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Chapter summary

This chapter covers:

- Why physical fitness is more important than we think,
- Some surprising candidates for good interpreter food,
- How to start the process of good health for long-term results.

It wasn’t until the second visit to the physio that I realised something was up. I would wake up one day with legs that felt relatively fine and the next with the feeling that someone had replaced my knees with small lumps of wet cabbage. To make it worse, on a ‘bad knee day’, walking, turning, and bending sent me reaching for painkilling cream.

At the first appointment, the physio asked me about some simple questions. When he asked me if I did any exercise, I asked if sprinting to the shared printer counted. When he asked about stretches, I told him I stretched my mind. When he asked about the physical demands of the job, I asked if fitting into small booths counted.

“There you have it,” he said, in a very medical fashion. “Your problem is your job.”

That didn’t mean much to me until the next session, when he localised the problem.

The diagnosis? It wasn’t my knees that were dodgy, but the muscles around them. The only way to solve the problem was to start a course of leg exercises which, to this day, provide great entertainment to my wife and children.

Interpreters aren’t normally associated with fitness. No teenager pins up pictures of SCIC staff (Directorate-General for Interpretation of the European Commission) on their bedroom walls. Your local court interpreter is not likely to be signing a deal with Vogue any time soon. To put it scientifically, we have ‘sedentary occupations’. We sit, we talk, we look for food. We sit and talk and go home.

Of course, no one hires us for our ability to beat Usain Bolt in a race or to carry weights. Well, maybe they should. We might work every day with our brains,
minds, hands, ears, and eyes, but what powers all of that is our bodies. Our bodies are powered by our diet and exercise regimes. Fitness is about far more than just managing to walk up the stairs to a medical interpreting assignment without becoming short of breath.

Successful interpreters want to keep getting better. Few people would argue that getting better means doing something to improve how our brains perform on the job. All the note-taking classes in the world won’t help if your memory is like a broken sieve and your problem-solving skills stop at opening chocolate bar wrappers.

With that in mind, two scientific studies should be on your reading list for your next journey. Stanley Colcombe and Arthur Kramer¹ and a team led by Yu-Kai Chang² both set out to examine whether regular exercise routines could help people perform better at mental tasks. The result in both studies was that, while exercise does have a small benefit to your performance overall, the biggest improvement was found in tasks where you have to think and coordinate different areas of your brain to work together. One of the tasks they tested was a verbal-fluency task, such as asking people to name lots of animals in a short space of time.

If you have done any interpreting, you will know that those two skills – verbal fluency and controlling different mental processes – cover a large proportion of our work. People have been teaching interpreters about mental efforts for years³. As important as it is to have a good memory and a nice voice, the skills of managing everything that is going on when you interpret and of coming up with the right word are vital.

Quite simply, if we want to interpret efficiently and well, those studies show that we need to start going to the gym or running the track regularly. Both of these studies go further, however. To start with, as you age, the benefits of regular exercise increase. In other words, if you are still young enough to wonder how anyone could have ever interpreted before free WiFi, you might get away with delaying your visit to a personal trainer for a little bit. If, on the other hand, you can tell people about interpreting at assignments on the Millennium Bug, it is probably time that you located a pair of shorts and a sweatband.

The second important finding is that jogging to the shops once a week and calling it ‘exercise’ won’t be enough. The best results were found when people undertook exercise sessions of over 20 minutes on a regular basis. What’s more, it seems that if we want the effects to last longer, the exercise needs to be more intense⁴.

Some people will smile with delight at those findings while others will break into a sweat at the mere thought of trying to find the time to run on a regular basis. The point is not that we should all be aiming to compete in the next Olympics but simply that we need to learn to look after the bodies God has given us. I realise that the schedules of some interpreters would seem low on space and high on stress. And I grant that some interpreters have to deal with rates so low that membership of a private gym and trainer’s fees might seem out of reach. However, these are merely hurdles to jump, if you’ll pardon the pun.
As with every other area in this book, we need to start where we are. Take my case, for instance. To my relief, my physio said I was not to do any intense exercise (great!), until I can do my leg exercises three times a day without any pain (not so great). That was my starting point. We know that exercising at the gym without proper prep is asking for an injury. Before we go to that level, or invest in an expensive tracksuit and trainers, you need to assess your starting point.

There is no excuse for starting and ending each day with a three-hour Netflix binge. If that’s your starting point, it is a good reason to book an appointment with a doctor or other health professional to get guidance on what you should and should not be attempting at the beginning. It is also a reason to look for small changes you can make to build your fitness, prepare for the day when you can deal with the amounts and kinds of exercise that will make a difference in the long term.

One small but often overlooked change might be breakfast. I am no dietician—in my home country, people eat deep-fried Mars bars and call it a delicacy—but I can spot a good idea. A team led by David Benton has given me just such an idea. They found that when people ate a healthy breakfast that released glucose slowly into the bloodstream (plain biscuits, wholegrains, and the like), they performed better on mental tasks than people whose breakfast gave them a sugar shot (most breakfast cereals and cereal bars). In other words, changing your sugary breakfast to one with healthful grains and protein, you can help yourself get a head start on healthy living.

