

EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

MAYA NASSAR IN THE ZONE

Maya Nassar speaks to RAGMAG on her rewarding fitness journey from the girl next door to becoming a bikini model. With this comes the realisation of a life-long dream and the price paid to achieve it.

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HOW AND WHY YOU GOT STARTED ON A HEALTH JOURNEY?

Around 4 years ago, I gained a lot of weight and no longer fit into my jeans. I had been feeling quite insecure about my weight for several months and had a turning point when none of my old clothes fit me. I realized I am responsible for my own lifestyle and did not want to live a life where I feel insecure or self-conscious.

I started researching fitness and nutrition to see what was necessary to turn my life around. I was extremely naïve and had no clue where to start. After extensive reading about what to eat and how to train, I started going to the gym and following a clean diet. Almost immediately I started seeing results on a weekly basis. I discovered that although it is hard, there is nothing more rewarding than health and a fit body. I lost a total of 15 kgs and 5 dress sizes.

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WHAT DID YOU IMAGINE THE OUTCOME WOULD BE?

My goal at that point was to lose weight and fit back into my clothes. However, I reached my goal and ended up becoming even leaner than before I had gained weight.

DID YOU THINK THAT YOU WOULD HAVE GOTTEN TO WHERE YOU ARE? HOW DIFFICULT HAS THE JOURNEY BEEN FOR YOU?

I never would have imagined that I would have started competing in bikini fitness competitions abroad. I was too insecure to walk around on the beach without a towel, so the thought of doing it on stage in a bikini would have terrified me. It has been really difficult and required a lot of hard work and endless sacrifice, but it has been worth every second of pain.



WHAT WAS YOUR MOTIVATION TO GO INTO BIKINI COMPETITIONS? HOW DID YOUR FAMILY TAKE TO IT? WHAT DO YOU ADVISE OUR READERS THAT WOULD LIKE TO FOLLOW IN YOUR FOOTSTEPS?

Once I had reached my fitness goal of losing weight and reaching a certain size, I wanted to take things to the next level. My dream was to step on stage in a bikini and compete with top fitness models. Training for a competition requires you to push to your limits both mentally and physically with extreme discipline to get to where you want to be. It changes you as a person and teaches you discipline, making you a stronger and more confident person.

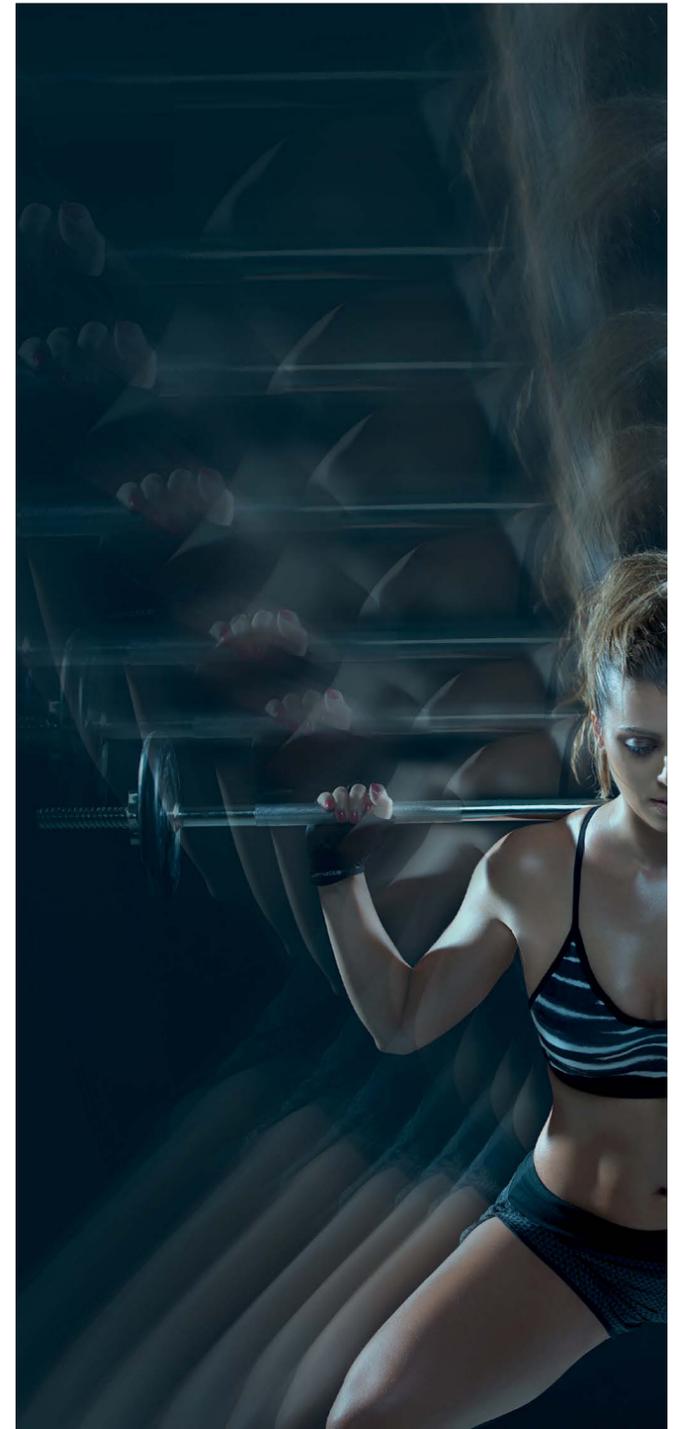
My family has been incredibly supportive towards my competitions. They motivate me and make me feel proud about the sport I participate in. One of my greatest supporters is my husband. After my first show, I was so exhausted and said I don't think I want to do this again. He encouraged me and said I should definitely step up on stage one more time. I took his words to heart and ended up winning first place in my second competition.

