

Hot, Sweaty and Out of Breath

*Learning to find the motivation to exercise—if only for a healthful 15 minutes a day.*

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For those of us who didn't fall in love with a sport in school, learning to use our bodies is a lifelong process. I spent my late teens and 20s pursuing physical intensities, but not that many of them involved running shoes. Sex and drugs and rock & roll were my independent study for phys ed. Luckily, I survived relatively unscathed. Even if I did use up a lifetime of drink in short order.

However, I've been scrambling since I turned 30—that is, for the last 15 years – to develop exercise habits. Why? Partly because of a sense of obligation: Exercise is good for you, so you'll feel better if you do it. Also, I started to get the occasional memo from my body that I should start using it.

I noticed that I didn't handle stress very well, and the steam-relieving dramatics I performed during my early twenties didn't work so well in the relationships of my late 20s and early 30s. A card-carrying member of the International Insomnia Society, I heard from numerous sources that tiring out the body could help the mind find its way to slumberland. Did this make me start wearing myself out on a regular basis? Nope.

Early stabs at exercise were once a week, when I took yoga or swam. I took slow, talky walks with friends. I thought I was taking care of myself, and thought my doctor was being pushy when she suggested I up my exercise to a more than weekly pursuit. Sheesh!

That happened once I had Francis. My first son liked to sleep three times a day. His nap bed was his stroller, and I've often wished I had measured the miles we clocked, walking for sleep.

As he grew older, he slept less, and I walked less. I did incorporate yoga a little bit, falling in love with a certain CD set, *Yoga Sanctuary* by Shiva Rea. I don't know how many times I've done the lunar disk, hot on the heels of sleep. Still, it wasn't enough.

Once I had my second son I joined the Troy YMCA because my brain was working way more than my body. That place has been great for me, but Felix is 8, and I didn't truly understand the benefits of movement until very recently.

That understanding came from two places last fall. Number one: My friend and neighbor Shanna Goldman suggested we run. I was suspicious. I'm an old lady, I whined, my knees! But she's so fun to be with that I said yes. Fortuitous event number two: I went to see my midwife, Michelle Doyle from Local Care Midwifery, for my annual exam. (The childbearing part of my life may be done, but the relevant organs are still in operation.) One of the things I asked her about was mood swings.

"You need to get hot, sweaty and out of breath 15 minutes a day," she said. She wrote the letters "HSOB" on a notepad. This was my prescription.

She also recommended I do this for my general health, but that was and is an abstract concern. Evening out my moods so that they don't get the best of me and my family, that is something I can pursue.

When I asked Michelle, four exercise-filled months later, about how she came up with the phrasing and figures that worked so well for me, she said that the phrase came off the top of her head. These words, she hears from more people than me, seem to stick. Maybe, she speculated, it's because they are so visceral.

"Everything else is so vague," she said. People can think, "I'm going to exercise. I'm going to do this for my health. I have to go to the gym, but

when you get it down to that real visceral level, everybody can do that. It can be going up and down stairs. It can be putting on music, or it can be wild sex. You can find some way to do that every day.”

As far as that number, she said that about two years ago, research showed that the outcomes from exercising 15 minutes five to seven days a week were as good as those from exercising 45 minutes two to three times a week. Bigger goals can be daunting, and if you don't reach them, doubly daunting because it's so hard to overcome a sense of defeat.

Am I getting out of breath daily? No. A big part of me is still a teenager and resists what I am supposed to do. As I write this, I haven't yet made plans for exercise. The weather rots, so no running, and there's too much snow for ice skating, but not enough for cross country skiing. I know I have to do something and soon, because once the kids get home, all hopes of actually attending to myself retreat.

Still, even if I'm reluctant today, in general, I like how moving is making me want to move more. Some evenings I look forward to the next day's planned run the way I used to relish the promise of coffee. (I just can't drink it anymore. Makes me feel like a train is squeezing fast through my veins.)

Other days I've got no mojo, so I keep quizzing people about routine. I've been talking to people who do yoga, because that is one movement form I'd like to do more. One person I asked is a yoga teacher in Troy, Ali Kenner, who teaches at Troy-Yoga and Shanti Yoga.

Kenner said that this question comes up a lot for yoga practitioners. For her, some days getting on the mat is not a challenge. Other days, she doesn't have the motivation. Regardless of those feelings, she does Kundalini yoga at the same time every morning. And if she misses that date with herself, she tries to fit yoga in at lunch, or before bed. This commitment didn't happen automatically, but gradually over a few years.

Her story reminds me that you have to start where you are. I can't expect to say, I am going to do this every day, and I will. Given my tendencies, I know that isn't going to happen.

“My take on yoga is that getting there—whether onto your mat or to a class—is the battle,” Kenner says. “Use your experience with yoga or exercise to reflect and take note of how you feel when your practice is more consistent. Once you begin to grow your relationship to yoga, or any physical practice, I think it becomes part of who you are and more important in your life.”

If you'd looked into a crystal ball last year and saw that I would often rise up from the desk looking to sweat, I would have laughed. So what's next? A half marathon? Yoga teacher training? Both sound improbable, but who knows.