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Fitness

How I Went From Hating Exercise to Becoming a Fitness Instructor in 5 Years

Opinion: These adjustments helped me finally enjoy exercising—so much so that I decided to make it my side hustle.

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For most of my life, my **relationship with exercise** was defined by a simple rule: calories in, calories out. I only exercised when I wanted to eat highly caloric foods or binge drink, and my workouts consisted of furiously flinging my legs back and forth on the elliptical as punishment for even fantasizing about a decadent meal. Even with the aid of *Law & Order: SVU* reruns streaming on the TV, I'd count down the minutes until the agony was over.

Unsurprisingly, I hated exercising. I cared about seeing how many calories I had burned during a cardio session, but just about everything else about **working out** made me absolutely miserable.

I wish I could introduce Julia at 24, depressed and lethargic and seeing calories as the enemy, to now-Julia, 29, a certified indoor cycling instructor who teaches group classes six days a week with a big smile on her face. Beyond teaching, my own fitness routine includes a mix of time on the bike, **rowing classes**, boot camp classes, and running in Central Park.

Whereas five years ago, working out daily was an unimaginable feat, today it's an integral part of my life. More important, it's an activity that makes me happy. While accepting and loving the way my body looks will always be a work in progress for me (like it is for so many other people), I can now say that I do truly love to exercise for how it makes me feel—so much so that **I made it my side hustle**.

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That love didn't blossom overnight. Rather, it took a lot of small changes in my daily routine and progressive changes to my mind-set that occurred over the course of five years. Ultimately, these changes have helped me develop a positive relationship with exercise instead of seeing it as a necessary evil or punishment.

1. I tried as many different fitness classes as possible.

Around the same time that I became discouraged with exercise, I was also going through a painful breakup and embarking on a jarring cross-country move to New York City. I was desperate to never be alone with my thoughts, which made cardio machines even more unappealing. I also craved human interaction outside of work, as a newbie to the city. Exercise classes seemed like a less awkward version of a meet-up group, so I picked one of the studios nearest to my apartment—an indoor cycling one—and signed up for a class.

Whether it was the dramatic lighting, inspirational mottos, or synced-up choreography that made me feel like a Rockette, for the first time since I played soccer as a kid I was doing exercise that didn't feel like a chore. This was actually fun. I started attending classes four, five, and sometimes even six days per week.

While indoor cycling accounted for roughly 50 percent of the classes I was taking at the time, I did try to check out a new class every other week (I was paying for ClassPass, but many fitness studios **do offer free first classes for new students**) to both push myself to socialize and better learn what forms of exercise I actually enjoyed to replace the dreaded elliptical. When I found a workout that distracted me from the fact that I was exercising (and grieving my relationship), like rowing and indoor cycling, I was more inclined to show up for classes regularly.

But diversity and exploration weren't the only selling points of taking classes. As an introvert, rush hour at the gym—with competition to snag machines—is one of my worst nightmares. When I signed up for fitness classes, I was guaranteed both a slot and the space to exercise. So with the end of the workday approaching, I would feel at ease knowing a bike, rowing machine, or mat was reserved just for me for a full hour.

2. I covered up the dashboard on cardio machines.

When I used to work out on cardio equipment, I relied heavily on the data dashboard to gauge whether or not I had gotten a good workout. Despite how miserable I was as I motored my legs back and forth on the elliptical, I'd feel a sense of accomplishment seeing the calories burned staring back at me. Because of my fixation on the dashboard, I also didn't find a need to bother with things like lifting weights—if there was no calorie data attached to it, as far as I was concerned it was a waste of my time.

Around that time I started to read and learn more about exercise, and one of the things I saw again and again was how the dashboards on cardio machines probably aren't that accurate. I wondered if I'd still feel like I was getting a solid workout if I ignored the data altogether.

Without the numbers, the elliptical was both seemingly pointless (I was barely working up a sweat, I realized) and even more monotonously tortuous than before. It was around this time that I also started to recognize that my obsession with burning calories wasn't only unproductive, but also possibly unhealthy. I had become so fixated on that aspect of exercise that I hadn't stopped to think about how I felt when I exercised, and if it made me a happier person or not. Giving up the dashboard data made me realize just how much I was letting it control me.

Most of all, realizing how painfully bored I was on these cardio machines prompted me to try different forms of exercises. As my knowledge of exercise expanded, I also read about the benefits of **strength training**, so I decided to give it a try.

