

CHAPTER

1

Where Are You on the Level of Activity Scale?



In this chapter, I introduce a different way to look at yourself by focusing on your lifestyle and your abilities.

While watching me work out at the gym the other day, an acquaintance said, “Not only don’t you look your age but you’re also not acting your age.” I laughed and thanked him. I was reminded of when, years ago, Gloria Steinem announced on national TV that she was 40 (she’s now in her 70s). The audience gasped. People couldn’t believe that this beautiful, glamorous woman was over 40. Her remark to the audience was, “Folks, *this* is what 40 looks like!” But she could have also said, “Folks, *this* is what 40-year-olds *act* like!”

We have so many preconceived notions of age. And it starts early. When we were celebrating my birthday, I asked my grandson, who was about 7 at the time, how old he thought I was. He said, “50.” I said, “No, quite a bit more.” He replied, “100?” Yikes. Well, how would he know what to guess? Whether 50 or 100, the numbers didn’t mean anything to him. They mean something to us only because we have so many preconceived notions of age.

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We all know people who play ball, ski, run marathons, and work out religiously well into their 70s or 80s. Others continue to work well past traditional retirement age. They stay active and in good physical shape. “But they don’t act 80,” you might say. That’s because they don’t live by the same chronological rules that others do. Through good genes, some luck, a lot of hard work, and great motivation, they continue to do what they love.

At the same time, some people cannot engage in physical activity because of health problems, injuries, or other limitations. Yet, they may be equally motivated and have a very active, almost high-intensity lifestyle. Other people may not enjoy physical exercise or exertion but live anything but a sedate life. They may travel extensively, work long hours, and volunteer a great deal of their free time. Their lifestyle is very active but not necessarily physically exerting.

Life Story

My friend Mitch, who had polio as a child and again in his 50s, walked with crutches for several years before needing a wheelchair to get around. At first reluctant to use the wheelchair, Mitch soon found it to be indispensable. It changed his life, he told me. For the first time in years, he was able to do things that he hadn’t been able to do for so long. From the moment he decided to use that chair, a new world opened to him. He could now go to the store without pain. He could attend baseball games, concerts, movies, and parties. And he could take his dog to the dog park, which is where I met him. In his 50s, he went from being practically housebound to active. Despite the wheelchair, his level of activity actually increased.

So when we think about how we plan to live the rest of our lives, one of the key factors to consider is the degree to which we want to and can be active.

Adapting this concept to our often age-obsessed society leads us to a different measure of who we are, which I call the level of activity (LOA) scale. How do we define this? There are no hard rules for this measure but rather a range. It’s not chronological—that is, we don’t go from one LOA to another simply by having lived another

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year. In fact, if we are so motivated, we can move up the ladder to a higher LOA as we age chronologically. The 55-year-old woman who decides to train for a 100-mile bike ride but who hasn't done this kind of physical exertion in years would increase her LOA. And the previously active 50-year-old who suffers a debilitating injury or severe back pain may change how he spends his leisure time, lowering his LOA level to one in which he coaches instead of plays.

The point is that when we define ourselves—and when others define us—we very often start with our age. That puts us in a cubbyhole that can be hard to break out of.

As you think about living the rest of your life, it's often good to start with defining your lifestyle.

Defining Your Lifestyle

Table 1.1 lists the level of activity number in the first column and sample activities or approaches to life corresponding to each LOA number. A marathoner who is constantly on the go, for example, would have an LOA number of 1, while someone who has difficulty getting around or requires assistance to do so, and who does not lead an active lifestyle, would be at level 8. An athlete who competes in sports while in a wheelchair could very well be at level 1 or 2. The point is that it's not your chronological age nor your skill level that defines who you are. Rather, your ability and desire to participate within a range of activity, whether relaxed or intense, better defines your limits, which, in turn influences your choices.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, it's neither your chronological age nor your level of activity score that totally defines you. But both of those are factors that may influence what you choose to do—just as the wheelchair-bound athlete will ski or play basketball, so too the 50-year-old man who can participate in a sport, and is in good enough shape to do so, may want to spend a great deal of his leisure time reading or being involved in some other quiet activity such as stamp collecting. Some folks may work a full day and head home to plop in front of the TV. Some retired people may be involved in various civic and volunteer activities and are busier and more active than they've ever been. The lifestyle you prefer influences your choices just as much as your level of activity.

