

3 Numbers that Don't Define You or Your Health

By Rachna Shah in HEALTH

Posted Jan 02 2018 - 07:00 p.m.

Now, more than ever, life and decisions are data-driven. From the number of steps we walk recorded on our Fitbits to the number of calories in that late night pizza slice, it's hard to live in the moment and just have fun. So, while a data-driven culture can be effective in a workplace environment, it doesn't work so well when applied to yourself. We all want to be healthy, but numbers aren't the best way to go about doing so.

"Most people don't consider general quality of life," says Dr. Kelly Baez, a licensed professional counselor and Founder of FitShrink. Health is more important than just numbers. You have to consider other questions like: "Is it getting easier to do day to day tasks? Do you have more energy? Is it easier to take the stairs than it was last month? If you struggle with anxiety or depression, has there been any improvement? All of these are relevant indicators of improved health."

Wellness is a journey, and not one that can be defined by numbers. Here are just a few numbers that don't define you or your health.

1. Your BMI

Chances are that you've been in this situation: you go to the doctor's office, get weighed and see that you've gained a few pounds and your body mass index (BMI) has increased. This may happen after your first semester at college or a study abroad or even [your favorite holiday](#).

Yet what exactly does your BMI mean? According to Dr. Baez, BMI is "a tool that uses your height and weight together to categorize your weight as underweight, normal, overweight, or obese, fails to take these variables into account." But the BMI was invented to help the government allocate resources over 200 years ago. It ignores waist size, relative proportions of bone, muscle, and fat, and it can make a one-pound gain the border between ideal and overweight.

Dr. Baez believes that numbers are used as the easy way out to explain trends in health and your overall health status. "It makes for nice looking charts but is not helpful in a discussion of ideal health goals."

Stephanie Murray, a junior at the Savannah College of Art and Design, has struggled with her weight and BMI since her doctor sent her to a weight loss camp in fifth grade. "Since then, every number associated with my weight and size impacted how I saw myself," she says. "In middle and high school, our scores on physical tests affected our grade in the class. I was a straight-A honors student but the fact that my BMI (35) and weight (that fluctuates from 230-250 lbs) determined my grade made me feel less of a person."

But as time passed, Stephanie saw things differently. "Your BMI is a suggested number based on height and weight, not who you are or what you're capable of accomplishing as a person. Numbers are just numbers. Some higher numbers, like credit scores, are better and some lower numbers like parking tickets, are better, but they don't determine your personality. Be yourself because you only live one day at a time, and that, is the only number that matters."

Think about it this way — you wouldn't tie your friend or your classmate's worth to an outdated number. So, why do it to yourself?

2. Calories

There's that old saying, "Quality beats quantity." This isn't only true in English classes when you're writing up papers — it also applies to what you eat. "Calories aren't indicators of nutrition," Dr. Baez says. "1600 calories of junk food and 1600 calories of lean protein, fresh produce and complex carbohydrates will have very different effects on your mind and body."

Calories are just one measurement, and they certainly aren't a comprehensive one. Moreover, there are serious dangers in extreme calorie counting. If you're planning to lead a long and healthy life, calories aren't the best way to get there. "Hard and fast rules aren't helpful for long term health," Dr. Baez says.

Hannah Harshe, a sophomore at the University of Michigan, agrees. She believes that you shouldn't be focusing on numbers to define your health, unless your doctor tells you to. "You were made a certain way, with a certain 'happy weight,' a certain number of calories your body wants, and a certain amount of exercise you need," she says. "Your body, mind, and soul work together. Sometimes you have to say no to the chocolate cake because of your body and sometimes you have to say yes to it because of your soul. It's challenging to know when to do what and what your priorities should be, but I promise that if you view food as a way to make one of your "selves" happier, everything will get easier."

When everybody's body composition and activity levels vary, it's important to realize that your caloric intake isn't the only factor that impacts your health. A calorie is not equal to another calorie, and just by reducing your caloric intake, your health isn't sure to improve.

3. Health statistics

According to the [CDC](#), 1 in 5 school-aged children is either overweight or obese. By 2025, 1 in 5 adults will be obese.

What do these statistics mean to you? You might interpret them as alarming, and with good reason. But you might also consider them as a warning. If you do, here's why you shouldn't.

"Statistics are generally considered at the population level," says Dr. Angelina Sutin, an associate professor of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine at Florida State University College of Medicine. "This means that associations are found when looking at a lot of people together. A finding may or may not be true about any specific individual."

Rather than looking at statistics, you can consider ranges for healthy numbers based off demographic factors, such as age, ethnicity. It's also important to consider family health backgrounds when reading health statistics. As you can see, health is definitely not as simple as a single number, or even a range of numbers.

...Some numbers do matter, though

Nonetheless, numbers can help to build a bigger picture of your health. One important number is the number of hours you sleep each night. This is a good example of a complex number, as sleep needs vary based on age, activity level, and lifestyle. Studies from the National Sleep Foundation have found that the recommended range is 7-9 hours for young adults and 8-10 hours for teenagers. However, it's also important to notice to base off the number of hours you sleep based on whether you're excessively sleepy in the day or if you're performing large amounts of exercise.

Just like the 8 hours of sleep myth, there's also an 8 glasses of water myth according to the [Mayo Clinic](#). The goal of eight glasses a day is understandable, but based on how hydrated and thirsty you feel, you may need more.

Numbers such as blood sugar and cholesterol level are also important to your health, especially if your family has a history of diabetes or heart conditions. However, it's important to remember that these numbers aren't just a single number — they're levels and ranges.

So much of the future relies upon realizing our potential and working by ourselves and together to reach our goals. Defining ourselves by numbers won't help us get there. Your health is incredibly important, but metrics and measurements can't tell you whether you're healthy or unhealthy. Dr. Sutin shared that there's no one definition of health or well-being. "Health refers broadly to the condition of the individual," she says. "This can be applied to different aspects of functioning, including physical health, emotional health, cognition health, etc." Your health is determined by [many factors](#), including but not limited to your sleep patterns and exercise.

At the end of the day, numbers like your weight and caloric intake will exist. It's up to you to think about these numbers differently. "It's not the

numbers listed that are the problem per se; the problem lies in the importance you place on them,” Dr. Jordan says. “It’s harder to quantify more important qualities like your level of grit, determination, integrity, creativity, leadership, compassion, loyalty to friends, inclusivity, kindness, sense of adventure, courage, self-reliance, passion, entrepreneurial spirit, and vision.”

While this may be easier said than done, it’s an important step on the journey to well-being — and it’s one that we’ll walk on together.