

EASY WAYS TO DO MORE EXERCISE

I used to say that the only sport I would consider was one I could play while holding a gin and tonic – and I did become very good at darts. I was also good at table football and pool even though I occasionally had to let go of the drink and, of course, the ubiquitous cigarette. At least I didn't have to leave the pub.

I believed that there was only one reason for exercising, and that was to use up kilojoules. Given that I would need to cycle for 15 minutes to burn off a banana, I concluded that this was a monumental waste of time and effort.

Since then I have discovered a number of facts that make exercise a very difficult thing to ignore.

- There's convincing evidence of an association between lack of physical activity and some cancers, including breast and bowel cancer.
- There's evidence that exercise can play a role in managing depression, anxiety and stress. This is powerful information when you're making choices that help you to feel better. Exercise can work twice over – once because you choose to do it at all, and again because it can lift your mood.
- Doing exercise of any kind will always earn a mental tick – we'll always feel better about ourselves when we've done it.

A few more good reasons

Of course, exercise also offers many other health benefits. Again, these may be familiar to you, but I don't think it hurts to remind ourselves that regular exercise can:

- help you lose weight
- improve your physical fitness
- lower your resting heart rate, so your heart doesn't have to work so hard
- lower your blood pressure
- reduce 'bad' cholesterol as it increases 'good' cholesterol
- reduce the amount of free fatty acid in your blood
- strengthen your immune system
- reduce the risk of heart disease, adult onset diabetes, stroke and osteoporosis.

Inactivity is also one of the main reasons why muscles become less supple and strong with age. Over time this can limit the range of movement around your joints and even affect your posture.

What if you hate exercise?

You may not have been aware of the specifics but I'm sure you've known in your heart for years that exercise is good for you. If you don't do it, I presume it's because you hate it. If you loved it, nothing would stop you.

For years I was put off exercising by 'helpful' books and articles that urged me to find something I enjoy.

There was nothing I enjoyed, so nothing is precisely what I did.

It's all very well knowing intellectually that exercise can help alleviate depression. In reality, it's practically impossible to motivate yourself to do anything at all when a black mood sets in.

Things inevitably go wrong in life – once in a while there's sure to be a morning when even getting out of bed is a struggle. These are the days when I lean especially hard on the techniques I talk about on page 118 as a first step to breaking the cycle.

I'm not saying it's impossible to find something that you can suddenly become passionate about – I'm sure this is the case for many of the women who discovered dragon boat racing as a direct result of having had breast cancer, or the men who have taken up tennis in order to encourage their children. But chances are that you won't. Or that, even if you do, it won't be something you can do easily several times a week.

A pivotal moment for me was finally accepting that I am never going to enjoy exercise. Ever.

I say I love yoga, but what I really mean is that I love the effects of yoga and how I feel when I've finished. If I could achieve the same outcomes by reading a newspaper for half an hour, you would never catch me in a warrior pose again.

It's the same with walking. I love being outside and close to nature. But, if I didn't have a dog, and if it were just as good for you to drive to the beach or a mountain

top and sit there enjoying the sunset, that is what I would do.

Somehow acknowledging this has made exercising easier rather than more difficult. In accepting that it will never be fun for me I have also accepted that I just have to get on with it and then focus on how much better I feel when I've finished.

In my first book I listed my goals as:

- walk the dogs for 20 minutes every day;
- do 5-10 minutes of yoga and stretching on most days;
- go to one yoga class a week

Ten years on, there's no longer a local yoga class but, instead, I do 30 minutes of quite strenuous yoga four or five times a week at home. I rotate three DVDs – 18 sessions in all – and I find this provides the variety and discipline I need; I love not having to think about what to do next.

I also walk my dog (sadly, only one now) for at least 30 minutes every day – I honestly can't remember the last time I didn't.

So I'm actually doing quite a bit more now than I aimed for back then and, while I have never enjoyed it, I'm incredibly glad I stuck to it.

I sometimes wonder how different life would be now if I'd never progressed beyond darts and table football. Of course, the very worst case scenario is that cancer would have returned. Researchers talk in terms of risk within a population – as yet, there's no way to predict what might protect or endanger any particular person, but it's just possible that I'm one of those that exercise protects.

Even in the best case scenario I wouldn't be as strong or as flexible as I am now. I might have back pain because my muscles would be weaker. I'd probably be significantly heavier and feel less comfortable in my clothes. And I know I'd be more prone to depression and less positive in my attitude because I now use exercise to help me cope with emotional challenges.

The value of little and often

Five to 10 minutes of yoga a day sounds a bit pointless. It just doesn't seem long enough to make a difference – and I'm sure a lot of people would be happy to point that out if you told them that this was your goal.

When I started out I knew that 30 minutes every other day would be better. I also knew that I wouldn't stick to it. I felt that a regular five minutes would be more helpful than a longer session I regularly missed and eventually abandoned.

I was right. And I now do that thirty minutes four or five times a week.

How did that happen?

Once again, I believe it has everything to do with the benefits of starting small.

If I had launched into the longer sessions, they would have felt like a punishment. I know I would have been thinking 'whatever the benefits, I can't do this for the rest of my life'. I know because it's exactly how I felt when I tried using an exercise bike for half-hour sessions at the gym, which I stuck with for about two weeks.