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And without digital metrics to guide me, I found myself focusing on a different set of numbers: the reps, sets, and pounds I was lifting. When I became comfortable within a certain range of these numbers, I'd start to crave more, fueled by my steady strength gains. But unlike on cardio machines, I could actually feel these changes; I didn't need an external calculation. I felt strong, and I felt accomplished, which in turn, made me actually enjoy exercising.

3. I started exercising first thing in the morning.

I initially switched to **morning workouts** because it was the only time I could fit them in—an extra-long commute to work in my mid-20s made it near-impossible to hit the gym late at night. But once I started attending morning classes, I actually noticed a distinct shift in my attitude. Whereas dragging myself to exercise after a long day at work felt like an obligation, morning sweat was an accomplishment. Even if my entire day went to ruins at work, I could go to sleep that night knowing I crushed a solid set of burpees before anything else happened.

Plus, when coworkers complained about how tired they were after rolling out of bed 30 minutes before beginning work, I'd get smug satisfaction (without telling them, of course) that I had accomplished something—it hardly mattered that it was exercise—before they had the chance to wipe the drool off their pillows. At a time when I felt I was flailing in my career and personal life, feeling like I had a leg up before the day even began was a definite confidence-booster.

Waking up before dawn wasn't (and still isn't) easy, but having some financial incentives helped motivate me to commit to this routine early on. Sleeping through a class meant that I'd get charged a \$20 no-show fee. And at first, I could only muster up, max, one predawn workout per week, but when I started to find the workouts I enjoyed, within about six months I was working out almost exclusively in the morning.

4. I invested in workout apparel that made me feel good.

You know those old, ragged, bleach-soaked T-shirts and ill-fitting shorts most of us reserve for house cleaning? That was my typical gym uniform for the better part of my early 20s. In a way, it was the perfect representation of how I viewed fitness: a chore that was simply a means to an end and not an opportunity for me to feel good and have fun.

As I progressively moved away from cardio machines to classes where there was almost always a mirror, I started to feel bummed out when I caught my reflection. It's always been easy for me to find ways to critique my body, but seeing it swaddled in a stained, smelly T-shirt didn't help. I put on dresses and did my hair for work and first dates—two things I valued. Why didn't I put in the same effort for exercise?

Slowly but surely I started to build my **athletic wardrobe**, taking note of the styles, cuts, and colors I'd see women rocking in classes. I also established a rule: If something I bought didn't make me feel sexy upon catching my reflection, I'd return it and try something new. Of course, everything also had to feel comfortable and stay in place during a sweaty workout.

I don't think I fully realized how stellar the right workout wardrobe could make me feel until I started to take, and teach, my own classes. Maybe it's because it sort of feels right with the club-like atmosphere, but for me the outfit is almost as crucial as the swagger I throw into my tap-backs.

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5. I connected with the fitness community on social media.

The first time I posted about a predawn workout on Facebook in my early days of learning to adopt morning exercise, reading the notifications at the end of my session was hugely gratifying. Comments like, "Good job girl!" and "Holy crap. I'm still sleeping" were encouraging. But beyond the immediate positive reinforcement, social media gave me a way to connect with the fitness community on a deeper level. It made me feel like I was a part of something bigger, and I felt connected to humans in a way that 60 minutes chugging away on a cardio machine and headphones didn't come close to doing.

When I was new to New York City, I'd follow instructors I liked, professing my love for their classes in DMs—and get encouraging responses in return. Fitness on Facebook and Instagram was a social club I could participate in before, during, and after the workout. Now that I'm an instructor, I'm the one receiving these messages and returning compliments, and it feels amazing to be able to be on the other end too.

Over time, these actions helped me see exercise in a new light.

With every cycling class I took, I rediscovered the moments in exercise where pure, sweaty exhilaration creates an euphoric effect, driven by thumping music, camaraderie, and competition. And with every weightlifting session, the soreness I'd feel instantly—paired with the bulging, outward growth I'd see over the course of months or even weeks—gave me a sense of accomplishment I could never get (but desperately wanted) from my old approach to fitness.

Of course, even today when I first hop onto my bike prior to teaching a class, I sometimes catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and cringe. I wonder what those 45-plus faces glued to me are thinking. I still even find myself comparing my body to the roster of other instructors. And then I stop myself in my tracks. Because by the time the lights dim and the music begins to thump, that self-doubt diminishes and it quickly becomes apparent that my appearance plays no role in how hard or fast I push, or how well I teach the class. The only real factor in how accomplished I feel is the gratitude I'm willing to show my body and appreciation for what it can do, rather than what it looks like.