There's a sportswriter who finishes his weekly column with "Things I Think I Think." As we sift daily through news articles and television reports about health and fitness, I'm amazed any of us can get a handle on what works and what doesn't work. It reminds me of the two ladies I used to eat lunch with:

"Do you know how many carbs are in that? Carbs make you fat," says the first lady.

"Do you know how many fat grams are in that? Fat makes you fat!" replies the second.

Yummy.

So recently I decided to start a "Things I Know" list. It's a nice list, but I'm not sure it's all true:

1. I thrive in a low-carb environment.

2. Fish oil capsules (fatty acid supplements) might be the best bang for the buck... ever!

3. I tend to do better with "big moves" in the weightroom like snatches, swings, cleans, squats (fronts and overheads), and deadlifts, then add the other stuff.

And before the list got to four items, I realized that even though I'm sure about those three, there were a lot of little things that I'm sure are right, but I can't prove them. The standard method of proving things is to take a bunch of skinny college freshmen and have them lift weights. They all get bigger, proving without a doubt that weightlifting makes skinny freshmen bigger.

This is science, folks.

But, college researchers go the "extra step." They add something to one of the skinny freshmen groups. It could be a magic potion or pill or something fun like electrodes and prison. Lo and behold, skinny freshmen who lift weights get bigger. Now, we ignore their diets, sleep habits, and recreational drug use, but we've proved that giving a skinny freshman B-vitamins with weights will make him bigger.

That's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about those "truths" that may or may not be true, but dammit, they sure seem true. So, here you go, a list of things I think I think I know, all brought to you without any scientific evidence, but I think that I think I know they're true.

10 Things I Think I Think I Know (Maybe)

1. I'm convinced that the hours you sleep before midnight are better for you than the hours after midnight.
In other words, going to bed when "must-see" television starts and waking up early is better for you than staying up until the milkman shows up. I can't prove it, but there's no doubt that going to bed early is better for fat loss and muscle gain.

There, I said it: sleeping leads to lean body mass improvements. At least, I think I think I know that.

2. Someone is going to read this and say, "Oh shut up about the damn dental floss."

Listen, dental health is probably the least appreciated area of total body health. The drug companies want to sell you dozens of low cholesterol drugs. Me? I want you to floss twice a day and get regular checkups.

I'm telling you, dental health leads to better heart health. This will be proved before you know it. There's a group of freshmen bench pressing with the extra resistance of dental floss as we discuss this point!

3. Cold showers are an excellent recovery tool. I have one in my backyard just a few feet from my hot tub.
I also think that shivering is an underappreciated way to help with fat loss, which is why I think that the winter months are a better time to lose fat than most people think. Add it up:

A) Longer nights equals more sleep. At worst, you don't eat fast foods when you sleep...most of us don't, anyway.

B) Generally, we find that cold weather foods – those big pots full of steaming foods – are heavy on veggies and low on candy. They fill us up without as many calories.

C) We can take advantage of nature's little way of burning fat: shivering. Exploit it. Go outside and shovel snow in a Speedo and fishnet tank top, like I do. Okay, that's an exaggeration; I don't have a fishnet tank top. I wear a nice pirate shirt.

4. Creatine is fine, but really, it only works for people on a high carb diet and then it seems to only help the bench and squat.
There have been more studies on creatine than probably anything out there, yet I just can't get excited about it. I have yet to work with an athlete on a "higher" protein diet who gets much out of it.

5. Here's what I think: I think women who train at Curves are doing okay. I'll now stand up and wave my hat to all of them.

So, am I saying that Curves is a perfect program? No. But it doesn't matter. "It's the road, not the inn," said Cervantes, and it's a long and winding road to greatness. Or goodness.

So what's the point? I think if you find the time to get into the gym or onto the treadmill or into pool a couple of times a week, you're off to a pretty darn good start. Perfect? Maybe not, but *something* is far better than *nothing* when it comes to training!

6. If you have to choose, it's better to deadlift wrong than to squat wrong.
I've given dozens of clinics on lifting and I usually have at least one audience member stop me after my short introduction to the squat and say, "I've been doing this my whole life."

"What?" I ask.

"These. See?" he says.

"What are those?"

"Squats!"

"Um, those aren't squats."

Now we can go through the litany. Answer "yes" to all these questions: Knees hurt? Back hurts? Neck hurts? Odd feeling like you always have a kernel of corn in your anus? (Sorry, but that's what I've had people tell me!)

