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The Minimum Effective Dose: How Busy Founders Actually Stay in Shape

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The Question Every Founder Eventually Asks

At some point, usually around the time your calendar turns into a wall of back-to-back blocks, you ask yourself: what is the least I can do and still stay in shape?

Most fitness content treats that question like a moral failing. I treat it like a good business question. Because it is one. You're asking about return on invested time, and that's exactly the right frame.

I've spent my life on both sides of this. I won a national vertical leap title against a field of more than 250,000 competitors, and in 1997 I was the national karate champion in the heavyweight division. I also build companies, which means I understand the founder's actual constraint: not motivation, not knowledge, but time and mental bandwidth. Elite training taught me how the body adapts. Entrepreneurship taught me that a perfect plan you can't sustain loses to a modest plan you actually run.

This article is about the second thing. The minimum effective dose. The smallest consistent training that delivers most of the benefit for people who cannot, and will not, live in the gym.

One note before we go further, and I mean it: this is general guidance, not a prescription. I don't know your history, your injuries, or your medical picture. Talk to a physician and a qualified coach before you start or change anything. What follows is a framework, not medical advice.

Why "Minimum Effective Dose" Is the Right Model

In pharmacology, the minimum effective dose is the smallest amount that produces the desired result. More isn't better past that point; it's just more. Training works similarly. A large share of the benefit comes from the first, hardest-won portion of consistent effort. The gap between doing nothing and doing something is enormous. The gap between doing something and doing a lot is real but far smaller, and it costs disproportionately more time.

For a founder, that curve is the whole story. You are not trying to win a national title. You are trying to be strong, durable, energetic, and clear-headed for the next thirty years while running hard at something else. That goal has a surprisingly low training requirement, provided you hit it consistently.

The mistake I see brilliant operators make is applying their all-or-nothing intensity to fitness. They launch into a six-day program, sustain it for three weeks, hit a travel stretch, and quit entirely. Net result over a year: worse than the person who did two honest sessions a week, every week, without drama.

Consistency Beats Intensity, and It Isn't Close

Here's the uncomfortable truth from someone who has trained at the highest intensity a body can produce: intensity is overrated for your goals, and consistency is underrated to an almost absurd degree.

Adaptation is a response to a repeated signal. One brutal workout doesn't build much. A moderate stimulus, delivered over and over across months and years, rebuilds you. Your body doesn't read your calendar or admire your ambition. It responds to what you actually do, on average, over time.

Consistency also compounds the way a good business does. Skills stack. Movements you practice weekly become efficient and safe. Loads you can handle creep upward almost without your noticing. Recovery improves. The person who trains modestly for five years is in a completely different category than the person who trains ferociously for five weeks, five times.

So the operating principle is simple: choose the version of training you can repeat on your worst week, not your best one. Design for the Tuesday when a deal is on fire, not the Sunday when you feel invincible.

Strength First, and Why

If you only optimize one thing, optimize strength. Here's the reasoning.

Muscle is the tissue you lose with age and inactivity, and it's expensive to get back. Maintaining it protects your metabolism, your posture, your joints, and your ability to do ordinary physical things without injury at 60 and 70. Strength training also carries a lot of general-fitness benefit along with it, especially when you keep rest periods honest and move with intent.

Cardiovascular fitness matters enormously too, and I'm not dismissing it. But a meaningful amount of cardio can be woven into a strength-first week and into your normal life. It's far harder to accidentally get strong. Strength requires deliberate loading. So we anchor the plan on it and let conditioning ride along.

The other reason I lead with strength is psychological, and as an operator you'll appreciate this: strength training produces visible, trackable progress. You add a little weight or a rep, and you can see it in a log. Progress is the fuel that keeps a habit alive. Cardio-only programs often lack that clear scoreboard, and habits without a scoreboard tend to fade.

A Sample Minimalist Week (General, Not Prescriptive)

Let me sketch a structure to make this concrete. Treat this as an illustration of the shape of a minimal week, not a program handed to you personally.

Two to three strength sessions a week, 30 to 45 minutes each, is enough to build and hold real strength for most people. The engine of each session is a handful of compound movements, the ones that train large amounts of muscle at once:

The building blocks

- A lower-body push pattern (think squat-type movements)
- A hip-hinge pattern (think deadlift-type movements)
- An upper-body push (pressing, horizontal or vertical)
- An upper-body pull (rows and pull-type movements)
- A little direct core and carry work

You don't need all of these every session. A two-day week might pair a lower emphasis with an upper emphasis. A three-day week gives you more room to distribute them. A few working sets per movement, taken close enough to real effort that the last couple of reps are genuinely hard, does the job. You do not need to chase soreness or empty the tank. You need to give a clear signal and leave.

For conditioning, fold it in rather than bolting on separate hour-long blocks. A brisk incline walk while you take a call. A short, hard finish at the end of a lifting session. A weekend activity you actually enjoy, hiking, a sport, a bike ride, that doesn't feel like homework. The daily-life movement most people ignore, walking, taking stairs, being on your feet, quietly does a large amount of the work.