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Table 1.1 Level of Activity (LOA) Scale

Level of Activity Score	Activity Level	Explanations and Examples of Activity Level
1	Extremely high	Always on the go; a Type-A personality. Extremely high energy. Can exercise or play sports regularly. Can run a marathon; do any of the legs of a triathlon; sprint 100 yards; play consecutive rounds of golf; ski five days in a row; play two or three sets of singles tennis two or three times a week; work six or seven days a week for 10 to 12 hours a day.
2	Very high	Very high energy and stamina. Can engage in full cardio workout three times a week; play multiple sets of tennis or two rounds of golf, walking the course, a day; jog or power walk routinely; participate in athletic events; work long hours including weekends.
3	High	High energy and stamina. Can play doubles tennis or a round of golf, walking the course, two or three times a week; work out, with an hour of cardio, two or three times a week; jog regularly for 20 to 30 minutes; bicycle 50 miles every month or so; work normal hours plus some weekends.
4	Moderate	Good energy and stamina; more of a Type-B personality. Can exercise once or twice a week, including some cardio; play golf or doubles tennis once or twice a week; work normal hours plus occasional late nights or weekends.
5	Less than moderate	Some energy and stamina. Can play a round of golf using a cart; climb several flights of stairs without losing breath; ride a stationary bike or do cardio exercise periodically for a half hour; work normal hours.
6	Minimal	Minimal energy and stamina; lives a relatively sedate life. Can run short distances with effort or climb one flight of stairs without losing breath; work full or part-time.
7	Somewhat limited	Limited energy and stamina. Can walk with no assistance but limited in distance and slope; maneuver easily and walk up a limited number of stairs; work part-time or not at all.
8	Very limited	Can move around with crutches, a walker, or a wheelchair; works part-time or not at all.

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Note

In determining your level of activity, avoid making value judgments. Someone who reads a great deal and prefers a sedate lifestyle is not “bad;” nor is the para-athlete “good.” People make choices about how to live their lives because of individual likes, dislikes, and abilities. You don’t have to fall into the trap of labeling a lifestyle bad or good.

The LOA explanations are, of course, merely examples of the degrees of exertion as well as the degrees of intensity you have chosen to live your life. Type-A people who have worked long hours every day for years but aren’t athletic might still put their LOA at level 1. If you, like millions of aging baby boomers, work all day in construction or other manual labor, or if you regularly bicycle but wouldn’t consider running (and many people who have bad knees, hips, or backs are warned not to jog), you can place yourself in one of the top rows. The LOA scale provides one view of who you are, and that view can help you focus on your future.

Creating LOA-Specific Goals

Why define your chosen lifestyle with a level of activity scale? For one simple reason: The person you are now, and generally the person you have been for most of your adult life, likely predicts the person you will be for the rest of your life. Although there are many exceptions, it follows that if you’ve been a high-intensity worker, athlete, or participant in leisure activities, there’s a pretty good chance your approach to life takes high-intensity focus. As a result, unless you decide to, or have to, make a radical change, you’re probably not going to last too long living a quiet, sedate, hangin’-out-on-the-beach lifestyle. Or if you do choose to live on the beach, you’ll likely spend your time surfing, boating, and wind-surfing. You’ll probably want the option to do lots of things nearby, perhaps a vibrant nightlife or lots of cultural opportunities (especially if you have injuries or conditions that limit your physical activity).

