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Taking responsibility for change



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General Manager of Coca-Cola Oceania, Paul Fitzgerald shares his story of how he went from being unfit and overweight to running an Ironman.

I come from a family of butchers and farmers. As a child, food was central to social gatherings, large portions were the norm and clearing your plate was expected. So I was an overweight teenager.

However, I managed to keep the extra weight at bay in my twenties as I played rugby and enjoyed cricket and tennis. But as work pressures took their toll and I began post graduate study at night, I stopped being involved in sport in my thirties. Exercise was no longer part of my regular routine.

My fitness slipped, my clothes got bigger and I had less energy. I got puffed just walking up stairs. Luckily for me (but not my fitness), escalators and lifts are everywhere!

Years went by and my weight constantly fluctuated. I'm very determined and goal focused, and easily lost 7-8kg each time on the countless fad diets I tried – everything from Atkins to The Zone. This approach was perfect for my personality and patience levels, but wasn't sustainable – the weight just went back on with interest. So I kept getting bigger.

As my energy dwindled, I fuelled myself with caffeine and skipped meals to keep going, then ended up binge eating. As a young man, you can get away with it, but not when you're older. By 2009, I had a

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demanding job where late nights, business travel and working dinners meant I was consuming too much of the wrong things at the wrong time, and there was no opportunity to exercise.

Furthermore, striking a positive balance between work and raising a family left no time to focus on my health and wellbeing.

The strains on my health and body were evident. I was over 40, weighed 110kg and was unfit, with high blood pressure and cholesterol. I felt like my health was out of control but I could do nothing to change it because all my dieting efforts had failed.



By now, executive health was a hot topic and heart disease was heralded everywhere as the number one killer of men of my age with my lifestyle. I realised I was a prime candidate for a heart attack and the thought of the impact on my family was overwhelming. Something had to change. I was lucky – I didn't have a health crisis. But I did see what was inevitably coming and finally took control of my life.

I decided to focus on fitness – where I thought I could make lasting change – rather than weight, where I had failed so many times. This time, there was no 'goal' – just a need to be in better health. I took up cycling and was delighted that I'd finally found an enjoyable way to manage stress, sleep better and think more clearly.

As I became fitter, I educated myself about the importance of good nutrition in aiding performance and general living, and made changes to what I ate. This wasn't a diet; it was a new lifestyle.

The difference was incredible: I felt more alive and alert, performed better at work and had more energy at home.

As I started putting fitness and nutrition together, my weight dropped. I remember the first time it was below 100kg. I'd been there before, felt "job done", then gone back to my old ways. This time, I was happy about my weight loss, but it wasn't my focus. That was the difference. Now, I was focused on doing something I really enjoyed, which was cycling, and on being fit. The weight loss was a bonus.

As time went on, I rode better and went further than I'd ever thought possible. So on my 48th birthday, I told my wife I wanted to do an Ironman before I turned 50. I'd never swum further than 200m or run longer than 9km. Signing up for a 3.8km swim, 180km bike ride and 42.2km run



seemed crazy.

The training was hard but I completed the Melbourne Ironman in 2014, six weeks after turning 49 years old. It took nearly 14.5 hours, but I finished!



Although it was a great personal achievement, being an Ironman isn't the reason I lost weight. If I'd set that goal when I was a couch-bound, 110kg middle-aged executive, I would not have succeeded. Incremental changes to my fitness and nutrition is how I did it, and it took five years.

When I stopped focusing solely on my weight and concentrated on my overall health and fitness, I finally managed to change my life positively – and that's the advice I would give to anyone else.

Now, my blood pressure and cholesterol are normal, my energy levels are sky high and yes, I have lost weight. I weigh 84kg and can maintain it without doing an Ironman every year. I'm never going to have a six-pack, and I know my weight will fluctuate by 2-3kg as my training ramps up or down. But it's the overall impact on my fitness that's important to me and making the right choices to support a healthy lifestyle.

Having undergone my own personal transformation, I can confidently and credibly talk to Coca-Cola's commitment to helping get people more active and focused on their overall health and wellbeing. I'm living proof that it works.

Obesity is an epidemic and it's going to take the collective efforts of a range of organisations and people to make a difference. As a leader in the food and beverage industry, I have a personal responsibility to encourage that positive change: for my family, our employees, our consumers and our community.

I believe in moderation – in eating a little less and moving a little more. I still enjoy a classic red Coke occasionally, but I'm more likely to sip on a Coke Zero or a Powerade if I'm training.

Now I know there is no silver bullet to solving this issue. It takes hard work, commitment, the support of family and friends, and taking responsibility for your own health and wellbeing.

