Strength in our Time

The Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, said, “The strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than the weak believer, though there is good in both.”

Strength carries many meanings. It can mean strength of character or having a strong faith. The twelfth-century Andalusian Imam Qadi Iyad writes that “strong believer” also refers to physical strength. It is physical strength that we want to say a few words on, to encourage all of you, men and women, and especially teenagers, to start strength training.

The World Health Authority estimates that a quarter of people worldwide are not getting enough exercise. About 1.4 billion people are idle. This figure goes up to forty percent of Americans and around sixty percent of Gulf Arabs. Australia fares somewhat better, with thirty percent of Australians inactive. This lack of exercise is now the fourth leading risk factor for early death. The result is that two-thirds of Australians are overweight and nine percent are severely obese. Almost thirty percent of Australian teenagers are overweight. This trend of not exercising and excess weight has steadily increased since 1995.

The year 1995 gives us our first clue as to why obesity is increasing and exercise is decreasing. In 2015, the British Medical Journal published a study on teenagers and strength training. The authors reviewed multiple studies that showed the harmful effect of screen time. The more screen time, the higher the risk of obesity, significant metabolic changes, and poor cardiovascular fitness. As time spent staring into screens has increased over the last twenty years, so has the opportunity to be sedentary. Teenagers aren’t hauling bales of hay or running around as much as previous generations. This decline in physical health might be bad enough. Unfortunately, the same study found that psychological health has been profoundly harmed by a combination of too much screen time coupled
with a lack of physical activity. The same might be said about adults.

The Australian government commissioned a nationwide report into the mental health of teenagers. The findings showed that ten percent of Australian teenagers have self-harmed. The number of self-harmers rises to twenty-five percent of Australian girls aged sixteen or seventeen. Some of you might be thinking that you’ve never come across teenagers who self-harm. Consider this: just last month, in our Birmingham Zawiya, a young streetwise scholar had to answer questions from teenagers with friends who were self-harming. Consider also that the Australian government report found that over half of parents are unaware their children are suffering from mental health pressures. Parents are sometimes the last people to find out. In addition to self-harm, the report showed that one in seven teenagers have had some form of mental health disorder. It concluded that the rates for depression, suicidal thoughts, ADHD, and anxiety are worryingly high, with anxiety being the second most prevalent mental health illness. This finding strengthens research coming out of the University of Nottingham in England. There, researchers found that social media use, specifically Instagram, is inducing anxiety and poor self-esteem among teenagers. Anyone who knows anything about Instagram knows that its users display a perfect life or a perfectly made-up face, while all around them their real life is crumbling.

The question, then, is what have all these mental health problems got to do with strength? A great deal it turns out.

Repeated studies, carried out around the world, have shown that strength training has a positive influence on the psychological well-being of teenagers, providing they enjoy the exercise. There is now a growing body of literature that proves strength training protects against anxiety and depression—the two diseases many people in our time are struggling with. Young and adult women particularly benefit from the antianxiety effects of lifting
heavy weights. Such training also helps cognition, memory, mood, and general quality of life. It works just like a drug. Adolescents who strength train report greater self-esteem after just eight weeks. They have great physical self-perception and are less vulnerable to having a negative body image. This point is important for overweight adolescents who are more prone to low self-esteem and higher rates of depression. These overweight youngsters are resistant to aerobic physical activities such as team sports or exercise involving running, usually because they struggle. In contrast, when overweight teenagers train with weights they are not hindered by their weight, and build strength quickly, while losing body fat. This further improves psychological health.

If strength training improves the mind and mental health, then the benefits for the body are almost too many to mention. When teenagers train it boosts insulin sensitivity, reduces the incidence of type 2 diabetes, and builds cardiovascular health. It is extremely effective for weight loss and body composition. It is a potent weapon for preventing cancer. There is an increased sense of vitality that carries over into everyday life as muscular strength, power, speed, and motor skills are all significantly improved. One of the key benefits is the increase in bone mineral density. Pediatricians know that this increase in bone mineral density carries forward into adulthood and later life. This point is especially relevant for female health. Every year millions of women develop osteoporosis. After the menopause, they lose estrogen, which protects the bones. The bones then become more fragile and susceptible to breaks. There is pain and there is surgery. When young women lift weights during their teenage years it builds stronger bones, and this reduces the risk of osteoporosis much later in life. They only get one chance at this.

Despite all these psychological and physical benefits, some parents are resistant to letting their teenage children train with weights. That reluctance is often due to a fear that weight training stunts growth.
Last year, Syracuse University men’s basketball team was the tallest in all college basketball. They had an average height of six feet, six inches tall. The same year, the Connecticut Huskies women’s team, the most dominant team in the history of the sport, had an average height of six feet, one inch.

At an early age, ballers play for fun; by their teenage years, the more talented players are playing organized basketball. At the age of fourteen or fifteen they start to lift weights to increase strength and speed. The strength and conditioning experts at USA Basketball recommend that players should start lifting at about the age of fourteen. By the age of sixteen, almost all future college basketball players are lifting weights.

All of them grow tall. None of them have stunted growth due to strength training.