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At the same time, there is no hard and fast rule that you can't adapt or change your lifestyle. If you are one of the lucky ones with enough resources, you can try a different lifestyle doing something you think might be a good fit, or something you've long dreamed of. If it doesn't work, well, at least you tried. There are many examples of people trying one thing and discovering later that they prefer something different. Just look at the story of John and Andrea in the Life Story sidebar.

Life Story

Ten years ago, John and Andrea, now in their 50s, sold their successful business in New England and moved to a small beach community in North Carolina. They rented for a year while their new home was built, during which they spent most of their time overseeing the construction, getting to know the community and the other residents, and involving themselves in local activities. John became active with the country club and Andrea became a volunteer firefighter. After the house was completed, they both felt they needed more to do, so John got his real estate license and joined a brokerage. Andrea began painting. Fast-forward five or six years, when they felt what they were doing still wasn't satisfying enough, so they opened a restaurant.

Both had been high-intensity small business owners, always on the go, participating in their community, leading an active lifestyle. They never felt comfortable with the notion of leisure time. They are both extremely happy with the new venture and with the busy, active lifestyle to which they've returned.

The point of John and Andrea's story deserves some emphasis: Unless you have the resources to make multiple life changes, think carefully about choosing a lifestyle that's radically different from the one you're used to. This is true for how you spend your leisure time, how close you live to your family—or how easy it is for them to continue to be part of your life—and the costs associated with the new lifestyle. In later chapters, I explore these issues and choices you can make regarding each scenario. And of course, consider your LOA score. While becoming less active is fairly common—whether through illness, injury, loss of muscle tone, or

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loss of drive—moving up the scale is also commonplace. As we've seen, many people get re-energized through rehabilitative services such as physical therapy. Others simply commit to a lifestyle in which old goals are readjusted or new goals formed.

Life Story

As I approached my fiftieth birthday, people warned me that I would soon have a midlife crisis. I often joke that instead of buying a sports car or seeking a mistress, I rode my bike 330 miles in four days for an AIDS ride.

I had never done anything quite so athletic, but I had been attending spinning classes in my gym and felt I was ready to commit to the challenge. Raising the required funds was a snap—almost all my friends quickly pledged financial support—but the training was especially difficult since I was overweight and not in the best of shape. I joined a team to help me, and my wife and friends were also supportive. I trained for months and, as the four-day ride approached, I was beginning to feel confident. My training partners encouraged me, and one even agreed to be my tent-mate. The ride was difficult, and I was never certain of making it all the way. But make it I did, and at the closing ceremony I triumphantly hoisted my bike over my head in celebration, just as my fellow riders were doing. I haven't done anything like that AIDS ride again, but by committing myself to the training program, I upped my LOA score.

Similarly, you might choose to change your level of activity because your relationship status changes. Suppose, for example, a relationship you've been in for a long time ends, and you're now single. In time, you might find that the lifestyle you led for many years was more attuned to your partner's wishes rather than your own. For the sake of the relationship, you lived in a particular area, participated in certain activities, or spent a great deal of your leisure time with your partner's family. If that changes, you could imagine a totally different set of goals and expectations, one that takes you traveling more (or less), doing new things with your time, or changing your professional life.

As your financial situation changes, it's important to reassess your LOA. Imagine that your partner dies, leaving you with a

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significant sum of money. Or, in the alternative, the partner who once provided the sole income for your household dies, and now you have to live on your own resources. You're very likely to change the way you spend your leisure time, where you choose to live, the people you get together with, and perhaps your professional life, if you no longer have to work or now *must* or want to work. The addition or subtraction of financial resources could significantly alter your lifestyle, either giving you the freedom to do more or less, or limiting what you can do.

Conclusion

One of the most important decisions you can make involves choosing a level of activity and a lifestyle that best suits you. Where you place yourself on the level of activity scale has an impact on other life choices you make and can be as important as your finances, health, relationships, and goals.

In Chapter 2, "What Are Your Goals for This Stage in Life?" I discuss how your level of activity score affects your goals. I provide guidance for creating goals (or realizing what they already are). And I focus on ways to find appropriate, inspiring role models.