With yoga I didn't have a plan. I wasn't thinking 'start out with five minutes a day and work up to 30

minutes in x weeks'. I focused on the fact that five minutes was better than nothing and stayed with that until I began to *experience* the benefits – until they become real to me rather than having someone else telling me that exercise was doing me good.

Instead of the usual waiting for myself to fail, I gradually came to enjoy how I felt, both physically and emotionally. I was choosing to make myself feel better.

I'm pretty sure I've reached my limit now. I suspect that trying to do any more exercise would push me over the edge, turning it back into an intolerable chore. But I also can't imagine myself doing significantly less.

Manageable bites

Something else that I think worked well for me was breaking my exercise goal down into chunks. This minimised my chance of feeling like a total failure, and of giving up completely because I set my goals too high. If I don't do yoga, I will always walk the dog. And I always walk to the local shops now, which I do at least once on most days. That's something else that crept up on me – I used to drive without thinking twice about it. Now I can't imagine taking the car.

Your baseline could be the tricks we've all heard about like getting off the bus a stop early and walking the difference, walking up escalators instead of standing still, walking up a couple of flights of stairs instead of taking the lift...anything you can do regularly and easily. Every time you choose action over inaction, you're choosing to make yourself feel better.

Exercise doesn't have to be structured

Fairly structured exercise suits me best because I don't have to think about it. I know the ideal is to 'mix things up' but, as far as I'm concerned, thinking about exercise is the first step to not doing it at all. I do four 'salutes to the sun' because that's what the woman on the DVD is telling me to do. If I had to ask myself 'what sort of exercise shall I do today?' I'd be doomed.

Of course, exercise doesn't have to be structured at all. You can easily build more physical activity into your life if you love gardening, have always wanted to get back into cycling or think nothing of putting on your favourite music and dancing around the living room. But, if you were that kind of person, wouldn't you be doing it anyway?

There's always a way

If you want to feel better about yourself, you really do have to put the excuses aside. I remember reading about one inspirational woman who was so conscious of being extremely overweight she wouldn't even walk in the street. Instead, she walked round and round her clothes line for half an hour every day until she felt comfortable enough to hit the pavement.

A sensible start

Exercise can have value for just about everyone, whatever your age and physical condition, but not if it kills you first. Going at exercise like a bull at a gate is like starting a crash diet – it can't last and could do harm.

If you haven't been active for a while or have any injury or illness, it would be a good idea to talk to your

doctor about pacing yourself and also whether there are any activities you should avoid.

How much is enough?

The amount of exercise experts recommend has varied dramatically over the years. Even now, the guidelines are far from clear – and I'm not sure they're always helpful.

For instance, one study that attracted my attention – for obvious reasons – showed that women who do eight hours of moderate exercise a week were significantly less likely to have breast cancer recur. That wiped the smile off my face! So much for feeling pleased with myself – all these years I've been doing nothing like enough.

Say I do two hours of yoga a week plus three-and-a-half hours of walking the dog – assuming that my walks are 'brisk' enough to qualify – that's only five-and-a-half hours. Even if I throw in an extra hour or so from walking to the shop I'm still short of what I need to do in order to reduce my risk of getting breast cancer again.

Or am I?

In this particular study, the control group consisted of women who were doing less than one hour of exercise a week. So, we know how eight hours compares with nothing but we don't know how it compares with six hours or four hours or even less. Or for that matter, 10 hours, 15 hours or even more. And, as the study relies on what participants *say* they do, we also don't know whether they really were doing eight hours of exercise at all, let alone how briskly they were walking.

The trouble with information of this kind is that, if we take it too literally, it could end up having the very opposite of the intended effect. How easy would it be to think 'forget this – there's no way I can commit to doing that much exercise every week' and go back to doing none at all.

Australia's Department of Health, the American College of Sports Medicine, the American Heart Association and the British Department of Health are just some of the bodies advising that two-and-a-half hours of moderate exercise a week bring significant health benefits. That tells me that doing something is always better than doing nothing at all.

On the basis of this information, I have decided to carry on doing exactly what I'm doing. As I've already said, I really believe I've reached my limit now. If I tried to do more, I'm sure I'd actually end up doing less because it would be easier to find excuses.

All of this hasn't come close to answering the question 'how much is enough' but I don't think there *is* a definitive answer. Obviously, we have to do something and common sense tells us that the occasional gentle saunter round the garden isn't enough. Half an hour of moderate exercise five or more times a week seems to be the closest we can get to a consensus, at least as far as general health benefits are concerned, so I guess that would be a reasonable goal to aim for. Again, I must recommend that you talk to your doctor or an appropriate specialist if you aren't sure about what's safe for you.

Whatever you decide, every reasonable specialist in the world will tell to start slowly for your body's sake. I say start slower still for the sake of your mind.

Beware of advice from extraordinary people!

I have found that many so-called inspirational books and DVDs have exactly the opposite effect because they're written by people who have achieved extraordinary things. That means, by definition, that they are very different from the rest of us.

For instance, I'm not convinced that a personal trainer to the stars, who spends hours with her clients every day to make sure they stay in perfect physical shape, is the best person to inspire someone who is venturing into the world of physical fitness for the first time.

I have known people to be totally discouraged when they couldn't manage the simplest starting-out exercises suggested by a book or DVD which purported to be for 'ordinary' people. It's easy then to feel that there's no point in trying because we're inevitably going to fall short.

I believe that the best place to begin is with the bar set so low you could practically roll over it. That way, there's no chance of 'failing'.