What’s in your cup is important to look at, too. The humble cup of tea or glass of wine might be of use, as it seems that the compounds in those two drinks, as well as in chocolate and blueberry, help our brains to lay down long-term memories and generally stay healthier. Of course, those four substances need to be taken in moderation. We are not going to do ourselves any favours by downing the entire bottle of wine and following it up with a giant chocolate biscuit dipped in a bowl of sugary tea. In moderation, however, we can eat and drink our way to a healthier brain and body.

The lesson from all of this is simple: look after your kit and it will look after you. We can’t afford to take it for granted that our brains and bodies will keep performing at our expected level unless we adopt the practices to maintain them. Little changes add up over time. Change your breakfast, take the stairs, have a cup of tea, nibble some high-cocoa-content chocolate—they sound like easy steps to make, but they are important ones.

In Chapter 3, I discussed creating a CPD plan. Perhaps it’s time we all created diet and exercise plans, too. Our collective addictions to caffeine and sugary foods need to be rethought. We need to learn as much about our diets and bodies as we know about the languages we speak.

There is no one better placed to give us the rundown on how to use our diet to improve our performance than Kamil Celoch. A conference interpreter in his own right, Kamil has dedicated his spare time to researching how to enhance our brain power using food and supplements.
Interview with Kamil Celoch

You are most well-known for your ongoing work on interpreter nutrition. Could you tell us how you got started in the subject?

As a former university-level athlete, I have always been interested in improving performance by any and all means at my disposal. What surprised me was that many of the lifestyle and dietary interventions yielded extremely positive changes on what could be widely defined as ‘cognition’. It could be argued that ‘you are what you eat’ is more than just a cliché – according to nutritionist Dr Mark Hyman, even if our genetic makeup plays an important role in how we feel and perform, environmental factors and nutrition are not to be underestimated, as they can switch certain genes on and off, which in turn can have a host of downstream effects on our mood and cognitive performance. This seems to resonate with my experience as an interpreter – I feel and perform at my best when my diet is in check.

One of your most surprising findings was that caffeine, often seen as the interpreter’s best friend, might actually be reducing our performance. Could you explain a bit more about this?

Caffeine is certainly an interesting drug. I think it important to note that coffee might have slightly different effects from pure caffeine found in energy drinks and pills, as coffee beans contain some other psychoactive alkaloids as well as antioxidants. Therefore, some people might react better to isolated caffeine as opposed to coffee or even green tea, and likewise, the opposite can also be true for your average java lover.

Sadly, it appears that if you want to rediscover that initial euphoric jolt, you might need to stop caffeine completely for at least a week. This is due to a built-up tolerance, which more coffee will not fix. I am willing to bet my left, now relatively caffeine-free kidney, that I am not the only interpreter who learned this the hard way. Unfortunately, cessation of caffeinated beverages is associated with rather nasty withdrawal symptoms, ranging from lethargy, apathy, and anxiety to reduced cognitive performance, which is why a lot of people prefer to stay in the state of dependence. After all, all you need is just a quick fix of your caffeinated poison of choice and you are ready to rock and roll again, a phenomenon that partly explains the addictive properties of the compound.

Still, caffeine is relatively safe if consumed in moderation, it’s easy to obtain and therefore is conducive to support dependence. Many of us also enjoy the taste of coffee. Also, there is a plethora of research that shows that the properties of caffeine are synergistic with an amino acid theanine, especially within the realms of cognitive performance as it pertains to attention and subjective stress levels.
And what would be a better way to replenish our energy levels and concentration capacity during an assignment?

I am afraid that once you get to ‘during’ stage, your options are rather limited. Sugar-laden snacks and energy drinks might be temporarily effective, but are likely to make you crash shortly after consumption. Small amounts of coconut oil, on the other hand, do not cause spikes in insulin levels but still ‘feed’ your brain and give you more steady energy levels. Deep breathing is also another great strategy to ensure better performance and reduced stress levels by increasing oxygen levels to the brain. Due to the complexity of bodily processes involved in achieving superior cognitive performance, one has to develop a holistic approach to address all of the following areas:

- **Diet:** reduce inflammation levels, normalise insulin sensitivity, and eliminate food sensitivities and/or allergies; increase intake of micronutrients and omega 3s
- **Hormones:** find and correct any deficiencies; reduce overall stress levels
- **Neurotransmitter balance:** high-protein diet to supply adequate amounts of amino acids; high intake of fruit and vegetables and micronutrients to support healthy enzymatic conversion
- **Mitochondria:** high-intensity interval training (such as sprinting or rowing); limit toxin exposure and inflammation-induced excessive free-radical production
- **Exercise:** ideally at least 20 minutes every day, both anaerobic and aerobic exercise
- **Rest:** meditation; adequate amounts of sleep and naps whenever possible; learn how to unwind without the use of your computer/mobile screen

You have also researched the use of dietary supplements in interpreting. Are there any you would specifically recommend?