That's the whole thing. Two or three focused sessions, compound movements, gradual added load, conditioning woven into the week. It fits inside a founder's schedule because it was designed around the constraint, not in spite of it.

Systems, Not Willpower: An Operator's Approach to the Habit

You already know that willpower is a terrible business strategy. You don't run payroll on willpower; you build a system. Apply the same thinking here.

Schedule training like a meeting with an investor. Put it on the calendar, give it a defended time slot, and treat it as a real commitment rather than something you'll fit in if the day allows. The day never allows. Protected time is the entire game.

Lower the activation energy. The hardest part of any session is starting, so remove friction. Keep a rack or a minimal set of equipment at home or a gym on your commute line. Lay clothes out. Decide the night before exactly what you're doing so there's no deliberation in the moment. Every decision you remove is a decision you can't get wrong.

Anchor the habit to something that already exists. Attach training to a fixed point in your day, first thing in the morning, immediately after a standing block, right before lunch, so it rides on an existing rhythm instead of floating and getting lost.

Set a floor, not a ceiling. Founders love ambitious targets, but for habits the ambitious target is the enemy. Define the smallest acceptable session, twenty honest minutes, two movements, and make that your non-negotiable floor on bad days. A short session keeps the streak alive and preserves the identity of someone who trains. Missing entirely is what breaks people, and one miss quietly becomes three.

Track it simply. A single log of what you lifted, or even just a calendar you mark, gives you a scoreboard and a feedback loop. What gets measured gets sustained.

And build for travel and chaos in advance, because both are coming. Have a no-equipment fallback, a bodyweight session you can run in a hotel room, so a disrupted week bends instead of breaking. Elite athletes don't skip training because conditions are imperfect; they have a version for imperfect conditions. So should you.

How This Actually Fuels the Business

I want to be careful not to over-claim here, because the fitness world is full of grand promises. But in my direct experience, and I've lived at both the athletic and entrepreneurial extremes, the return on this small time investment shows up in your work in concrete ways.

The most immediate is energy and mental clarity. Training tends to sharpen focus, steady your mood, and lift the flat, foggy afternoons that eat productivity. The founder problem is rarely a shortage of hours; it's a shortage of high-quality hours. Physical training buys you more of the good ones.

The second is stress capacity. Entrepreneurship is a stress-loading exercise, and so is strength training. Deliberately putting your body under controlled physical stress, then recovering, seems to raise your tolerance for the mental kind. On the hard days, the trained version of you simply has more room before the needle pins.

The third is discipline transfer. The habit of showing up for something uncomfortable, on a schedule, when you don't feel like it, is the same muscle that builds a company. Keeping one non-negotiable commitment to yourself makes it easier to keep the others.

And the fourth is the long game. You are not building a business for this quarter; you're building for decades, and you'd like to be healthy enough to enjoy what you build. The minimum effective dose, held consistently, is one of the highest-return investments available to you, precisely because it costs so little and pays for so long.

You don't need to become an athlete. You need to become someone who trains a little, every week, without fail. That person, ten years from now, is almost unrecognizably better off than the one who kept waiting for a free hour that was never coming.

Start smaller than you think you should. Then never stop.

Key takeaways

- ② Most of fitness's benefit comes from the first consistent dose; optimize for the smallest amount you'll actually repeat, not the most impressive plan.
- ② Consistency beats intensity by a wide margin because adaptation responds to a repeated signal over time, not to occasional heroics.
- ② Lead with strength: it's the hardest thing to gain by accident, protects you as you age, and gives you a clear, motivating scoreboard.
- ② A realistic minimum is two to three 30-45 minute strength sessions a week built on compound movements, with conditioning woven into daily life.
- ② Run it as a system, not on willpower: defend the time on your calendar, cut activation energy, set a minimum floor for bad days, and keep a travel fallback.
- ② Treat it as a business investment; the payoff shows up as energy, stress capacity, discipline, and decades of healthy runway. Consult a professional before you start.

Frequently asked questions

I genuinely have almost no time. What's the absolute floor that's still worth doing?

Two short strength sessions a week, around 20 to 30 minutes each, built on a few compound movements, will maintain and even build strength for most people, especially paired with daily walking. That floor, held for years,

beats an ambitious program you abandon in a month. Consistency is the variable that matters most.

Should I prioritize lifting or cardio if I can only pick one?

For a time-starved person, lead with strength. Muscle is expensive to lose and hard to regain, strength requires deliberate loading you can't get by accident, and it delivers broad fitness benefits along the way. Cardio matters too, but a meaningful amount can be folded into a strength-first week and into ordinary daily movement.

How do I keep this going when travel and crises blow up my schedule?

Build the disruption into the plan in advance. Set a minimum acceptable session for bad days, keep a no-equipment bodyweight routine you can run in a hotel room, and protect the time on your calendar like a real meeting. The goal on a chaotic week is to bend without breaking, not to be perfect, because one clean miss too easily becomes three.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.