There is a persistent myth that weight training stunts growth or is riskier than other sports. No one quite knows whence this rumor originated. Such rumors take on a life of their own, perpetuated by the Internet, or WhatsApp groups, wherein a few dominant personalities convince other members. Beyond USA Basketball, other expert organizations, who are not on WhatsApp, have a few thoughts about teenagers lifting weights. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Sports Medicine, the Council on Sports Medicine, the American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine, the National Strength and Conditioning Association, the World Health Organization, and the Australian Government all agree on the effectiveness and safety of strength training. As do hundreds of sports scientists from tens of elite universities around the world, including here in Australia. The UK Strength and Conditioning Association says that concerns about strength training being harmful to growth are misinformed. Several studies have shown there to be no evidence of strength training having a negative effect on growth during adolescence, nor does it reduce eventual
height in adulthood. There’s a remarkable global consensus that strength training does not restrict growth.

There is also a remarkable lack of injuries when compared to other sports. A review of twenty-seven studies, stretching back to 1978, found that just three children got injured. A look at the actual injuries was even more revealing: one child missed one training session, another had thigh pain that resolved within five minutes, the third child needed a week of rest. Per 1,000 hours of weightlifting, just 0.5 children will get injured. Among seventy serious, competitive teenage lifters, over a one-year period, none of them got injured. The vast majority of strength training studies summarized the injury occurrence in adolescents as either very low or nil. In contrast, the injury rate in soccer, basketball, rugby, and gymnastics is a great deal higher. These injuries are also more serious ranging from ACL tears, to fractures, to strains and ligament damage. All of these are sports that parents encourage, and yet one of the safest teenage physical exercises is warned against as harmful to growth.

The problem with many sports is specialization at too early an age. Parents want their children to be the next Serena, Tendulkar, or Ronaldo. It is this sports specialization and year-round participation that causes injury, not lifting weights. In the United States, young baseball players are now developing degenerative conditions usually seen in people over the age of fifty. The American Academy of Pediatrics found a huge rise in ACL tears over the last twenty years in soccer and basketball players. Serious shoulder and elbow injuries have risen fivefold in other sports. These injuries are becoming a real concern, facilitated by pushy parents who live their sports dreams through their children. Team sports should be played, but they should be fun, without early specialization and overtraining, such that youthful enthusiasm is not dampened.

In Birmingham, Monday is known by Muslim gym goers as ‘International Bench Press Day.’ Monday is the day of
the bench press and it’s difficult to find a free bench at the gym. Scores of young Pakistani men press very heavy weights. Yet for all their strength, there is a problem: about ninety percent of them have poor form, learning off their friends or self-taught from YouTube. The true injury danger from weightlifting is from incorrect technique. The other very real problem is ego lifting. This is when young, testosterone-fueled men want to lift heavy every session, every time trying to max out their lift, competing against their friends for fear of being seen as weak. Put together poor form and very heavy ego lifts, and at some point an injury will occur. Put together poor form, very heavy weights, with lifting at too early an age, and it is true that the growth plates at the end of the long bones can become damaged. However, remember that the risk of damage to growth plates is much higher in other team sports that children regularly play without parental concern.

The injury risk from improper form and too heavy lifting is instructive, because adolescents who lift with proper form, and the right amount of weight, at the proper age seldom get injured, nor do they fail to grow. It tells us how and when adolescents should start lifting. There is a consensus that teenagers can start lifting during the final stages of puberty. For most, this will be between the ages of fourteen and sixteen depending on the maturity of the child. We asked Andy Bolton about training children as he has a great deal of experience. He was the first person to deadlift 1,000 lbs. He has forty-nine 900 lb deadlifts, more than anyone ever. He was the squat world record holder. His bench press is his weakest lift as he only presses 754 lbs. He’s been training for thirty years and has never been injured. Just this month, one of his young students became the UK, European, and world junior powerlifting champion. He knows how to train people young and old.

Despite these heavy lifts, Andy Bolton emphasizes, then emphasizes again, learning correct form from someone qualified to teach. He says, “it doesn’t matter how much you lift when you are young, or even old and just starting out. All that matters is correct form and technique.” This is
where fathers come in, lest any teenagers think we are putting all the responsibility upon them. Fathers, this is your opportunity to bond and train with your teenage sons. They shouldn’t be left alone. You don’t send them off to the gym or make them lift in the garage while you read the sports pages. Find an instructor, learn some of the lifts, get a program, then train together either at home or in a suitable gym. Daughters and mothers shouldn’t be left out. Fathers, train your daughters too. Ladies, you too start lifting, there’s no reason you can’t become seriously strong and train your sons. There is zero danger of you becoming muscled like a man. You should also lift heavy weights.

So just what are heavy weights? It’s very simple. First, wait until they are the right age, then find a teacher, master the form with a light weight, then build up slowly until you can lift about seventy percent of your maximum lift. Some trial and error is needed here, but don’t go too heavy, because even a mountain like Andy Bolton only trains at seventy-two percent of his maximum effort. This seventy percent effort has been confirmed by numerous studies on teenage lifting. It’s also the amount of effort that promotes optimal mental health. Don’t ego lift; don’t compete against your peers. Do not max out. Train two or three days a week, make it enjoyable, and always remember correct form.

We started by relating a hadith about strength. That hadith wasn’t about bodybuilding. It wasn’t about having a beach body fit for the Gold Coast. It wasn’t about using anabolic steroids to build muscle, because these damage fertility, the heart, the brain, and the kidneys, even though Australia has seen a 750 percent rise in their use. The hadith was about strength. This physical strength is sought such that we are not incapacitated as we age; that we can take care of our needs and family; and that most of all, we remain strong such that we can worship our Lord into advanced old age.