), have chemical colorants and preservatives, and many contain significant amounts of refined wheat and sugar. Examples include most bread, pasta, cake, cookies, pie, pastries, crackers, processed meats (all deli meats, hot dogs, Spam) and anything with hydrogenated oils (salad dressing, Nutella, many snack foods).

The most healthful drink, by far, is water. Herbal teas are also good. Minimize the fake drinks—they’re full of chemical sweeteners and colors. Freshly made juice is fine, but most commercial juices, including orange juice, are not healthful because of the processing.

Many Americans simply eat too much, so be mindful of portion sizes. Eat slowly and

chew thoroughly.

You must know your body. Many people can’t tolerate certain real foods containing lactose or gluten, “nightshade” plants (such as tomatoes and eggplants), nuts, shellfish, etc. If your body feels abnormal after eating, seek help from a qualified medical professional.

Intermittent fasting (IF) is simply the practice of fasting for a while every day. IF proponents typically fast for a period of 13 to 16 hours (called a fasting window) and eat during the remaining eight to 11 hours (called the feeding window). The fasting time allows the digestive system to rest, can promote insulin sensitivity (great for blood sugar control) and stimulates the utilization of body fat for fuel. On most days, I break my fast around 1 p.m. and have my last food by 10 p.m. (musician hours!). When I started working out before breaking my fast, which took a little getting used to, my excess body fat easily burned off.

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Because real food is perishable, eating healthfully does require more frequent food shopping. In general, I shop the periphery of any grocery store, since that’s where most of the healthy food (produce, dairy, fresh meat) lives. I go through the aisles for olive oil, canned beans or dark chocolate, but the aisles mainly contain packaged factory-food. I try to shop in as eco-friendly a way as possible.

Key to healthful eating on the road are preparation and knowing which foods travel well. I usually carry a small dedicated food bag when I travel, and every day I stock it with whatever healthy stuff I can find: apples, nuts, boiled eggs (in the shell), carrots and celery sticks. Many transport hubs now have decent packaged salads, “protein mixes” of nuts and cheese, and other good options. While I don’t recommend protein bars (most have too many chemicals and sugar), I usually keep a couple of Kind or GoMacro bars handy in case everything else runs out. I usually bring a water bottle (stainless steel is the safest—avoid plastic) and refill it regularly.

EXERCISE

Our bodies are designed to move, so developing good physical strength, agility, flexibility and balance is important. Plus, *a strong body handles stress much more effectively than a weak one*. Daily exercise is ideal, but you don’t have to go to the gym for hours. Here are some tips:

- Envision how you would like to look and feel. This is very important. You become what you think, so imagine yourself as strong as you would like to be and synchronize those thoughts with the appropriate actions. Nurture your health-priority mindset.

- Check with your doctor before you begin a new exercise program. Start gradually and do not overdo it, especially at first. It can take some weeks for your body to adapt to a new, strenuous routine.

- Learn about fitness approaches. Ask your fit friends. Read books and blogs. Try some things to see what works for you. Activities like running, biking, basketball, weightlifting and yoga are great.

- You can do basic calisthenics—push-ups, squats, planks, leg lifts, curls, pull-ups—in almost any location. Even five to 10 minutes daily is beneficial. Remember to breathe, use excellent form and move slowly—this really works the muscles.

- Build natural exercise into your daily routine, whether that involves long walks or hikes, gardening, cycling or walking up stairs. Unless you’ve got a lot of gear to unload, park as far away as possible, and enjoy the walk. Little things like that add up to an active lifestyle.

- Long, low-intensity aerobic sessions are not particularly good for you. Twenty to 30 minutes of aerobic work plus 20 to 30 minutes of strength training is much more effective for overall health, strength and body fat reduction. Also, high-intensity interval training is excellent when you’re ready for it.

- Stretch during and after every workout.

The key to staying fit on the road is realizing that even small actions help. Any travel day can be approached “actively”—for example, take the stairs, or carry your bag instead of rolling it. A morning walk before breakfast is a great way to start the day. Many hotels either have their own fitness rooms or have an arrangement with a local fitness center—inquire when you check in, or, better yet, when you book your reservation.

These days, we have a lot of knowledge and many tools to help us achieve healthy, strong living. With some discipline and a little help as needed, we all can reach our maximum musical and life potential. So, breathe, grab a friend and do something good for your health today and every day. *Take excellent care*, and enjoy life’s journey all the more!

DB

For more than 30 years, saxophonist/flutist Don Braden has toured the world leading his own ensembles, as a special guest and as a sideman with jazz greats Betty Carter, Wynton Marsalis, Freddie Hubbard, Tony Williams, Roy Haynes and numerous others. He has released 21 albums as a leader—including his latest, *Earth Wind and Wonder* (Creative Perspective Music), featuring jazz arrangements of songs by Earth Wind & Fire and Stevie Wonder. A renowned educator, Braden has spent more than two decades giving master classes at schools and universities and running first-class educational programs, such as the Litchfield Jazz Camp, NJPAC’s Wells Fargo Jazz For Teens and, most recently, the Harvard University Monday Jazz Band. Visit him online at donbraden.com.