If your readers would like to follow in my footsteps, I would advise them first to be in good shape and be at their ideal weight. The next step is to decide on a specific category in a bodybuilding show as there are lots of different ones. The category I compete in is called bikini. The final step is to apply to bodybuilding shows abroad and find a good coach to set them up with a training and nutritional program. Training for a bodybuilding contest is quite different than just training to lose weight and would require professional guidance if they are not sure what to do.

YOU RECENTLY WON THE UK CHAMPIONSHIPS. WHAT STYLE OF ROUTINE DID YOU HAVE TO FOLLOW AND FOR HOW LONG?

Winning first place was a real accomplishment especially that I was competing against some really beautiful women. I trained for around 3 months following a rigid diet and exercise program. I lifted heavy weights around 5 times a week and did up to an hour of cardio about 6 days a week. This period is quite challenging and requires you to follow your diet to the letter and stop drinking alcohol. Your diet starts off easy to follow but then gets more and more difficult as the months pass by and you start to get closer to the competition date.

I was especially pleased to receive an endorsement from the Minister of Youth and Sports to represent Lebanon which helped me gain media attention and raise awareness about female bodybuilders. Many people believe that women who lift weights will become bulky and look like men and my goal is to change these misconceptions.



WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT SO FAR?

Other than winning first place, I would say my greatest accomplishment is helping other people and showing them that they too can achieve their fitness goals if they put their mind to it. I've been really pleased to receive many positive emails from visitors to my website telling me that I've changed their life or helped them take on a healthier lifestyle. Many people don't believe in themselves and feel like it is just too difficult and I love using my story as an example to prove them wrong. I'm just a normal person like anyone else with average genes. If I can go from insecure to competing on stage against top fitness models, then there is nothing holding anyone else back, regardless of their age, weight or current fitness level. Helping other people gives me a sense of achievement and happiness to know that I have made a difference in their lives.

WHAT IS HEALTH AND FITNESS TO YOU?

Health and fitness has become something I live for. I see fitness as my passion in life and something that has changed me for the better. It has made me a happier, more confident and a stronger person. I have experienced a whole other lifestyle of being sedentary and unfit and know just how rewarding it is to take care of yourself. Fitness and health is the one thing that must be earned and cannot be handed down to you. I always tell people if you are not going to take care of yourself for the way you look or feel, do it for your health in the long-term. I'm sure everyone wants to live until they are old and grey and watch their grandchildren grow up.

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TELL US ABOUT 'START LIVING RIGHT'. WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE BEHIND IT?

