

“Getting Started” by Donna Phelan

I started exercising regularly when I was 11 years old. That is 40 years – 40 sweaty years of smelly socks, sore muscles and the inevitable wedgie that comes with kicking, stretching and generally forcing my body into contorted positions resembling the twisted shape of a paper clip. I could pretend to know the magic formula that will inspire you to start and stick with an exercise routine, but frankly, I don't recall how I did it myself. Oh, sure, I was an overweight kid, desperate to lose weight and feel like one of the group (rather than the ENTIRE group), but what ultimately motivated me to adopt a regular exercise routine, I can't say. Exercising has become part of who I am, as much a part of me as my brown eyes and quirky sense of humor. Too many years have passed. And, as my kids are fond of pointing out, “you don't need sweating with the oldies, Mom, you ARE an Oldie!”

What I *can* give you is some practical advice – pitfalls to watch out for, how to avoid setting yourself up for failure. In the end, however, the only person who dictates your success is you. YOU will have to do the work and make the commitment to exercise. And, even though you might hope for the foolproof secret to success, you know deep down it is simply hard work that will get the job done.

I've always contended that the hardest part of any exercise routine is not the exercise, but the routine. Doing those sit-ups, push-ups and leg lifts is easy compared to overpowering the part of you that would much rather open a bag of chips and pop a disk in the DVD player. So, when you are ready to tackle your evil twin, the lazy slug, be certain you are mentally prepared. Look at your upcoming calendar and pick two consecutive weeks that look relatively free – no dinners with visiting dignitaries or nights on the town with touring rock bands. Block off those weeks and plan to keep them open. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you would be better off trying to offset a week of parties by attempting to start an exercise program the same week. Unless someone has perfected aerobic eating, it is not likely you will find the time for both activities. As much as humanly possible, attempt to exercise every day of that two weeks, even if it is just a 15-minute walk around the neighborhood. Don't think past the two weeks. Even if you fall right back into your indulge and bulge habits, you will have proven to yourself that you can succeed at exercising. I started and stopped exercising several times before it became part of my lifestyle. Each time I learned a little more about my own motivation. Each time it became a little easier to get started again.

Once you have established the exercise habit, pick a workout you can stick with. Try several activities. Never pick a workout simply because it burns the most calories, is the latest trend, or will impress your friends. Pick something appealing to some part of you. Many runners will tell you that it is being outdoors, pounding the pavement with only their thoughts to keep them company that motivates them to continue running. Personally, I put running on my list of LEAST favorite things to do, just after getting a root canal. My workout of choice is Tae-robics. For me it is the constantly changing

routine, the motivation that comes from exercising with a group and the social aspect – the people I workout with have become my friends. One “size” does NOT fit all when it comes to exercise, so take the time to shop for your “size”.

When first beginning an exercise program, have a backup plan in the event you miss your regular workout. As challenging as it is to establish the habit of exercise, dropping the habit is as easy as finding a pornographic website on the Internet...uh, well, so I’m told. If you miss your 6 PM Tae-robics class on Wednesday, go for a walk on your lunch hour on Thursday. It isn’t important that you match the intensity of your regular workout or even the time spent doing it. What is important is keeping the habit. As you exercise, week after week, year after year, you will find that family, your job and other responsibilities and opportunities will force you to alter your exercise routine as well as the time you choose to enjoy it. When I first started exercising, I had to fight the temptation to skip my routine. When it became a habit, missing a routine made me anxious – convinced that I was back on the path to my former slovenly ways. Now that exercise is part of my lifestyle, I can miss a routine here and there with no guilt or concern about “making it up”. Exercise has become as natural as sleeping. When I have a late night and don’t get enough sleep, I never worry that I won’t be able to catch up on that sleep the next night.

“If it is important enough, you will find the time.” How many of us have cringed at those words while thinking “and here I’ve been wasting that hour between 3 and 4 AM!” The statement is true, to some extent, but it is an over-simplification of the 24-hour challenge we all face. Exercise *is* important to me so I *do* find time for it. But, not without giving up other activities I wish I had time for. I would love to read more often, but I don’t have the time. I would like to keep my house cleaner, but I don’t have the time. I would like to take up painting again, but I don’t have the time (a big relief to anyone with taste). The fact is we all have activities, habits or hobbies that are non-negotiable to us – a part of our lifestyle that we will not give up. The trick is to identify those activities that are non-negotiable to YOU. By doing that, you’ve determined, by default, those activities you are willing to give up, willing to replace with regular exercise. This is tough to do, but vitally important if you want to succeed in establishing an exercise routine. Let’s face it, with the possible exception of the Maytag repairman, no one I know has an hour of time every other day just waiting to be filled with exercise.

Hopefully, I’ve offered enough ideas to get you started, enough strategies to make you optimistic about your chances for success. We all know that regular exercise is important to your health, quality of life, emotional well being, and blah, blah, blah – well you’ve all heard that lecture. Go ahead and admit it, though – you secretly suspect that exercise and healthy eating doesn’t really make you live longer...it just SEEMS longer, right? Be prepared for a pleasant surprise. Once you’ve made exercise part of your lifestyle, you will find that you workout not just because of the way it makes you feel, but because working out is so damn much fun! Here’s to your success. Good luck and good health!