

# Master Your Core

# **What's in it for me? Empower your core - and transform your life.**

Picture this. You wake up in the morning and mentally scan your body – no aches or pains. Then you hop out of bed and look at yourself in the mirror – six-pack abs, check. In the shower, you realize you feel physically, emotionally, and spiritually ready to seize the day. Sound too good to be true? It's not! To get fit and strong, reduce your risk of injury, and boost your overall health and mental well-being, there's one core thing you can do, and that's to empower your, well, your core. These blinks provide science-backed wisdom and strategies that target the mind-core relationship to achieve holistic wellness. By activating your anatomical center, you'll transform your body and lay the groundwork for a healthy, happy, and long life. In these blinks, you'll discover

why improving your posture will boost your mood; how self-love can reduce your risk of injury; and breathing exercises to increase strength.

## **Your core initiates every major move your body makes.**

Luke started throwing a baseball in little league. Years later, in college, he became a star pitcher, but he suffered from recurring tendonitis in his shoulder and missed a lot of games. Then he tore two shoulder tendons and had to have surgery. Luke thought his pitching days were over. But the author had a different plan. When she met Luke for physical therapy, she added core training to his routine shoulder-strengthening exercises. Luke not only healed, but also achieved a pitch speed of 90 mph – his personal record – and remained injury-free for the rest of his career! How? It's simple: by strengthening his core, he strengthened every other part of his body. The key message here is: Your core initiates every major move your body makes. Your body is an incredible machine. It's made up of over 650 muscles that work together to get you out of bed and propel you through life. And your core is the most crucial link in that kinetic chain. Before we dive in deeper, let's get one thing straight: your core's a lot more than just your rectus abdominis, or abs. It's also your glutes, back muscles, hip joints, pelvis, and spine. It initiates and can enhance every major move your body makes. To throw faster, run further, or feel steadier, you need a strong core. But strength alone isn't enough. Its flip side, stability, is just as important. The author's scientific definition of core stability is "The foundation of dynamic trunk control that allows production, transfer, and control of force and motion to distal segments of the body." In other words, you need core stability to move your body the way you want to – and also to avoid getting injured when you step on the proverbial banana peel. In a purely physical sense, this stability depends on three types of muscle contractions. The first is concentric, like when you do a crunch and your abs shorten. The second is eccentric – those same abs lengthen when you jump or catch yourself when you're falling. The third kind is isometric, when your abs maintain constant tension in a static position – think planks. Core stability also involves proprioception. Often referred to as the "sixth sense," proprioception is your ability to sense the location and motion of your body in space. Your levels of core control and proprioception are the most significant factors in preventing injuries. The author personally experienced this when she fell 50 feet off a

steep cliff while mountain biking – and survived with just minor injuries. On the other hand, isolated exercises like crunches actually promote injury because they imbalance the kinetic chain. The key is holistic training, which we'll explore more in the coming blinks.

## **Your posture affects your physiology and mood.**

How's your posture? Be honest. Are your shoulders slumped? Is your neck craned forward? Is your back rounded like a turtle? If so, you're not alone. On average, American adults sit for six and a half hours every day. Exhaustion, stress, and gravity cause many of them, especially those that work at computers, to have a neglected posterior chain, or "dormant bottom syndrome." In other words, the muscles on the front of their bodies are tight from constant use while those on the back side are weak. As a result, their posture is a mess. Core training starts with cultivating good postural alignment. This isn't just about looking confident and svelte. Poor posture is the main cause of neck, back, shoulder, hand, and knee problems. It also compromises circulation and makes you tired and depressed. In short, the way you carry yourself can literally make or break your day. The key message here is: Your posture affects your physiology and mood. So what exactly is good posture? For starters, your spine should be aligned vertically, with your chin parallel to the floor, your shoulders even, and your body weight balanced on both legs. It might be counterintuitive, but good posture doesn't mean "standing up straight," which can feel tense and exhausting. The goal is actually to "stand up curved" – that is, to embrace your spine's natural curvature. Looked at from the side, there should be an elongated, S-shaped curve going from your neck to your mid and then lower back. Your ribs should float directly above your hips. Don't tuck your butt in – instead, lift it. Now grow tall by imagining that a thread is drawing your spine up through the top of your head. This will automatically engage your core. Tune in to and correct your posture when you're brushing your teeth in the morning, while you're working at your desk, and when you're whipping up dinner. Think about how you're encouraging alertness and happiness every time you lengthen your spine – how, with each gentle nudge, your core is getting closer to making good posture its default position. Movement also encourages good posture. Do shoulder circles, walk around to invigorate your sleepy butt, and consider switching to a standing desk – they've been shown to reduce back pain. And pandiculate. Pandiculation entails contracting, then slowly lengthening and relaxing, your muscles. You naturally do it upon awakening: you tighten your jaw, arms, and legs; give a big yawn; and splay your arms and legs out as far as they'll go. This sequence of motions resets your muscles' alignment, decreases tension, and improves proprioception by providing your brain with sensory feedback.

