



Reflections on Turning 50 (10 lessons I wish I had known when I was younger)

By: Keith Herman

Date: April 4, 2024

In 50 years, I have learned a lot about myself, and how to be happy and healthy. Below are some of the most important lessons I learned.

Lesson 1: High LDL cholesterol may kill you. About 1/3 of all humans die of heart disease even though it is almost completely preventable. More women die from heart disease each year, than all forms of cancer combined.

The latest research indicates high LDL cholesterol is the only prerequisite for heart disease. Not everyone with high LDL will get heart disease. But no one without high LDL, for a prolonged period, will get it.

Most individuals are not taking the steps necessary to lower their LDL to a safe level. LDL goals for those at very high risk of heart disease, high risk, and moderate risk are 55, 70, and 100 mg/dL, respectively. You can check your lifetime risk with the American College of Cardiology ASCVD Risk Estimator at tools.acc.org/ldl/ascvd_risk_estimator

My LDL has been high for most of my life. I spent far too long trying to correct it with only diet and exercise. It wasn't until last year, when I did a type of CT scan called a coronary artery calcium score, that I finally went on a statin to lower my cholesterol.

Go to WalkinLab.com and order a lipid panel, a lipoprotein(a) test, and an ApoB test. I have no affiliation with them, but I order many blood tests there to save the time of going to my doctor first. Then I can walk into my doctor's office with the blood tests completed and ready to discuss options.

Lesson 2: Build as much muscle as you can as it becomes more difficult as you age. Around fifty, it starts to become more difficult to build new muscle and hold onto your existing muscle mass. This is called anabolic resistance. Exercise and protein still have a beneficial effect, the effect just isn't as strong as when you are younger. But if you maintain a healthy protein-sufficient diet (.635 to .907 grams of protein per pound of body weight, according to the International Society of Sports Nutrition) and a consistent resistance training program, you can hold onto much more muscle than most people. And if you start with more muscle in your fifties, you can afford to lose some and still maintain much of your strength as you age.

Over the last few years, I got my personal training certification and prioritized building more muscle. I feel like I did the best I could, given my genetics and motivation to avoid injury.

When I was 34, I spent some time purposely trying to get in the best shape of my life. I had been

overweight for most of my life, but when I finally began learning about nutrition, that all changed. With the right foods, I shed my excess fat. Then I started strength training and quickly gained muscle. This is me (I'm on the left) and my brother on vacation when I was 34.



Let's compare this to me at 50.



It is hard to tell from the picture, but based on my DEXA scans, I have more muscle now than in my thirties.

Holding onto muscle and strength as you get older is one of the keys to staying fit, healthy, and avoiding type 2 diabetes. As we age into our 70s, 80s, and 90s, it is also important to maintain strength to avoid life threatening falls and bone fractures.

And there is a concept called “muscle memory.” It means it is much easier to regain lost muscle than it is to build it in the first place. I would like to keep up my strength and muscle mass as long as possible, but even if I lose some, it will be easier to regain next time.

Lesson 3: Aging catches up with all of us. I feel like my body looks about the same as it did sixteen years ago (which makes my ego happy), but it is what’s on the inside that really matters.

A couple years ago, I went to the doctor for a nagging pain in my hip. Turns out I have serious cartilage degeneration in my left hip that will require a hip replacement. My hip socket is shaped in a way that has slowly worn down the cartilage since I was young. I still remember sitting in my car after learning I would need a new hip. It was the first time I confronted my own mortality, and it was a shocking feeling. Until then, I felt impervious to the effects of aging, but that quickly changed.

I had a long-standing goal to stay off prescription medications. I was cruising along just fine until 49. Then I developed a nasty thing called cyclic vomiting syndrome that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. It was treated with a prescription medication called amitriptyline. The amitriptyline caused many side effects, which led to me starting testosterone (the picture above is pre-testosterone). Unrelated, as mentioned above, I also started taking rosuvastatin for my high LDL cholesterol. So much for my goal of staying off prescription medication.

Then there was my racquetball “come-back.” I played on Mizzou’s racquetball team in college and was pretty good. After law school, I started having lower back pain and eventually stopped playing. Last year I decided to pick it up again. I dusted off my old racquet and joined a league at the YMCA.

My body started talking to me right away. First it was sciatic nerve pain so bad it hurt to take a step. Then my hip pain kicked in. That resolved and then lower back pain started that made it painful to stand. Then the meniscus tear in my left knee (from doing the pigeon pose during yoga) forced me to stop temporarily. I got that under control just before I developed elbow tendonitis and Achilles tendon pain. Somehow, I managed to play through all of that until I got plantar fasciitis, again. Still rehabbing that one ... along with my elbow tendonitis . . . and bicep tendonitis from pull-ups.

I learned to spend more time taking care of my body, warming-up before workouts, and stretching after. But some issues are going to arise no matter how you prepare. Gaining muscle is great, but staying injury-free and being able to use your body to do the things you want is also a key to long-term health and longevity. Looking back on it all, I am grateful those are the only major issues I have had.

