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## Personal Chemistry and the Healthy Body

by Gerald M. Weinberg

Many DP professionals aspire to executive careers yet are mystified each time they are passed over for promotion. Perhaps the problem is in their “personal chemistry.”

I have a newspaper clipping quoting J. Gerald Simmons, president of Handy Associates, an executive search firm. (Put aside your prejudice against people who use their first initial and middle name, like J. Edgar Hoover or G. Marvin Weinberg, and hear the man out.) Simmons emphasizes the importance of “personal chemistry” in choosing among otherwise equally qualified candidates. Among the ingredients of personal chemistry are appearance, personality, style, articulateness, energy, attitude, thoughtfulness, composure, sparkle, breadth of interest, and an aura of leadership. These desirable qualities sound a bit like the Boy Scout creed, but let’s not give up yet.

Simmons asserts that personal chemistry can be developed, lending hope to the troubled masses yearning to be executives. But his advice on how to develop this chemistry often has the phony ring of a counterfeit coin. For instance:

*Appearance:* Conspicuous obesity or extreme emaciation are negative marks. (Advice: lose or gain weight.)

*Energy, drive, ambition:* Cultivate the quick stride, fresh appearance, and tone of superb physical health.

*Composure:* The nail-biter, hair-twirler, foot-tapper, chain-smoker, or twitcher rarely gets past one interview. (Advice: try to eliminate distracting habits.)

*Aura of leadership:* An erect carriage, a head held high, an agreeable manner, eye contact, and a certain amount of self-confidence connote leadership qualities.

When I read such items, I’m reminded of my mother nagging me to “sit up straight” or my teacher bellowing “don’t chew gum.” The advice, when given, seems to me to be less than useless. Worrying about whether you emit an aura of leadership is apt to drive you to nail-biting, mouth-stuffing, or simple mind-squashing.

Yet there’s no doubt that Simmons is right. We’d all prefer to be in the presence of people who are nice-looking, energetic but composed, and agreeable. The problem is what to do about it if we’re not that way. If you’re depressed about life, the easiest thing in the world is to attract advice: “Don’t be depressed.” Or are you obese? Then how about this advice: “Don’t eat so much.” Ambrose Bierce defined advice as the smallest current coin. Advice is usually free—and worth every penny. To my mind, most of the advice about “personal chemistry” or other success formulas merely serves to becloud the very few deep principles of true happiness and success. Bertrand Russell wrote about these in his classic

book *The Conquest of Happiness*, a book I try to reread every year to restore me to the simple track. I say “try” because my copies are always out on loan and tend not to return. Just now I can’t find a copy around the house or office, but Russell’s number-one point doesn’t need any reminding.

According to Russell, perhaps the greatest philosopher of our century, health comes before all else in producing happiness. Or perhaps it goes the other way—lack of health destroys any other formula that promises success. Consider Simmons’s “personal chemistry.” If you’re healthy, you won’t look obese or emaciated. Your stride will naturally be quick. You’ll look and smell fresh without spraying your body with a thousand unpronounceable ingredients. You’ll probably not bite nails, twirl hair, tap your foot, or drum your fingers. You’ll do very little twitching and probably no smoking at all. You’ll sit up straight and you probably won’t look like you’re having trouble digesting your lunch simply because you’re not having trouble digesting your lunch.

By curious coincidence, the modern view of health is that it’s largely a matter of body chemistry (you are what you eat) and activity (you are what you do). If that’s the case, then perhaps “personal chemistry” is no more than “real” chemistry and physics—about as basic as you can get. But rather than give you advice, let me just relate some stories.

We all know Gary Gulper, that dedicated programmer who’s dedicated mostly to stuffing his face with junk food. He thinks he’s impressing the boss by working through lunch and eating only a candy bar and a Coke from the vending machine. Then there’s Susan Sitter—her secret formula for success is to work sixteen hours a day, hoping the boss will notice before she dies for lack of exercise or is immobilized from calluses on the butt.

I’m well acquainted with such people because I display all their qualities. What we share is an honest dedication to our work—so much dedication that we abuse our own bodies, if necessary, to get the work done. Now there’s nothing wrong with honest dedication, until it’s carried to the point where it destroys our ability to work effectively. What’s the sense of working over-over-overtime if in so doing we cause the quality of our work to deteriorate? Why skip lunch for a candy bar to accomplish a task that we’d accomplish much more quickly with a properly nourished brain and relaxed body?

Well, let’s be honest with ourselves. It’s *fun* to abuse our bodies once in a while. Who can honestly deny the seductiveness of a candy feast, a beverage binge, or an all-night work orgy? So, while we can argue that we’re doing it out of dedication to our work, we’ve got a perfect excuse for fulfilling our innermost desires. And besides, a little excess never hurt anyone, did it? And sometimes the job really does require an all-out, self-sacrificing effort.

