When the weather outside is frightful, you may be tempted to stay curled up inside by the fire rather than brave the elements for the sake of fitness. However, staying active is too important to your health to wait until the spring thaw. Try some of the following suggestions to have a more active lifestyle, whatever the weather.

Dress for success. Staying active in cold weather can be pleasurable (really!) if properly dressed. Successful cold weather garb includes these essentials:

- Start with your head. A warm hat is essential to maintain body temperature. Make it one that is comfortable and stays on your head, even when the wind blows.
- Warm gloves add greatly to comfort and help prevent sore, chapped hands. Use mittens when temperatures get frigid. Keep feet warm and dry in wool-blend socks and insulated boots for snowy fun.
- Layers are important to hold in body heat. You can regulate body temperature by taking off layers as you warm up. Garments that make good layers include long underwear, tights or leggings, long-sleeved T-shirts, turtleneck tops and sweaters, vest and coat or jacket.
- Fabrics can make a big difference in comfort. Fleece is very warm yet lightweight. Microfiber and silk garments can be much warmer than heavy cottons. Nylon is an effective wind block. Waterproof finishes are a must for snow activities.

Fit in several short fitness breaks throughout the day. Health experts recommend a minimum of 30 minutes of movement on most days, but that time can be broken into shorter segments.

- Try a couple of 10- to 15-minute periods a day with different activities. For example, take a stretch break instead of a coffee break at work. Get up and walk to speak with a co-worker instead of emailing. Take the long way to the copy machine.
- Make movement part of your everyday routine. Take the stairs instead of elevator. Park as far from the door as possible. Do calisthenics or household chores during TV ads. Go into the bank instead of using the drive-up window.
- Use household chores like vacuuming, dusting or laundry as an opportunity to move vigorously.

(Continued on page 4)
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I came across a haiku poem the other day by Kobayashi Issa, Japanese poet and Buddhist priest, that made me think about the New Year. He may have come as close as anyone to capturing my thinking on the subject:

“New Year’s Day…
everything is in blossom!
I feel about average.”

How many of us view the difference between the New Year and the Old Year as merely a day . . . or perhaps a glass of champagne? Does anything really change except the date? Most people I know fail to make a New Year resolution because they doubt they’ll keep it anyway. Unfortunately, I can put myself in this category most years. Perhaps I’m missing something with my slovenly attitude. The end of a year really should be about looking at a behavior we weren’t pleased with in the past, and changing it. A small adjustment may be all that is necessary. A little tweaking could go a long way.

We might even get a little creative as we attempt to formulate our resolution. If better health is our goal, diet and exercise aren’t the only things we can work on . . . although I don’t want to discourage improvement in those areas. We might consider other healthy concepts, such as stress reduction; or increasing our number of sleep hours; or using humor instead of anger to resolve conflict. Pick one. We have a much better chance of success if we concentrate on only one area for improvement at a time.

Once we’ve selected our focal area, we should narrow it a bit. Proclaiming we will reduce stress is too broad for most of us to deal with effectively. We have to be more specific to make it work. Just how are we going to reduce stress?

The next looming decision is how frequently to incorporate the stress reduction technique of choice into real life. This will be dependent on your frazzle factor. Just how tense are you? How often do you require stress relief?

Once these decisions have been made, a specific New Year, or mid-year, or end-of-year resolution can be crafted. It should look something like this: I will walk 15 minutes each morning before breakfast. Short. Specific. To the point. Doable.

It is important to remember Nido Qubein’s statement: “. . . nothing works unless you do.” That’s the hardest part. We have to get off the sofa and do something! We have to push our comfort zone over the edge and invest some energy into accomplishing what we’ve resolved to do.

The fireworks on New Year’s Eve signify a time of renewal. They remind us that we have an opportunity to rejuvenate, to reinvent, to improve. If they failed to motivate you at the beginning of 2009, it’s not too late to act. On reflection, if I’d been following my own advice and changed one behavior each year, by this age I’d be nearly perfect!
Mud between your toes: Reaping nature’s benefits

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Richard Louv’s latest book, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, raises concerns about the increasing amount of time children spend indoors, away from nature. It caused me to reflect on my own childhood and the enormous amount of time I, my sisters, along with neighbor kids and friends, spent in the woods below the home where I grew up.

