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Health By Numbers

FEBRUARY 25, 2020 BY [CARL GREER](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

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How do your health numbers look? When a nurse tells you what your blood pressure is, or when you step on a scale, does the number affect your outlook for the day? Measuring health by the numbers has its pros and cons.

Health apps and activity trackers are popular in part because we all tend to look to numbers to tell us how to feel about our health. Are you doing well or showing improvement? A weight gain of a pound or two or "bad" numbers on a medical test can awaken you to the need to change your health habits, which is good. But you might emphasize numbers too much and end up feeling demoralized by them instead of inspired to change. You might end up not looking at your health numbers at all.

Big changes can be very difficult, but you can set small goals and establish new habits so as to experience less stress and better health and wellness. Numbers can help. You could eliminate a second glass of wine with dinner, and skip wine altogether three nights a week, and watch your numbers on the scale change. When you get into your car to drive to or from work, you could consciously choose to meditate for several minutes before starting your engine and, over time through meditation, retrain your brain and even reshape it to be less emotionally reactive to potentially stressful situations. You could walk in nature for a few minutes a day, thereby lowering your levels of the stress hormone cortisol and boosting your immunity, even as your mood lifts from being outdoors. You could set a goal to walk 10,000 steps at least once a week, or 8,500 steps three times a week, and when that goal has been met, increase it slightly.

One way to make numbers work in your favor is to record them whenever you look at lab tests results or your activity tracker's or scale's display. Notice what is your most common range of numbers. Maybe, instead of becoming upset that you gained two pounds, you will see that your weight fluctuates and, due to changes you have made in your daily habits, your range of weight is two pounds less than it was before, and you never hit that top number. Maybe, you can track how many days you met your goal of sticking to your new healthy habit, instead of obsessing about not having reached the number you are seeking.

If when tracking your health by the numbers you become frustrated by your slow progress, you might track different measures, such as how many days a month you met your goal. This week, you might do better than last week.

Also, why not pay closer attention to how it feels when you meet your goal? Small victories can inspire bigger ones. Minor setbacks can simply awaken you to the need to figure out how you got off track, and your insights can help you get back on track and stay there. If your downfall is longing for a reward after a long, hard day, maybe you can find a better one than a glass of wine before dinner or a bowl of ice cream before bed.

If you have become obsessed with your numbers, keep in mind that they are just representations of health. They are not you. Don't overidentify with your health numbers and write a story for your health called, "I'm a failure because I can't get those numbers to budge." When you find your moods are affected by your numbers being "good" or "bad," you might be giving them too much influence over you. Do your numbers matter, or do you simply need to go about the business of living healthfully and improving your habits?

How can you move from obsession with the numbers to focusing on other issues regarding your health and feel more relaxed as you go about your activities of living—including the actions you take to change your health habits? You might start by writing a new health story for yourself that goes beyond achieving certain numbers. Your new health story could be:

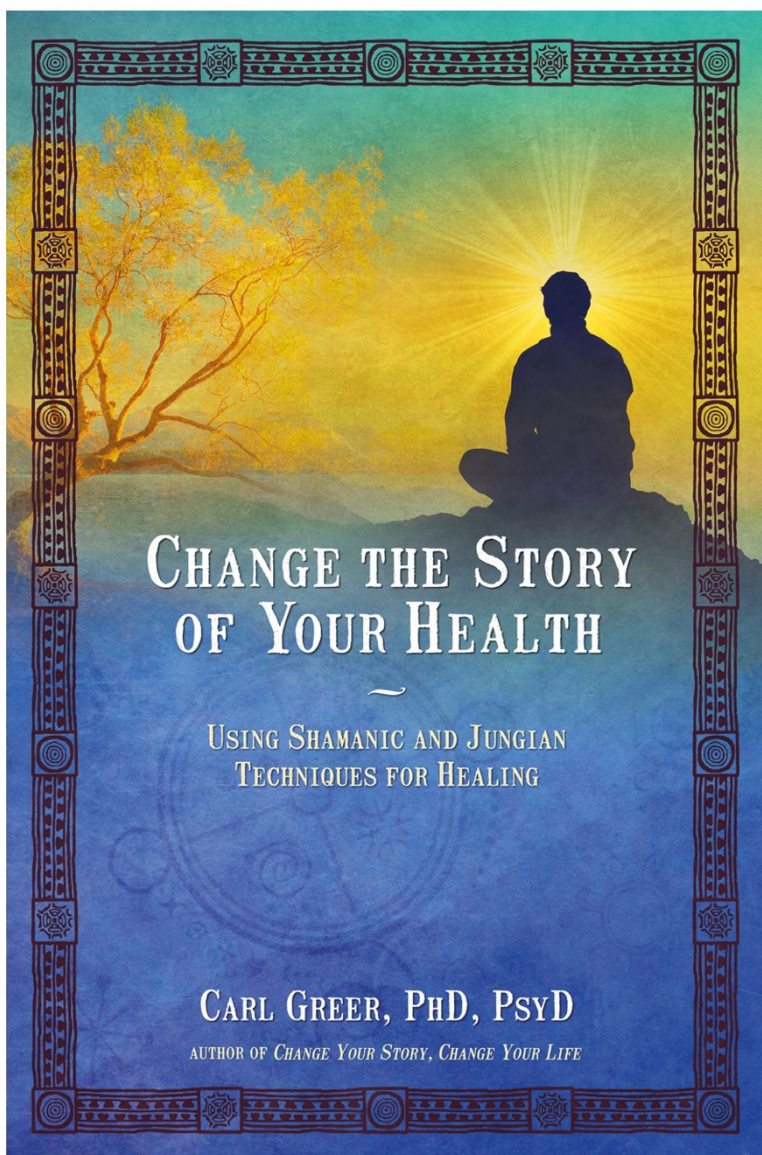
I am strong in my body, and it supports me in all I choose to do.

Sometimes I do not reach my exercise goals, but I choose not to worry and instead, simply try again tomorrow.

I have noticed I have habits that don't serve my health, and I am changing them. I am optimistic about my potential for significant changes for the better.

How would it feel to free yourself from the tyranny of judging your health by the numbers and instead, create a new relationship with them? What would it be like if you were to say, "I'm just not going to pay attention to the numbers for a while"? If this makes you nervous, you are not alone. You may need to work on trusting yourself more, and you may need to explore why you struggle with changing health habits or with perfectionism. Try liberating yourself from checking your numbers for a while if it will not pose an immediate threat to your health. Journal about how you feel during this experiment. Pay attention to how your body feels. You might find it is giving you the message, "Don't worry so much! Stop obsessing and lighten up!" If so, think about how you might monitor your numbers without creating stress while doing it.

Health numbers are simply a means to help you decide what you want to change about your health habits and what you want to keep doing. For a better story of your health, consider having a different relationship with those numbers.



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