With deadlifts, the learning curve is shorter and you always have that wonderful early warning system of intense, mind-numbing pain if you do them too wrong too often. I find it a nice break in the day.

Here's an idea: Learn to squat and deadlift correctly and save your knees, back, spine, and all the rest. I think that's the right idea. In other words, learning how to lift right is probably worth the time and effort.

7. After driving through mind-numbing traffic to get to the gym, the worst thing you can do is mind-numbing aerobics or cardio or whatever the hell we call it this week. I think that you need a warm-up routine that breaks you from one world into another. In fact, my athletes tell me that if all they did was my warm-up, they'd get a good workout.

Here's an idea: Chart out all the things you think you need to do. Okay, pull-ups. Good one. Farmers' walks. Not bad. Front squats. Are you kidding? Really? Dips. Continue the list. Do a few non-max "sorta intense" sets of these as your "warm-up."

Here's a typical one for my gym:

- Sled Drag: Down and back
- Farmer's Walk: Down and back
- Rock Walk: Down and back
- Pull-ups: Two to three sets of around eight to ten
- Dips or push-ups: A couple of sets
- Front squats: Two sets of five at 50-60% of max
Now, if the phone rings and you have to go, you did "okay" for a workout. If not, a sled drag is miles from waiting for twelve red lights to turn green. You own the environment again.

8. I might need to find my terrycloth headband, but I think Heavyhands is still the best fat burning workout for the masses.

Here's the upside: You go out to walk with Heavyhands. The moment you get out the door with the dog jumping around and the fresh air and pumping those three pound weights, you go farther than you would on a treadmill with a countback timer. You go, then you come back.

Those extra calories burned by pumping the arms up and down with added weight is a bonus. Most people notice that they remain warm for hours after the Heavyhands walk. Save money on your fuel bills: walk with weights.

9. I think that the two most difficult things to do in body composition, in no particular order, are:

1. Losing fat

2. Gaining muscle

The holy grail of body comp is losing fat while gaining muscle. You know what I think? I think most of us work far too hard to accomplish either task, certainly too hard to do both!

Art DeVany was taken to task for an honest answer concerning fat loss. When asked about the best way to lose fat, he answered, "Don't get fat in the first place!" An honest answer, and, it seems, the politically incorrect one. He was right, of course. Nobody likes people who are right.

However, if you "found" yourself obese one morning, what would you do? Most of us would:

1. Go on a starvation diet

2. Exercise to the point of death

I like a balance of "more" and "less" when it comes to muscle gain and fat loss.
More:

1. More protein
2. More fiber
3. More fish oil / fatty acids
4. More water
5. More sleep

"More fish oils!" says Dan.

Less:

1. Less time in the gym
2. Less days per week
3. Less total number of exercises
4. Less total volume
5. Less stress

For examples, you can look at my Tabata Method article or the One Lift a Day program.

Get the body out of "flight or fight" mode 24/7/365 and give it a chance to realize that seventy pounds of extra fat isn't really necessary for survival. Maybe we all made fat loss far too complicated. Let the body have a chance to lose it on its own, too.

10. I think going to clinics, workshops, seminars, and conferences is far better than hanging around with your gym friends on just one more Saturday workout. How many gymrats does it take to screw in a light bulb? Seven. One to screw in the bulb and six to say, "Bro, you're huge, man! Ripped!"

In the past six months, I've been to seven of these events. What I like best about "hands on" or "learn by doing" clinics is that moment when I get "exposed." No, not that, you perverts. I'm talking about the moment when you try a skill or drill and fail so miserably that the whole audience is afraid to look you in the eye.

"Dear God Above, did you see him try to do that triple flipping double twist on the high bar and fail? And we all thought he was good!"

Like many of my students who discover they only know how to cartwheel in one direction, each of us will fail miserably at some lift, skill, or trial. It's good to know that early in the game of life.

At other workshops where I just simply take notes, I love to hear my cherished beliefs trashed before me. My favorite is something like, "Oh, well actually no, [insert favorite pet belief] doesn't do a damn thing for you." If you can avoid tears, so much the better.

Wrap-Up

I'm willing to bet that within twenty years a number of young people will earn degrees proving that the above points are true. Just look for a bunch of freshmen pulling sleds with dental floss and you'll be on the right track.
About the Author

Dan John is the former number one in the world in the Highland Games, ages 45-49, broke the American record in the Weight Pentathlon, holds numerous National Championships in weightlifting and throwing, and maintains a full-time free internet coaching site at http://danjohn.org/coach.

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