We played for hours down at the creek or hiking up to “Big Rock,” on a bluff that overlooked the small town where I grew up. The freedom I experienced at such a tender age of 5 and throughout my teen years was developed in a woods filled with rabbits, squirrels, birds, butterflies, bees and turtles. The creek meandered for miles at the bottom of the hill, where slippery rocks and pools of water provided small fish, dragonflies and snakes to observe, fantasize and pretend, setting the stage for hours of play.

That was a few years ago, back in the 1950s, during a time that offered freedoms our kids today will never know—unless we do something about it. Louv’s book provides research that shows how important nature is to all of us, adults as well as kids. He makes the case for nature being essential for physical and emotional health. He also cites research suggesting that exposure to nature may reduce the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

“Nature-deficit disorder,” according to Louv, “describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses.”

Researchers studying the phenomenon of the “de-naturing” of childhood show reduced amount of leisure time experienced in families today. They find people spending more time in front of the TV or computer, playing video games or Wii. Not only is obesity growing among children and adults, but research says the best predictor of preschool children’s physical activity is simply being outdoors. Another research study found the average 8-year-old could better identify characters on the Japanese trading card game Pokémon than native plants and species in his/her own back yard and community.

So how do we change this condition? Here are a few suggestions to get started.

1. Take time to be outdoors.
   Encourage your children to turn off the television and computer and go outside for awhile—and do the same yourself.

2. Be mindful and observant of what is happening around you. Don’t just go to the park (which is better than not), but try to find a field or open land area. Spend time categorizing the different insects and animals you can find. When was the last time you turned on a porch light and looked at the bugs flying around? Have you ever walked in the mud after a rain and felt the squishy mud push through your toes? Try it again this time with your child.

3. Look for patterns to see your environment in a new way. Take a winter walk and look closely at ice crystals you find in nature. In early summer try catching fireflies in a jar. Watch their lights turn on and off. On a warm summer night go out in the back yard, lie on the ground and look at the stars. Really get to know one open area to see what’s present at different times of year.

4. Talk to your children about your own experiences with nature. Encourage them to talk to you. Build memories and enjoy each other’s company.

Keeping fit when winter weather is frightful

(Continued from page 1)

Explore new activities.

♦ Try mall walking, indoor swimming or other water activities; sign up for Tai Chi; or take dancing lessons. Treat yourself to a new aerobic dance video, or look for a yoga program on TV.

♦ Join or start a church or community-based sports team. Look into joining the YMCA or other community fitness program.

♦ Buy a piece of exercise equipment. A treadmill or stationary bicycle may be just the ticket to keep you moving and motivated. Learn as much as you can before shopping; consider purchasing gently used equipment rather than new. Keep your mind occupied while on the treadmill or bike by listening to music or books on tape, watching TV, or reading a good book. Give new meaning to the term “active social life” by choosing active entertainment when you go out with friends. Dancing, bowling, laser tag and ice skating are fun, active alternatives to sitting in a movie or concert.

♦ Bring out all your fitness equipment and set up a fitness circuit. Spend 5 to 10 minutes on each piece of equipment. Alternate with walking or jogging in place until you make the complete fitness circuit.

♦ Sign up for a strength training program. University of Missouri Extension has a strength training program especially for middle-aged and older adults called Stay Strong, Stay Healthy. For information about this program call your county Extension office or visit http://missourifamilies.org/sssh/.

Stay active all winter long to protect your health and make sure you are ready for a fun, active spring and summer.

PERSONAL FINANCE

6 financial tips for the New Year

1. Review current spending. Think about where you can plug unplugged spending leaks.

2. Order and review your three free credit reports at www.annualcreditreport.com.

3. Review your debt load. Find an extra $10 each week to pay more than the minimum.

4. Review your energy costs and consider weatherizing.

5. Plan weekly menus to reduce shopping trips and cut grocery costs.

6. Make sure you’re putting away money so you’ll have reserves in case of an emergency.

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