## **Develop a strong connection between your core, mind, and heart to quickly recover from - or even prevent - injuries.**

Jessica was wakeboarding at 25 mph when she had the accident. Now, her knee was ripped to shreds; the bone, cartilage, and tendons were torn, along with all four ligaments and a major artery. But on the way to the hospital, Jessica didn't panic. She meditated, focused on her breathing, and traded her pain for gratitude that she was alive. And just months after her injury, Jessica returned to work as a wildlife guide and naturalist – with a fully functional leg. All her life, Jessica had empowered her core not only as an active outdoorswoman, but also through her mental outlook of optimism, intellectual curiosity, and gratitude. This resilient mindset and strong mind-body connection played a huge role in her recovery. The key message here is: Develop a strong connection between your core, mind, and heart to quickly recover from – or even prevent – injuries. In the West, the core is usually defined as the body's center of strength and balance. But the core is more than just muscles. Long ago, both the ancient Greeks and Indian master yogis recognized that it's also the body's spiritual center – and that harnessing its power can actually help the body heal. Modern medicine has begun to take note of these findings and approach rehabilitation more holistically. And it's starting to place more focus on the best injury remedy of all: prevention. As you saw with Jessica, things like breathing and meditation can be used to reduce pain and improve healing. If incorporated into your daily routine, these techniques can also help you achieve a stable mind and core to prevent injury in the first place. For example, new research reveals that concentrating on certain things while exercising can actually make your muscles bigger and stronger! The heart and the core are closely linked as well. Anatomically, your heart is connected to your diaphragm – your breathing muscle – at the top of your core; it moves up and down with each breath you take. And caring for your core directly boosts your heart's well-being. For one, exercising it gets your heart rate up, which is crucial for cardiovascular health. Conversely, the nerves in your diaphragm – especially the vagus nerve – can bring your heart rate down and reduce stress in your body. A poorly functioning vagus nerve is at the root of many chronic diseases, so it's important to stimulate and tone yours through meditation, massage, or cold showers. You can also try “buzzing like a bee”: slowly exhale through your nose while making an “mmm” sound to relax your body, regulate your heart rate, and gain mental clarity.

## **You need to holistically nourish your core to flourish.**

As you've seen, your ability to thrive isn't just about being in good physical shape; it also involves your mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. These aspects are all connected, which is why people get depressed when they don't exercise – or feel at peace when they pray, practice yoga, or go to a spa. You have a lot more power to influence all these factors than you may think. Your genes do predispose you to certain injuries or diseases, but they don't dictate your fate. That is determined by the way you live your life every day: your choices can actually alter the way your DNA is expressed. As Dr. Mehmet Oz says, “Genetics load the gun. Your lifestyle pulls the trigger.” It follows, then, that you need to nurture each part of your nature to flourish. And, at its essence, holistic care means getting down with the idea of self-love. The key message here is: You need to holistically nourish your core to flourish. Self-love includes obvious things like exercising regularly and knowing when to rest, which is crucial for enhancing performance and avoiding injury. It also involves getting enough sleep; aim for seven to eight hours, and try incorporating 20-minute naps into your day instead of coffee to naturally boost your attentiveness. Self-love means eating well so you don't

end up dying prematurely – as 500,000 Americans do every year – due to a poor diet. Opt for organic, unprocessed, and locally-grown whole foods whenever possible, and focus on plants. The USDA 2020 Dietary Guidelines suggests that your dietary intake be over 75 percent plant-based. And don't forget to drink enough water! That's 11.5 cups of fluids each day for women and 15.5 cups a day for men. If you're a woman, self-love can mean becoming aware of your hormonal fluctuations – and harnessing them to your advantage. The US women's soccer team tracked their individual cycles and used the data to create tailored training schedules. This maximized their performance, and there are many free mobile apps out there that can help you do the same. Self-love also involves more subtle actions. You can promote physical and emotional resilience by practicing meditation, gratitude, and compassion. And approaching spirituality with an open mind – whether that means connecting to the universe through a higher power, art, or nature – will help you cultivate wonder, contentment, and a sense of oneness. But this sense is more than just a feeling. In the same way your experiences, beliefs, and decisions were informed by your ancestors, your own choices will travel far beyond the here and now. How you live your life and nurture your body and mind today affects how your DNA will function tomorrow – and further down the line.