Lesson 4: Instead of setting goals in many different areas, it can be more productive to focus on your single most important goal. My most important goal guides my daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly subgoals, action steps, and schedule. It is much easier to prioritize my day when I am constantly focused on making progress toward accomplishing this one goal. As Curly said in City Slickers, the secret to life is focusing on just one thing.

Lesson 5: You can add meaning and purpose to your life by using your unique talents to serve a cause greater than yourself. I am not excellent at many things in life, but research is one of them. I now realize I am most satisfied with my life when I am using my unique talents in a way that helps others. When I utilize my strengths, I feel like my life has meaning and purpose.

I keep this quote in my office,

The key to happiness is this: dedicate yourself to the development of your natural talents and abilities by doing what you love to do, and doing it better and better, in the service of a cause that is greater than yourself.

Lesson 6: Daily journaling will teach you what you love. It wasn't until I started journaling that I recognized what I enjoyed most in life. It was the result of asking myself this one simple question every day: "What was the best part of my day?"

With this newfound self-awareness, I discovered the power of designing my perfect day. It is an enlightening activity. If you want to give it a try, take out a piece of paper and mark off lines for every hour of the day. Start by marking off your ideal sleep schedule. Then jot down your ideal morning routine and when it starts and stops. Then work your way through the rest of the day until you hit your ideal bedtime. Mark down your time for exercise and other forms of physical activity, meals, meal preparation, quality time with the people, and animals, you love. If you consider your career your passion, then mark that down. If not, put down plenty of time to do the things that bring joy, meaning, and purpose to your life.

Now that you have designed your perfect day, examine what you need to accomplish to achieve the ultimate goal of living your perfect day over and over again. This exercise helped me realize that many of the goals I used to set for myself were not really that important to me.

Lesson 7: When you clarify your values, decisions become much easier to make. I recently took some time and wrote my core values. I started by circling words on a list of values, but that didn't get me very far. Then I realized that it is easy to identify your values by looking at how you spend your time and money. For example, you may think you value health, but if you only sleep 5 hours a night and routinely eat fast-food, then you likely value other things in your life more. Now, when I encounter a significant decision, I ask which option is more consistent with my values. Usually, the answer is clear.

Lesson 8: You will be much happier if you design your work environment around *your* goals and personality-type. The biggest impact on improving my mental and physical health over the last ten years has been working from home. There are so many positive effects it is hard to list them all. As I don't have to spend time shaving every day, putting on a suit and tie, driving to and from work, and parking, I have extra time to sleep, exercise, and prepare healthier meals. I have more physical activity in my life and am eating healthier, than any other time in my life. And I get to spend more time with our dogs. Unconditional love from your pet does amazing things to your mood.

One of the worst aspects of working at the office was the constant distractions and intrusions on my time. I no longer have people randomly walking into my office with no consideration for what I was doing. I have never been so productive than I am now, as I can focus for long periods of time without distractions – if I don't check my emails

Lesson 9: You can create new habits with ease when you understand the hidden laws of habit change. Like everyone else, I struggled to eat healthy, find time to exercise, and get enough sleep. After doing an exhaustive search on the most effective ways to change behavior, I learned that it isn't really that hard. First, you need to be aware of the silent forces that are subtly manipulating your behavior. Then you need to use these forces to your benefit. Turns out it doesn't take monumental effort or self-discipline – it takes planning and consistency. I created my Health & Well-Being Journal for a guided structure to create and maintain healthy habits.

I have used these hidden laws to completely change my eating habits, increase my physical activity, create and maintain a strength training program, give up alcohol, and create a writing habit I used to write my book and create my Journal.

Lesson 10: Gratitude reduces anxiety and fatigue, decreases the risk of burnout, and improves happiness, mood, well-being, life satisfaction, resilience, mental health, sleep, and heart health. Gratitude practices also encourage the development of healthier habits, patience, and humility. This is a lesson I learned while creating my Journal.

I am very grateful for my life. For as long as I can remember, every year has been better than the last. I have the most amazing family and friends. My wife is the exact person I dreamed of when I was young. I still tear up every time I think about how lucky I am to have her in my life. We have two amazing girls that are thriving and showing the world what it looks like to follow your dreams. My brother and sister are my best friends. My parents still constantly remind me how proud they are of me. And I don't know anyone that has a group of friends as caring, fun, and loyal as mine. I couldn't have designed a more wonderful life for myself. I try to live by the mantra that only good things happen to me. It is a useful device to reframe temporary obstacles into motivation for improving my life.

Those are the top ten lessons I learned reflecting on my life as I turned 50. I hope you find something in these lessons to help you improve the quality of your life.

P.S, Bonus Lesson: If you don't pay attention to your passport's expiration date, you may miss out on a great trip. Many countries don't let you into the country unless you have at least 6 months until the expiration date. Check your passport and calendar a reminder to update it when it has a year left.

I'll tell the story of my 50th birthday trip passport adventure another time . . .

And don't forget to take my [Heart Disease Quiz](#), to test your understanding of diet and habit change principles.