IVAN CANTU

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HUMAN RESOURCES



For Ivan Cantu, the biggest change of the past year might be visible on the outside. But ask him about it, and he keeps coming back to what changed on the inside. His mindset.

About a year ago, Cantu found himself at a difficult point. He was dealing with personal challenges, his health was not a priority, and his weight had climbed to 300 pounds — the highest it had ever been. Then came a visit to the doctor and a diagnosis that forced him to pay attention: prediabetes.

It was, as Cantu described it now, a wake-up call.

“I was going through some rough times,” he said. “I had some personal problems, and I had to get out of that stage.”

What followed wasn’t an overnight reinvention. It was a series of decisions that, over time, began to resemble a different way of living.

Today, the 46-year-old employee benefits analyst is about 40 pounds lighter. His diet looks different. Exercise has found a place in his routine. His family has noticed a change in his attitude. And Cantu says he feels happier, more positive and more focused on what is ahead of him.

Cantu has worked for the county for 22 years, including three years with the Auditor’s Office and 17 with the Department of Budget and Management before moving to Human Resources. But health and fitness were not always a significant part of his life.

Growing up, he was much more interested in academics than athletics. He liked baseball, but mostly as a spectator. Looking back, he wishes he had made more room for physical activity.

“I always had time to take care of myself. It’s just wanting it.”

There was one exception. In college, Cantu took up swimming for a semester or two and remembers being in some of the best shape of his life. But when the swimming stopped, so did the routine.

“I didn’t keep up with it,” he said. “I should have.”

Food followed a similar pattern. Cantu remembers growing up without much emphasis on a structured, healthy diet. Junk food was normal, and those habits followed him into adulthood.

By last year, Cantu had reached 300 pounds. But knowing something needs to change and actually changing it are two different things.

For a while, his attention was somewhere else. Personal difficulties occupied the mental space that might

otherwise have gone toward his health. Then the prediabetes diagnosis made the consequences harder to ignore.

“I always had time to take care of myself,” he said. “It’s just wanting it.”

Cantu decided he wanted something different. One of his first moves was also one of the simplest. He asked for help.

Through the Hidalgo County Employee Wellness Program, Cantu met with nutritionist Liza Reyes for a one-on-one consultation. Reyes helped him develop a low-carb eating plan, and that first appointment turned into monthly consultations.

Instead of vaguely trying to “eat healthier,” he had a plan and someone helping him stay on course.

“My kids keep me motivated. And just moving forward.”

“Liza has been very good to me,” he said. “She’s a great resource.”

Over the following year, Cantu lost over 40 pounds, dropping from around 300 pounds to 258 at the time of his interview. His next milestone is 50 pounds, but he talks less about reaching a magic number than maintaining the habits that got him this far. That meant changing some deeply familiar routines.

Bread and flour tortillas largely disappeared from his diet. Sugary drinks did too. Cantu laughs when talking about Pepsi, which once had a particularly strong hold on him. These days, he mostly sticks with water or zero sugar alternatives, with an occasional exception.

The refrigerator at home tells the story. His son sometimes looks inside and declares it “empty.” What he really means, Cantu jokes, is that it is missing the snacks he expects to find. In their place are foods Cantu now keeps as staples: eggs, chicken, beef and other protein-focused choices.

Lifestyle change is often measured in pounds lost or numbers on a lab report. But eventually, it becomes something much more ordinary. It becomes what is in the refrigerator, what you drink with lunch and what you walk past in the break room.

And, yes, Cantu has learned to walk past the occasional birthday cake. “There’s cake all over the place,” he joked about working in an office.

He has also started adding exercise to his routine. He calls it fairly modest by walking for 15 to 20 minutes, roughly 10 minutes of a rowing machine and a set of pushups. He isn’t training for a competition, and he has no ambition to become a body builder. He wants to maintain what he has built.

“My goal right now is just to maintain my low-carb diet,” he said, “and to keep the weight off.”

The Employee Wellness Program has helped give him the tools to do that. Beyond his consultations with the nutritionist, Cantu follows the program’s online resources and watches educational videos and interviews with health professionals. He also points to the fitness opportunities available to employees, including the free classes at the Precinct 2 Indoor Sports Complex.

But for Cantu, those resources work best once someone decides they are ready to use them.

“You have to want it,” he said. “You have to go for it.”

That philosophy comes from experience. Cantu knows what it is like for health to fall down the priority list because something else in life feels more urgent. What changed was his response.

Cantu wakes up around 5 a.m. His workout, even though he calls it “basic,” gives him motivation and focus. He tries to approach what is ahead with a more positive frame of mind.

“I have that mindset. You have to be focused on what’s ahead of you,” he said.

The difference had become noticeable to the people closest to him. His teenage daughter is active in sports, including wrestling and powerlifting, and Cantu had watched her develop an interest in fitness long before his own transformation. Now she is watching him. She noticed the change quickly.

“You seem to be, like, very upbeat and very cool,” Cantu recalled her telling him.

He laughed, “So now I’m a cool dad, according to my daughter.”

It is a lighthearted moment, but it shows how a personal change can extend beyond the person making it. Cantu began changing his habits because he needed to take better care of himself. Now his children are seeing that change firsthand.

He encourages his son, who prefers gaming, to find something active he enjoys. He has even considered asking his daughter if she wants to work out together, although, as he readily admits, she already has her own workout friends.

His children are also part of what keeps him moving.

“My kids keep me motivated,” he said. “And just moving forward.” That phrase captures much of what Cantu sees in his life now.

He doesn’t talk as though the transformation is finished. He is still working on it. He wants to maintain his weight loss, continue improving his diet and make exercise a consistent part of his routine.

The difference is that his health no longer has to wait. That is also the advice he would give someone else who feels stuck.

“There’s always time to take care of yourself,” Cantu said. “There’s always going to be problems, personal problems, or even work problems.”

For him, the Wellness Program helped turn that realization into action. Nutrition guidance gave him direction. Educational material helped him stay engaged. But Cantu is clear that the decision

to change still has to come from the individual.

His motivation today is straightforward: his children, his health and the challenge of becoming a little better than he was before.

“Being challenged to do something better,” he said, “to be better, to be a better person.”

A year after reaching his highest weight and receiving the diagnosis that shook him into action, Cantu seems less interested in looking backward than in protecting the progress he has made.

His transformation isn’t just about what he eats or how much he exercises. Taking care of himself no longer feels like something he will get around to eventually. It has become part of how he moves forward.

“You change your attitude,” Cantu said, “and you change everything about it.”