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## Data Dilemma

Health tracking can fall into “too much of a good thing” territory if the metrics mess with your head. Here, how to monitor mindfully.

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Photographed by Corey Maywalt

During an 18-mile run last year, I logged 26,660 steps and burned 1,521 calories over two and a half hours. Sounds like a successful marathon-training workout, right? Not according to my fitness tracker, which deemed that run “unproductive” based on the pace and heart rate data it recorded (which can be thrown off by external variables like the weather). Despite the fact that my training was right on point according to my IRL coach, that tracker prompt sent me into a mental tailspin, throwing my game off for weeks as I obsessed over how I could change my status back to “productive” instead of paying attention to how my body *actually* felt in response to my training.

I’m not the only one letting numbers dictate my relationship with fitness. Chances are, you know (or are) someone who’s done laps in their home to hit 10,000 steps on their activity tracker or broadcast when they hit their daily exercise goal. Maybe these behaviors could even be described as “Detrimental Tracking Tendencies” (or DTT for short), a just-coined term—for this article—that describes a phenomenon sports psychologists are seeing more and more often: the negative preoccupation fitness tracker users have with keeping their health data “perfect” and/or continually beating their metrics.

This kind of quantification is becoming increasingly common as more people strap on these devices or download fitness-tracking apps. Wearable sales jumped to nearly \$19 billion in 2020, a 30.6 percent increase over 2019, and wearable technology was named the number two fitness trend for 2021 (second only to

online training) by the American College of Sports Medicine.

But why do we care so much about these markers? It’s a little egotistical, tbh: If someone tells you reaching a certain number is healthy, you’re probably going to feel good or productive when you hit it (especially if the device rewards you with a celebratory buzz, badge, or animation), says Jordan Etkin, PhD, an associate professor of marketing at Duke University who studies how people set and pursue goals.

Once you’ve internalized that feedback, though, it’s hard not to think about how you’re performing any time you reengage with that activity, and to feel the need to reach that same number (or better) when you partake. “That’s when it becomes a compulsion,” says Hillary Cauthen, PsyD, executive board member for the Association for Applied Sport Psychology.

Look, it’s okay to feel pride in accomplishing something like a workout, no doubt. But the problem

arises when behaviors or thoughts around these numbers start to impact your life in negative ways. Not only can the pursuit of fitness-tracking perfection lead to overtraining, injuries, and lower self-esteem and confidence, but it can affect your mood, too, says John Torous, MD, director of the digital psychiatry division at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. It’s not hard to imagine how you could get unduly anxious that you won’t close your rings on your Apple Watch one day and ruin your streak, or become so depressed by the feedback your watch is providing that you think you won’t make it to the marathon finish line (yep, that was me), so you give up on working out altogether.

That’s not to say all (or any, in fact!) trackers are evil; I still use my watch religiously, and tons of people utilize trackers for a whole lot of good on the daily. But it’s up to you to create awareness around your consumption so you don’t veer into the danger zone, leading to DTT. Here’s how to strengthen your relationship with what’s on your wrist.

## ● ● Make Your Feelings the Real MVP Metric

If you find you want to buy a tracker because you see your friends celebrating milestones on social media, or you already have one and, even though you’re sore, you force yourself to do a late-night workout just because you didn’t log a daily activity, these may be signs you’re in it for the wrong reasons.

“These are external incentives,” says Etkin, just like money or trophies. And while those things can be effective motivators, they undermine the intrinsic kind—i.e., doing something simply because you like it. When you start quantifying pleasurable activities, it makes them feel more like work, reducing your enjoyment and engagement, revealed one of Etkin’s studies, in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Going old-school and logging workouts in a journal can help you track how you feel in a healthier way. “Then you’re self-monitoring based on your mental and emotional needs, not just what a device is telling you,” Cauthen explains. But



Need a break from your tracker? No shame in a numbers-free sweat!

the same actually goes if and when you're using a smart watch: "Any time you read the data points, be curious and reflect on them. How did you feel? What went well?" That—not a digital badge or social media kudos—is what's going to boost intrinsic motivation and keep you consistent.

#### ● ● **Track Trends, Not Numbers**

Fitness device recommendations are based on numbers that have been deemed healthy for the general population. "It's a great source of one aspect of information, but it can't be our sole place for education around our health," says Cauthen.

Take your resting heart rate. That number can fluctuate day to day depending on how stressed you are (among other things). "A watch can tell your heart rate, but it can't measure emotions," says Cauthen—so don't freak out if it's up one morning. If that number has jumped by 5 to 10 bpm for several days in a row, though, it could signal a larger health issue, like overtraining or illness.

And remember: There are biases in the algorithms and in tracking accuracy, says Dr. Torous—for example,

# mind

coldness and the color of your skin can affect how sensors read heart rate. “Feedback from wearables is not diagnostic,” says Etkin—meaning it doesn’t carry the same weight as insight you’d get from a physician. Instead of focusing on one number, look at what your pattern could be telling you. “One or two bad days can make us feel as if we’re performing poorly, but in reality, our overall trend may show more positive days and progress,” says Cauthen. Forget about the daily rewards and focus on weekly or monthly goals that allow you to actually take in all your hard work.

## ● ● Separate Yourself

Your wearable exists to serve you. And if you don’t like its feedback, you can ditch it at any time. “We expect way too much of this technology,” says Nir Eyal, author of *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*. None of these devices, he adds, are so amazingly well designed that we can’t say “Screw it!” Just as you’d fire a human coach you don’t like working with, you can move on from your device and try a new one (or forgo tracking altogether).

Even if you capital-L love your gadget, don’t be shy about working out naked (ahem, sans technology) at least once a week. When you always rely on a wearable to judge your performance, “you don’t learn to tune in to how your body is adapting and responding,” says Cauthen. You can still set goals for these workouts: Decide how hard you want your session to feel on a scale of 1 to 10, and aim for that target. This is called effort-based training, and it’s a great way to push your body without going too hard, because it factors in exactly how you feel and where you’re at in the moment (if you didn’t sleep well, for example, you may not need to work out as hard or long to reach the same level of effort).

Again, there’s no one magic metric that determines health. If you’re listening to a gadget instead of your body, you’re going to miss the cues that can help you find pure joy in movement. So make it a priority to check in with yourself just as often as your watch. That way, you can chase goals together. Teamwork makes the dream work!



## ● ● ● ● Cool Cooperation

*New features that allow you to program the right kind of encouragement into your tracker? Yes! What the biggies are helping you do...*

### SMARTLY HYPE YOURSELF UP

Set certain Garmin devices to display customized motivational reminders (think: “focus on feeling strong” or other language you know you respond well to and will feel encouraged by) whenever you reach a specific time or distance during your sweat session.

### TRACK METRICS YOU CARE ABOUT

Program your own goals—for active-zone minutes, time, distance, calories—into Fitbit workouts and the tracker will buzz when you’ve met them and when you finish (meaning you can stop peeking down at your wrist and enjoy the scenery around you instead).

### PEEP THE MUCH BIGGER PICTURE

Instead of focusing solely on closing your Apple Watch rings, head to the Fitness+ app on your iPhone to check the Trends page, where you can compare your last 90 days of activity with the last 365 for a zoomed-out look.

### SYNC WITH AN IRL GUIDE

Fitbit Health Coaching + Premium (\$55/month, fitbit.com) allows wearers to engage with coaches for a more nuanced interpretation of their results. Or connect with a coach from TrainingPeaks, a training program that syncs with 100-plus fit devices (from \$119/month plus a \$99 start fee, trainingpeaks.com).