



# Fitness in Numbers

Maintaining an exercise routine doesn't have to be a challenge. Working out with others makes it as easy as one, two, three.

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**MOST OF US ARE AWARE OF** the benefits of regular exercise: weight management, cardiovascular health, increased stamina, bone and muscle strength, lowered blood pressure, and reduced insomnia. In addition, scientific research shows exercise also might prevent cancer, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease. Unfortunately, even though people understand the value of exercise, far too many have a litany of reasons why they can't do it. In some cases, they actually might be true, but most people can exercise — they just don't. "Exercise is like breathing," says Maj. Gabriela Cora, USAFR, a board-

certified psychiatrist in Miami. "It's not something you do now and then. It's a must, a pillar of biological health. The more you [exercise], the more you're in control on a mental as well as a physical level."

One effective strategy for maintaining an exercise regimen is working out with others. Recent studies by the International Council on Active Aging show group interaction is a significant factor for older adults sticking with long-term exercise programs.

### **Jump-start your workout with competition**

According to Debbie Mandel, a fitness expert and author of *Turn on Your Inner Light: Fitness for Body, Mind and Soul* (Busy Bee Group, 2003), competition is a motivating factor when working out with others, because most people are reluctant to quit an activity while their group carries on.

"Competition is a positive aspect of group exercise," Mandel says. "There's that keep-going spirit that's very important. You tap into

positive group energy, and you think, 'Everybody's doing it, I can do it, too.'"

However, there is another side to competition. "There's a big fear of failure," Mandel says. "Someone new walks into a gym, sees the 'hotties' who have been exercising for a long time, and thinks, 'I don't look good. I'm too clumsy. I don't know what to do. I'll hurt myself. I'll look dumb.'"

That's where other class members and the instructor can offer motivation both by demonstrating and explaining moves and dance steps, or by teaching how to use gym equipment and providing encouragement.

Former Marine Frank Mikulka of Nassau County, N.Y., who teaches "warrior" classes (a fusion of cardio, flexibility, and strength training), demonstrates the correct techniques for safe workouts while inspiring his students to be the best they can be.

"Everybody started somewhere, sometime, and they couldn't do something," Mikulka says. "But there is a progression." He thinks when group members are at dif-

ferent skill levels it inspires you to "keep on keeping on."

### **Stay on schedule with the help of others**

The social aspect of working out in a group also influences people to stick with exercise. "Social networking is huge," says Anne Wolf, a faculty researcher at the University of Virginia School of Medicine and an exercise instructor in Charlottesville, Va.

According to Wolf, research shows these networks are becoming more important to people, and an exercise group encourages a positive lifestyle, because it includes people who share the value of wanting to stay fit. "You don't have to know the people personally, although you often come to," she says. "But you recognize them in class and feel an affiliation with them that makes you want to come more frequently."

Of course, exercise doesn't have to be at a gym or in a specific class. Many people form informal, but regular, exercise groups. "Keeping the exercise commitment is much easier



when others are involved,” says Teresa Pridmore, who lives near Scott AFB, Ill., with her husband, Ed.

Teresa walks as early as 6 a.m. with a group of female friends, including an Air Force retiree and the wife of an active duty officer. “You keep each other motivated as well as challenged,” she says. “I know I push harder at walking faster with a group.”

Ed, who is retired from the Air Force, regularly plays basketball, racquetball, and “wallyball” with a group of men from his church. Because the group keeps a regular schedule, everyone in it is held more accountable.

“When someone expects you to be there, that’s powerful,” says Toni Branner, an exercise physiologist and author of several books, including *The Safe Exercise Handbook* (Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1993).

### Find the right exercise group for you

Branner says finding a group is not hard for most people. “Try at least 10 different places,” she says, explaining that many workout facilities offer free one- or two-week introductory sessions. “There are commercial fitness centers, park-and-recreation departments, and the local [YMCA] and many churches now have programs.” Most retirement communities and military facilities include fitness centers. Some exercise programs, such as Silver Sneakers, are sponsored by health care systems and specifically are directed at senior wellness.

A final consideration is finding a workout you enjoy. “Whether you’d rather jog or kickbox in a group, take a Pilates class or use a DVD with

friends in each others’ living rooms three times a week, as long as you like it, you’ll do it,” says Nicole Glor, a group exercise instructor in New York City and creator of an exercise video, “Nikkifitness Military Wife Workout.” “If you hate your routine, try new things,” she says.

Branner realizes people often make significant lifestyle changes only after receiving a bad diagnosis. “My passion is trying to get people to make changes before that happens,” she says. “You can’t feel prevention. You don’t feel it when you’re not getting a cavity, and you



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Air Force veteran Rick Hansen of Silver Spring, Md., did just that. He found a new workout called SingYo, which combines classic yoga postures with singing familiar songs. “The entire group sings,” he explains. “It’s encouraging to hear other voices. It definitely helps to have the support of others. It’s not that you have to exercise, but that you want to.”

don’t feel it when you’re not getting cancer, but the research is so clear now. We know what we have to do.”

Mikulka says he recognizes that people make different exercise choices, but being a member of a group can help them achieve a common goal. “We all want to stay well, stay fit, and stay ahead of Father Time.” MO