

Jennifer Villegas

Hidalgo County Wellness Program Champion of the Month

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Jennifer Villegas, Eligibility Worker II, Community Service Agency

Anyone taking charge of working on their health and wellness will face challenges. Those challenges will vary in magnitude; some may be easy to overcome while others may be much tougher to get through and will take time.

When Jennifer Villegas was younger, she always considered herself to be “a little bit on the heavy side,” especially after having her first child around 20 years ago. She had hit 205 pounds.

“I’ve always struggled with the weight, but at some point, I was able to maintain it until these recent past years,” said Villegas.

Villegas was among the many who had gained weight during the start of the pandemic. She believes with the restrictions at the time it was mainly being bored at home and food being easily accessible that caused her to put on some weight.

Once COVID-19 restrictions started to lift, she and a coworker started going on walks after work at a park for about 20 minutes for a few weeks. Then they decided to change things up a bit by attending the free 5:30 p.m. fitness classes at the Precinct 2 Indoor Sports Complex in Pharr about two to three times a week.

Villegas is a group member on the Hidalgo County Employee Wellness group on Facebook. She occasionally posts on the page about her workouts at the sports complex or her walks at the park. A friend who works with the county took notice. They also attend the free fitness classes, but at 5 a.m.

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“Start cutting something out. Little by little,” she noted. “Take an apple to work for a snack. Strawberries. Carrots. Mixed nuts. All of that helps.”

“She mentioned, ‘Hey, why don’t you join the morning class?’ I said, ‘The morning class? No, I don’t think I want to do that.’ Because, you know, I live in San Juan and to drive there I get traffic, construction. Nombre, I’m not gonna make it!” gushed Villegas.

After further thought, Villegas gave it a try. Then she went again. Then again. She realized the early morning class had a different effect on herself than going to the class after work.

“I really liked it,” she said. “I started noticing a little bit of a difference. I was feeling more awake. I wasn’t feeling so sluggish throughout the day. I guess you can say it gave me the energy I needed to be able to get through the day versus doing the workouts in the afternoons.”

Villegas says it was a doctor’s visit that sparked her drive to work on her health. Her physical exam turned out great. Her doctor told her was healthy. Then her doctor asked if there was anything else she was worried about.

Villegas recalls she got emotional, “I do. I have an issue with my weight. I have not weighed this much since my first pregnancy. I told her, you know I would understand if I were pregnant. I could blame it on pregnancy weight, but I’m not. I’m getting older. I am going to be 40 this year. I do not want to go into my 40s weighing over 200 pounds. A change needed to be done.”

Villegas explained a lot of different things that led up to her hitting more than 200 pounds. She says it was when tragedy struck, impacting her family.

“I would say the weight started coming on after my stepson died,” she sniveled. “After that, as a family, we had always done activities. Family trips, just doing stuff together – any family that goes through a hard experience like that – losing a parent, losing a child – you notice and you see the change.

You go into that grieving status, where it makes it hard to want to do things. So as a family we kind of stopped doing a lot of things.”

Villegas explained that food became a comfort. She believes she took out her grief through eating.

She disclosed her stepson’s death was unexpected. He had developed a brain tumor and they headed up to Houston for treatment at a children’s hospital. At the time, they did not know how aggressive the tumor was and he had stopped breathing on the trip up.

“It was something very difficult for us to comprehend. That played a very big part in many, many ways,” she said.

Over time since her stepson’s death, Villegas detailed how the health of her husband and three other children changed.

Her youngest son gained the most weight which was noticeable in his school photos. He has since improved his health. Her husband developed diabetes two years ago. She says he has been able to manage it with medication and changed his diet.

Villegas says the entire family now watches over each other. Her 19-year-old son will call her out if she tries to drink a soda.



"I'll make dinner and set my plate then I say, 'Oh, I think there's a Dr. Pepper in the fridge.' My son will come in and says, 'Mom, you don't need to drink that! Drink water,'" she chuckled. "He plays a big part in helping me maintain my weight. He's seen how we've struggled and he just wants everyone to be healthy."

At work, Villegas says her coworkers have noticed her health change. She invites them to the morning workouts at the sports complex. She says they immediately decline after learning it's a 5 a.m. saying she's "loca" and they will be asleep.

"I tell them that's an option. They do have a morning class, they do have the noon class and they do have the 5:30 [p.m.]. And now the Saturday morning!" she said. "I know with the construction it's a little difficult to get there, but it's there. Versus having to go and pay for a gym and when you go you don't know where to start or what machine to use. [At the sports complex], your workout is on the board ready to go for the day."

Villegas says the trainers at the Precinct 2 Indoor Sports Complex will guide you through and will modify the workouts for you. "It's worth it!" she says. She recommends to those who are hesitant to start exercising is to start small.

"Start with walking like I did. Do 15-20 minutes and then add to it – 30 minutes. Then from there if you feel like you're noticing the change and want to do something more, mix it up," she advised. "I noticed the change and I can feel the difference. I can sleep now at night and I can stay asleep. I don't wake up with back pain, hunched over and be like, 'Ugh! You know it hurts.' No. I can get up from bed without that back pain. I just feel more energized throughout the day."

Villegas mentioned people won't see a change with only exercise. People wanting to improve their health will need to change how they eat.

"Start cutting something out. Little by little," she noted. "Take an apple to work for a snack. Strawberries. Carrots. Mixed nuts. All of that helps."

Everyone has their own way of overcoming challenges. For Villegas, the loss of her stepson caused a ripple effect, challenging her family's health that lasted a few years. Her family built the motivation to weather through their depression to improve and maintain their health.

Villegas notes she's only getting older and wants to continue to do things with her family for as long as possible on her own terms.

