

Executive excess

by Jackie Range

At 70 years old, advertising magnate Harold Mitchell is fighting fit.

The executive chairman of Aegis Media Pacific says he'll live for another 30 years after taking radical steps to improve his health and reduce his weight from 165 to 90 kilograms.

"I did it with a very famous lap band surgery here in Melbourne and rigorous attention to it," he says. "I'm a non-drinker, non-smoker but I was overweight and so now, all my vital signs are perfect.

"Over the years I just wasn't careful and my whole body allowed my metabolic rate to come to a full stop and so I'd go on a diet, make it even worse, so I had to break the pattern, which I now have."

Mitchell's story sits in stark contrast to many members of the Rich 200. Indeed, the phrase "you can't be too rich or too thin" has only been partly taken to heart by the majority.

The battle of the bulge is a challenge for pretty much everybody in Australia but add keeping on top of a billion-dollar business empire to the list of daily chores and watch that exercise and diet regime get pushed down the list of priorities.

"Some of the things that produce drive in a person aren't very compatible with health," says Insight Matters principal corporate psychologist Stephanie Thompson.

"Achieving a lot, doing a lot and having a lot of attack, if you like, in your approach to life and to work, tends to have a chemistry in common with good old stress – and the chemistry of stress is not very conducive to health."

High-powered types who are “on” all the time are at risk of not following the body’s natural cycle of resting and activity. At the same time, says Thompson, they may also have bad health habits.

“It depends on a person’s knowledge and what they care about,” she says. “When you see people becoming extremely overweight ... there’s a tendency to think ‘well they just don’t care about their health.’ It may or may not be true.”

For the rich and powerful, there’s often the risk of a less healthy lifestyle. “Positions that involve a lot of entertaining and doing deals ... more luxurious food becomes part of that day-to-day lifestyle,” she says. “For the average person, it’s an occasional thing rather than a regular thing.”

For Health Kick Nutrition and Dietetics advanced accredited practising dietitian Melanie McGrice , there are three key lifestyle areas that present big challenges.

Business dinners are very common. “Three-course dinners or degustations, where they feel pressured to drink a lot of wine ... that can happen on numerous nights and days of the week and so that’s significantly more kilojoules than what people need to be eating,” she says.

Travel is also a challenge. This upsets the body clock, and aeroplane food, even in first class, isn’t always particularly healthy.

The third challenge is regularity in meals, says McGrice. Rushing between meals means there isn’t always the time to organise eating regularly.

To help those who have ended up carrying more weight than they would like, McGrice often goes to work with a client’s personal assistant. Together they plan regular meals, with the personal assistant perhaps providing healthy sandwiches and breakfasts and arranging for fruit platters or vegetable crudités delivered to meetings.

McGrice also makes sure a client's office is well stocked with nutritious snacks, perhaps installing a bar fridge and stocking it with meal replacement bars, mineral water, fresh fruit and nuts.

For those heavy business meals, she counsels clients not to eat everything on their plates. They are also taught how to pick healthier choices – such as oysters for an entree. Other tips include avoiding bread, making sure there's lots of mineral water on the table and limiting alcohol intake.

Where there are health problems linked to being overweight, McGrice will help clients quickly shed some kilos. "We'll often use medication, meal replacements and so forth to help them get some weight off quickly if that's what they choose to do," she says.

But for those who do decide to slim, that same drive that helped make them rich in the first place means they have high rates of success. "They are always really determined and we get some quick results," McGrice says.

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