

LIFE IN THE FIT LANE

Here's how one young woman learned to love her body and lift her spirit through exercise

It has taken me some time to get to a place called self-love, but I finally got there with the help of exercise. I started the process four years ago. I was 20 years old and in college. At almost five feet tall, I tipped the scales at 200 pounds, wore a size 22 and felt totally unattractive. I'd munch on any and everything—ice cream, potato chips, leftover pizza—and when I was done and about to burst I felt bad.

I knew something was wrong. I knew I had to stop. I also knew it was within my power to fix it, but that I had to want to do something about it. I was all too comfortable doing the same old things. I struggled for months trying to figure out why it was that in other areas of my life—school and career, for instance—I had the drive and motivation to move mountains, but when it came to treating my body right, I was lackadaisical, uninspired and apathetic.

But I finally did it. I began by incorporating a *little* fitness into my life. I started walking. Instead of busing it to my part-time job at the local mall, Mikey and Ikey (pet names for my feet) took me there. I started walking everywhere, some days at least three miles. If there was someplace I needed to go, I left earlier than usual and wore a comfy pair of shoes or sneakers.

Just knowing that I wasn't totally immobile encouraged me to do a little more. I wasn't ready to join a gym yet because I was too self-conscious. I thought the whole world would be looking at me

and talking about my body. I thought about some of the things I liked doing, and dancing was the first item on my list. Throughout my life, people have complimented me on my ability to move to music. Maybe it's these big hips I've been blessed with, but when

I'd dance around the house or at parties, it made me feel good. I looked in the phone book for dance classes. Jazzercise sounded interesting, so I gave it a try.

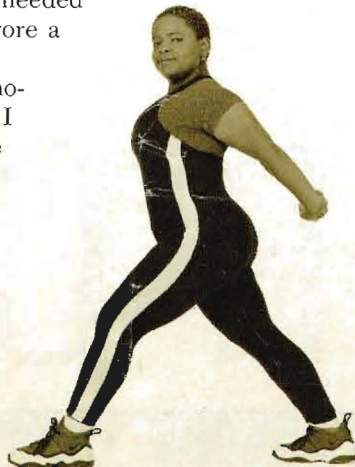
Jazzercise turned out to be one of the best things I could have done for myself. Women of all shapes and sizes were in the classes. They were in the same predicament I was in: They were unnerved by the gym scene and wanted a more friendly atmosphere where they could work out. They became like my family. They made me feel that I wasn't doing it alone. This was the support I needed to get me going and that kept me going.

GETTING MOTIVATED

I took Jazzercise classes three times a week. Instead of paying per class, I prepaid. That way I knew I would do whatever I could to attend because I couldn't afford to waste my money. I kept track of my attendance on a calendar, and if for some reason I couldn't make class, I'd indicate on the calendar whether I walked that day to make up for it. In about a month's time I was Jazzercising at least five times a week and walking for at least 20 minutes every day. Suddenly, my otherwise comfortable size-22 clothing began to feel baggy and muscles developed in my legs. My progress inspired me to change my eating habits: I gave up red meat and pork, ate more fruits and vegetables, and had poultry and fish twice a week. I still had my penchant for butter-pecan ice cream, but I stopped eating a whole pint in one sitting. It actually took me a few days to finish one!

I hit my first stumbling block five months into my fitness program, when I had to leave my college town in Florida and return to my hometown, New York City. I quickly slipped back into my old regimen and was out of sorts for at least three months. I tried taking Jazzercise classes again but got discouraged because the classes were not as exciting as the ones I had taken before.

I was able to get back on track about six months later when a friend told me about really funky aerobics classes [CONTINUED ON PAGE 32]



BY DIANE R. PAYLOR

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PREVENTION

offered at a small Crunch gym in lower Manhattan. One Saturday afternoon I attended a class and was hooked. The music and steps were contemporary, the teachers full of character and the participants energetic. It felt more like I was hanging out at a nightclub than working out at a gym.

STEPPING UP THE PROGRAM

For two and a half years now I've been a faithful member of my gym. I've also come a long way from my Jazzercise and walking days. My fitness schedule is more intense now that I've learned the importance of cross-training. I don't just stick to one activity. I still take aerobics classes and walk, but I've added other things. About a year ago I bought a mountain bike. It's a great transportation alternative—and lots of fun.

I also run now. I get up at sunrise, grab my portable stereo and run for an hour. When I can, I go to a personal trainer at Body Sculpture, a one-on-one training gym in Manhattan. I try to go once or twice a month. With my trainer I'm learning to push my body further than I ever thought it could or would go. Each session we work out either my upper or lower body. If I start slacking off, my trainer keeps me going by shouting, "C'mon, Diane! Pull. Lift. Ten more." I'm usually wincing in pain, but when it's over I always feel good. My heart and stomach often flutter after a workout, and I'm usually feeling like there's nothing I *can't* do. A long time ago I would have laughed at the idea of my doing pull-downs with a 70-pound bar, but now I know I can.

STICKING IT OUT

There are days when my muscles are fatigued and hurting, and I'd much rather stay at home and watch TV. But the pain is not so bad that I won't get up and do something. Each night before I lay my head down on my pillow I like to know that I did something that day for me and my body. This is *my* body. I am in charge of it. I have to motivate it. I also have to listen to it. That means not just exercising it but also feeding it the right kinds of foods. So I joined a weight-loss program that teaches me which foods are good for my body and how a combination of them can help me lose pounds. And I have—30!

I'd like to lose more weight, but what inspires me isn't necessarily the weight loss. My healthy habits have taught me to love myself. I know that loving myself means getting up at the crack of dawn and running for an hour, lifting those weights even with sore muscles and making healthy food choices. Loving myself means taking care of *me*. And exercise has helped me understand that.

Below is some advice that can help you make a fitness plan part of your life:

1. Determine what your motivation is.

If you're not happy with the way you are, then use that unhappiness to get you started. For example, if you would like to lose a few pounds, let that push you to get up and moving.

2. Set realistic goals.

Forget about those infomercials and ads promising a quick fix. Everything takes time. If you want fast results, then you're probably not ready to stick to a permanent program. If you feel that you'll do whatever it takes, implement a plan of action. Figure out what activities you'd like to do to reach your goal and how often you're going to do them.

3. Stick to it.

Some days you'll want to say "Not today!" But despite what you're feeling, keep on going. Nobody ever achieved anything by giving up.

4. Evaluate your goals every so often.

Perhaps it's taking you a lot longer to get where you want to be. That's okay. There's nothing wrong with changing your goals. Be patient with yourself.

5. Choose an activity and set a specific time to do it every day.

For example, make it one of the first things you do in the morning—like brushing your teeth—and it will become a habit.

6. Start with something you're comfortable with.

This can help ease you into the habit of making physical activity a part of your life. Try something convenient like getting off the bus a few blocks before your stop and walking the rest of the way. Keep increasing the distance you walk, and soon you'll be walking the entire way!

7. Surround yourself with people who understand your motivation.

We all need a support base. Sometimes others can encourage you to stick to your program when the going gets tough. ♦

Diane R. Paylor, a freelance writer in New York City, can usually be found shakin' and sweatin' at her local gym.