## **Cultivating your breath and awareness lays the foundation for a healthy core.**

Google “Michelangelo’s David.” Pretty impressive abs, right? The superficial, global core muscles of his literally sculpted physique get all the glory – and for good reason. But if he were flesh and blood, he’d be thanking his deep local muscles too. These behind-the-scenes heroes constantly work to stabilize you and stave off injury. The author’s Core BASE Guide is all about activating both your local and global muscles through Breathing, Awareness, Stability, and Empowerment. These blinks will explore just a few of the many exercises that focus on building core stability, strength, and coordination. By mastering these techniques, you’ll perform and feel better in both your athletic endeavors and life in general – and build a six-pack while you’re at it! First up? Breathe. The key message here is: Cultivating your breath and awareness lays the foundation for a healthy core. Deep breathing combined with dynamic stretching can strengthen your mind-core connection and improve your posture, core stability, and oxygen flow. The star of the show here is your diaphragm – the breathing muscle you encountered earlier. Diaphragm, meet “turtle” posture – and now bid it farewell! Hop onto your belly and lace your hands on top of each other. Rest your forehead on the back of your hands, and then raise your chest. Inhale through your nose into your lower abdomen; imagine the air’s filling into your core and floating away your turtle shell. You normally take between 10 and 20 breaths per minute; slow that to 4 to 10 breaths. With each long exhalation, pay attention to the gentle squeeze from the front, sides, and base of your belly. Practice this diaphragmatic breathing for a few minutes every day to awaken, align, and balance your inner core. Now comes the Awareness phase, which ensures you’re using the right muscles at the right moment in order to move efficiently and safely. Here’s a simple meditation to unite your mind, body, and spirit. Deeply breathe into your abdomen, then ribs, then chest. As you exhale, reverse the flow so that the breath leaves your abdomen first, then your ribs and chest. Gently rest your hands on your belly; feel it rise and fall. Inhale joy, exhale tension. Next, find your lower ribs; sense them expanding and receding like waves. Keep your mind focused on your inner core. Concentrate on contracting your core with your exhalations and relaxing as you inhale. Now begin to repeat mantras, silently or aloud and in sync with your breath,



to strengthen your mental, emotional, and spiritual muscles. “I am in control.” “I choose positivity.” “I believe in my core.” “I will listen to my body.” “I find strength in adversity.” “I have potential for greatness.”

# **Stabilize and empower your core through dynamic exercises and challenging, fun activities.**

Ever tried whitewater kayaking? If so, you’ll know it’s impossible to navigate the rapids without your core; you’d immediately tip over. The third step of the BASE guide focuses on Stability. Research shows that most traumatic injuries occur just 0.04 seconds after a knee or ankle starts to twist. But through dynamic training, you can actually teach your body to respond quickly enough to sidestep any damage. In short, it’s not the strongest that endure, but those who are most adaptable. Balance is key. It’s not something anyone is born with, but it can be cultivated by challenging your body to move in new ways. The key message here is: Stabilize and empower your core through dynamic exercises and challenging, fun activities. Plyometrics, or jump training exercises, have long been used to develop core stability, balance, and power in athletes. Try these “Sky Hops.” Start with your feet hip width apart and your toes pointing straight ahead. Reach your arms up and lengthen the top of your head toward the sky. Bend your knees as you squat down, then push through your heels to jump up and down as fast as possible. Try to land softly with your knees parallel to each other. Or try hanging like a spider! Suspension exercises use straps and your own body weight as resistance. They’re an effective and entertaining way to promote core muscle control. Now, for the final part of the Core BASE Guide: Empowerment. You know your core does best when your mind and spirit are thriving – so embrace play! You probably won’t get the results you want if you’re stuck in a workout plan you don’t enjoy. Instead, see core empowerment as your own personal adventure. Challenge yourself to try something you’ve never done before – maybe surfing or rock climbing. Pilates, yoga, martial arts, and dance are some of the best ways to strengthen your mind-body connection. On top of that, they can do wonders for your muscle tone, flexibility, endurance, heart health, coordination, and spatial awareness. And remember, laughter is the best medicine. That’s not just a handy trope. Laughter actually engages your musculoskeletal, respiratory, and cardiovascular systems – as well as all parts of your core. Doctors in ancient Greece knew the benefits of laughter; they’d send sick patients to a hospital’s “hall of comedians.” And in the fourteenth century, French surgeon Henri de Mondeville began doling out “humor therapy” to help his patients heal after surgery. Life can be stressful. There will definitely be times when you don’t feel like laughing. But approaching any activity with playfulness – be it work, exercise, or meditation – will make it more fun . . . and core-empowering!

## **Final summary**

The key message in these blinks: Mastering your core is about much more than achieving a six-pack – it’s allowing yourself to flourish in a physical, emotional, and spiritual sense. The Core BASE Guide is a holistic program for harnessing your inner power. With scientifically supported exercises and techniques on breathing, awareness, stability, and empowerment, you can transform your physique, reduce injuries, and

recalibrate your outlook on life. And here's some more actionable advice:

Challenge your core while communing with nature. Studies reveal that people who exercise outdoors reap more psychological and physical benefits – better moods, fewer health problems, and longer life spans – than those who do indoor workouts. It's not just that having to adapt to variable terrain challenges your core in new ways. Being in the great outdoors also gives you the chance to absorb vitamin D and experience awe at the “universal energy” – both of which promote clarity and resilience. Activities like running, hiking, biking, surfing, snowboarding, skiing, or paddle boarding are all great!