Of course, it’s hard to make blanket statements, as we all have unique brain chemistries, but I would personally love to see research on tyrosine in an interpreting setting. This naturally occurring amino acid is a precursor to dopamine and its metabolites, and has shown a lot of promise in military research in improving vigilance, stress response, as well as general well-being in sleep-deprived subjects. As you might be aware, one AIIC study has found that burn-out rates in conference interpreters are higher than those of senior-level Israeli army officers. Some anecdotal reports suggest that tyrosine indeed could be an effective tool for a language professional, however at this point we need more research to draw any conclusions. There are also some situation-specific supplements that have been shown to have a high degree of efficacy in the following areas:

- **Fatigue:** rhodiola rosea
- **Focus and attention:** combination of theanine and caffeine, nicotine, tyrosine
• **Chronic stress exposure:** rhodiola rosea, bacopa monnieri
• **Energy production:** a combination of mitochondrial supplements: Alpha-Lipoic Acid, Acetyl-l-Carnitine, Creatine, Resveratrol, Co-Enzyme Q10, Magnesium

Some people seem to thrive on stimulants. Surprisingly, nicotine (not to be confused with cigarettes and tobacco) appears to be a potent cognitive enhancer.

*In all your work, you clearly point out that interpreters should run any change in diet past their doctors. Could you give us some examples of how some substances like gluten or caffeine might have different effects on different people?*

Caffeine is an interesting example. Some people are slow metabolisers, and, in general, those individuals do not do tolerate the compound all that well. If that wasn’t bad enough, it takes longer for the slow metabolisers to clear the caffeine out of their system – a classic double whammy: more side effects for longer! Gluten sensitivity, on the other hand, is more cunning in its ways due to a delayed onset of symptoms. So you eat your favourite croissant on Monday and might not get any symptoms until Wednesday or Thursday! Gluten sensitivity is also harder to pick up in diagnostic tests, since most of them check for full-blown allergies. You might want to consider going gluten free for a week and compare your energy and concentration levels to determine how much, if any, impact this somewhat-hard-to-digest protein has on your well-being.

*Do you think interpreters in different settings – such as court interpreters, conference interpreters, or medical interpreters – might have different nutritional needs?*

In my view, nutritional needs should be reviewed on an individual basis, irrespective of occupation. Diet and resultant deficiencies are highly variable from person to person, and as such it would be next to impossible to extrapolate with any degree of certainty what nutritional needs an individual might have, let alone a group of professionals. I have a strong suspicion, however, that just like the majority of the population, interpreters would do well to increase their intake of magnesium in their diet, as it is one of the most common deficiencies. Zinc, vitamin D3, and vitamin K2 are also notoriously low in a typical Western diet.

*Many interpreters travel a lot for assignments, and some may not have easy access to healthy food options. Could you perhaps suggest some portable snacks that might help them?*

Beef jerky, nuts, rice cakes, nut butters, protein powder, fruit, hummus, boiled eggs, seeds, cocktail prawns, and leftovers of last night’s dinner are all good options. Remember to include moderate amounts of protein in each and every snack and drink ample amounts of water in between assignments to stay hydrated. Alternatively,
you could eat a more substantial, healthy meal every four to five hours if it fits your schedule. In this case you can forego the snacks.

Lastly, if you could suggest one single change that interpreters could make to their diet to improve their performance, what would it be?

Plan your meals ahead to avoid overreliance on sugary snacks – your body and mind will thank you later!

**Key chapter concepts**

- We might work every day with our brains, mouths, hands, ears and eyes, but what powers all of that is our bodies.
- If we want to interpret efficiently and well, we need to start going to the gym or running the track regularly.
- We need to start where we are.
- Look after your kit and it will look after you.
- I feel and perform at my best when my diet is in check.

**Putting it into practice**

**Questions to ask**

How much effort do you put into your physical fitness?

What sorts of food do you eat while preparing for assignments and when you are on them?

Are those foods good or bad for your performance?

When was the last time you had a full medical check-up to spot any areas where you need to improve?

**Actions to take**

Note: it is always advisable to run any changes past a doctor. The advice in this chapter does not replace close medical supervision and professional training.

**On your own**

Ask your doctor to book you in for a full check-up to check for any problem areas. Create an action plan for at least one area that needs improvement.

For the next week, so long as you do not have any pre-existing medical condition,
consider changing to a breakfast that has a low glycaemic index (GI) and note any changes in your concentration.

Look at the foods that you use for fuel when you are busy or stressed. Change one or two at a time to substances that are more healthful.

*In a group*

Form a healthy-interpreters group in your local area and train together. The camaraderie and accountability will be a big help in keeping your routine on track.

**Notes**

4 Chang et al., ‘The Effects of Acute Exercise on Cognitive Performance’, 95.