Okay, so here comes the moralizing. Too many professionals—including me—develop the habit of sacrificing their bodies to their work. They develop this habit when they are young, when their bodies are much more resilient. Then one day they discover that their bodies don’t snap back as quickly or as easily as they once did. But when they discover this deficiency, it’s usually far too late, for several reasons:

1. The habit is too ingrained to be gotten rid of easily.
2. The deficiency has been there for a long time before it gets bad enough for them to notice it. But others have been noticing for a long time, so their career has already suffered.
3. They're too old to learn new habits readily.
4. The troubles with their health are likely to multiply, and we all know how hard it is to deal with two interacting system errors.
5. Even if they do start cutting back on excessive workloads and spending time on proper eating and exercise, the results won't be immediately forthcoming—which means that the immediate effect is less output at work and possible loss of job or position.

All that sounds like moralizing. I certainly thought so twenty years ago when people told me such things. Morality, I suppose, is the wisdom that prevents sacrificing long-term happiness for short-term happiness. In the case of health, we need some simple morals because our brain is the first organ to degrade when our health deteriorates. Not only do we feel bad, but we can't apply our brain to the problem because it's in trouble too. But because it's in trouble, it's not likely to see that it's in trouble. When the brain starts to falter, the owner is always the last to know. Morality fails, though, when it congeals into rules whose purpose has long been forgotten. In that sense, morality is just like DP standards. I don't believe people should do things for reasons they don't understand—things like looking healthy, eating spinach, or avoiding GO TO statements. Rules without reasons focus on the appearance of things, not the substance. That's why I'd never dare suggest that people try to improve their personal chemistry by working on the surface.

Instead, I advocate getting underneath. Underneath all the details is a simple observation. Many professional people become so devoted to their work that they destroy their health—the true substance of their “personal chemistry.” Once you understand that concept there are many paths to health; but I won't practice medicine on you. I'm not that kind of doctor. I am the kind of doctor that heals organizations, and there are things an organization can do to establish a healthy climate for health. That's why I advise data processing managers to set a good example for their employees by

1. Working regular hours *most* of the time
2. Taking time to eat properly, so as not to set a standard of working through or hurrying through lunch (or supper, if you're violating rule number 1)
3. Never rewarding people for working excessive hours or for skipping meals, but instead rewarding people for being sufficiently well organized to finish a normal day's work in a normal day

It's all too easy to adopt the pattern of work for work's sake or for the sake of how it looks to others. But you can break that pattern by reminding yourself that your body is your number-one piece of professional equipment. If it goes down, all the king's horses and all the king's men can't get it up and running again. In fact, I doubt whether even IBM's field engineers would do you much good.

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For more than 45 years, Jerry Weinberg has worked on transforming software organizations, particularly emphasizing the interaction of technical and human issues. After spending between 1956 and 1969 as software developer, researcher, teacher, and designer of software curricula at IBM, he and his anthropologist wife, Dani Weinberg, formed the consulting firm of Weinberg & Weinberg to help software engineering organizations manage the change process in a more fully human way. Jerry is author or co-author of several hundred articles and more than 30 books. He can be reached through his web site at [www.GeraldMWeinberg.com](http://www.GeraldMWeinberg.com).

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## A Brief Afterword

By Daniel Read

Editor and Publisher of *developer.\* Magazine*

This essay, "Personal Chemistry and the Healthy Body," was first published approximately two decades ago. It's an honor to present it to new readers in a new context. I consider this essay a true classic, as relevant today as it was when it was first written. Over the past several years, I have read it probably a dozen or more times, and every time I do, I get something different from it. The essay has a pretty simple overarching message: take care of yourself. But there are so many other lessons packed in there too. It would take another essay several times as long to deconstruct them all. Though such an exercise is certainly tempting, I won't try that here. I'll let the essay speak for itself.

As I write this, issues like "work/life balance," excessive/unpaid/forced overtime, and the deliberate overworking of software development teams are hot topics, in particular in the game development industry. Programmers, graphics specialists, and other software professionals are pushing back on the companies that abuse their "honest dedication" (using Mr. Weinberg's words) to their work. The reason I wanted to republish this classic essay by Gerald Weinberg is that it presents another side of the programmer abuse story: while he certainly does not let employers and managers off the hook, he shows us our own role in the maintenance of work/life balance.

This essay is available in print form as part of the book *Understanding the Professional Programmer*. I recommended this book earnestly. Its many essays demonstrate the same empathy, humility, and good humor as "Personal Chemistry and the Healthy Body."

## Recommended Books by Gerald M. Weinberg

If you enjoyed this essay, then you will also likely enjoy other selections from Gerald Weinberg's large body of work. The following is a brief list of recommended titles. Please visit [www.DorsetHouse.com](http://www.DorsetHouse.com) for a full list of available titles. The `developer.*` web site ([www.DeveloperDotStar.com](http://www.DeveloperDotStar.com)) also contains links to these titles.

- *Understanding the Professional Programmer*
- *Becoming a Technical Leader: An Organic Problem-Solving Approach*
- *Exploring Requirements: Quality Before Design* (with Donald C. Gause)
- *The Psychology of Computer Programming*
- *Quality Software Management* (Four Volumes)
- *General Principles of Systems Design* (with Daniela Weinberg)
- *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking*
- *Amplifying Your Effectiveness: Collected Essays* (co-Editor, with James Bach and Naomi Karten)
- *The Secrets of Consulting: A Guide to Giving and Getting Advice Successfully*