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Individuals need to make healthy decisions

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Jackie Gingrich Cushman](#)

This winter I noticed that the numbers on my bathroom scale kept getting higher every time I stepped on it. For a while I solved the problem by not getting on the scale. That didn't really solve the problem; it just allowed me to ignore it.

I was still working out several times a week and didn't think I had changed my eating habits, but something was happening. Four weeks ago, I decided to face reality, not always fun or easy, and got back on the scale.

For the past three weeks I have focused on a more serious training routine — interval training, step and sculpt, and boot camp. The new program seems to be working — at least a bit, and I feel much better, though terribly sore.

My point is that it takes effort and hard work to stay fit and healthy. While I might fail occasionally, it is not the failure that is important; it's trying again the next day, and the next day.

When I close my eyes and dream of America's future, it includes a fit and healthy population. Americans playing with their friends and children in green space, eating fresh, healthy food, and falling into bed at night physically and mentally exhausted from the day's activity. At night we would sleep soundly knowing that we had made the very most of the day.

That's my idea of a vision worth working toward.

With approximately 70 percent of our population overweight or obese, we have a long way to go. But, we can get moving in the right direction. First lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign is a step in the right direction. But in the end, each and every one of us has the right and responsibility to make daily, individual decisions that determine our health. We also have the opportunity to inspire others to live their best lives, too.

While those in Washington have been focused on health-care reform, real reform would result in millions of Americans changing their daily behavior to live healthier

lives. This would result in less health care needed, less cost with a much better outcome, and millions of better lives.

Health care costs about \$2.3 trillion a year according to the Department of Health and Human Services, more than 16 percent of our gross domestic product. Of this cost, a 2003 study by Finkelstein, Fiebelkorn and Wang estimates that medical expenses related to obesity or being overweight accounts for 9 percent of medical expenses — equating to \$207 billion.

But it's not just about the cost, it's about quality of life and health impact. The risk for many diseases increases with being overweight or obese: breast cancer, coronary heart disease, type II diabetes, sleep apnea, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, colon cancer, hypertension and stroke.

Our children have also become less healthy. In 1982, 4 percent of children were overweight. Now, about a third of our children are overweight or obese.

The YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta developed Youth Fit For Life, a physical activity and health behavior change program to address the growing problem of obese and overweight children. The program incorporates cardiovascular activity, resistance training and nutrition information. Results of 16 trials showed improvements in body mass index (**BMI**), strength, endurance and other factors.

Five years ago, after learning about the problem of growing childhood obesity and learning about a company that uses artificial intelligence and video to create custom conversations, I founded a nonprofit organization, Learning Makes a Difference. The nonprofit focuses on innovative learning programs by running pilot programs with third-party testing to see if they work, blueprinting the project if it works, and then sharing the blueprint.

Learning Makes a Difference, Med Respond and the **Metro Atlanta YMCA** are working to put together the pilot for **Project Go**, a nutrition and exercise learning program geared toward middle school students. Do we know if Project Go will work? Not yet. But it's worth a try. It's not the failure that is important; it's trying again the next day, and the next day. Let's keep trying to move toward that better vision for America.

Cushman is a nationally syndicated columnist, author and professional speaker.