Start Living Right is an online website which I created to combine my passion of writing with my passion of fitness. I wanted to start something that would help others achieve their fitness goals and share my story to inspire them. My site currently receives around 8,000 visitors a month.

I realized that there are many people like my old self who do not know where to start or what to do in order to live a healthy lifestyle. I see my website as a place where anyone who doesn't know anything about fitness can go and receive real, solid advice and educate themselves. My website is extremely honest; for example, I will never tell anyone that they can achieve their goals without putting in hard work or effort.







YOU RECENTLY LAUNCHED THE FIRST EVER FITNESS APPLICATION IN LEBANON. TELL US MORE ABOUT IT?

I just released a mobile version of my website called Start Living Right and yes, it is the first fitness app in Lebanon! It is a free application and offers many useful tools to help people achieve their fitness goals. It includes all of the articles, quizzes and blog posts from my website along with nutritional calculators and fat loss calculators. People can simply search "Start Living Right" on their smart phone store and download it instantly. I see it as a handy application to provide useful information to people on the go. My goal is to expand on this and keep on adding useful features.

PEOPLE CAN SIMPLY SEARCH "START LIVING RIGHT" ON THEIR SMART PHONE STORE AND DOWNLOAD IT INSTANTLY

DO YOU THINK THE AVERAGE LEBANESE IS AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE? OR IS THERE A LACK OF EDUCATION?

I do believe Lebanon can be better informed about the importance of a healthy diet and regular exercise. I receive a lot of emails from people in Lebanon and the Middle East who are incredibly uninformed. There are a lot of misconceptions which still exist and it is sad to see some health professionals prescribing dangerous advice. People believe scams such as promoting low calorie diets, cutting out major food groups or even the belief that weightlifting is bad for your health. Many Lebanese people take unregulated diet pills or fat burners that can be incredibly unsafe and life threatening. My goal is to correct these misconceptions and teach people the safe and healthy way to go about losing weight.

LOOKING THROUGH YOUR APP, WE SEE THAT YOU PROMOTE A HEALTHY LIFE WITH A HEALTHIER LOOK, MUSCLE TONE AND DEFINITION RATHER THAN THE TYPICAL FRAGILE SIZE 0 LOOK. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE LEBANON THAT STILL PROMOTES SKINNY AND AS THE WAY TO LOOK?

Unfortunately there is a belief in Lebanon that "skinny" is healthy. Many young girls email me and tell me that their ultimate goal is to become thin. They tell me they have been starving themselves and can't figure out why they haven't lost weight yet. My response is always that being skinny does not necessarily mean you are healthy. Instead of obsessing over becoming thin, I believe a woman's goal should be to become healthy, fit and strong. If women obsess over becoming thin, they might become incredibly frustrated and resort to extreme measures, such as starving, to get to where they want to be. Many women genetically will never have a "thin" look which is why they can end up feeling frustrated. Setting a goal to become healthy is far more achievable and rewarding. One of my favorite quotes is "skinny isn't sexy, but health is."

WHAT DO YOU ADVISE THE READER THAT DOESN'T KNOW WHERE TO START?

I believe there are four ingredients towards transforming your body. The first is motivation. This involves really believing in yourself and being mentally prepared to put in the hard work that is necessary to build the body you want. The second is nutrition. A good diet makes up around 80% of your results. People should focus on eating a combination of whole-grains, healthy fats and lean protein while paying attention to overall calorie intake. The third and fourth ingredients include weightlifting and some cardio. Weightlifting helps with fat loss and will build up your metabolism. Cardio boosts your endurance and burns fat. Finally, the hardest thing is getting started and making your lifestyle a habit. I always tell people that fitness is a mental challenge, not a physical one. Someone just needs to work hard for approximately 3 to 4 weeks before it becomes much easier. It is all about getting started, believing in yourself and pushing forward for long enough to see results.

WHAT IS NEXT FOR MAYA NASSAR?

I have a lot of future projects coming up! Along with working on my goal of opening my own fitness center, I will be making constant improvements to my website and phone application to keep on guiding other people who are struggling to achieve their fitness goals. My next goal is to compete in another bikini fitness competition in April 2015 in the UK. I plan on pushing even harder than I did this year and presenting myself on stage in my best ever condition.

