MIND OVER 
muscles

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELVIS SWIFT

To find a fitness plan you’ll stick with, figure out what your mind needs—and your body will happily get with the program.

Visit the Fitness Pointe health center in Munster, IN, on a weekday evening and you’ll likely come across a 30-something woman doing bicep curls while quietly whispering to herself: “Increasing my strength gives me power. I can be whoever I want to be.” A hundred feet away, you might spot a man in his 40s, peddling away on a stationary bicycle, sporting a pair of mirrored sunglasses and an expression of beatific contentment. Meanwhile, Debi Pillarella, the director of this 73,000-square-foot health center, is heading out the door for her own workout: a solitary walk with her dog.

All three people are committed to their workouts—for good. So why are they able to stick with it while so many of the rest of us don’t? Research suggests that quitters focus on a specific outcome—losing 10 pounds, say, in time for the college reunion. Long-term exercisers find meaning and purpose in movement itself and simply being fit. “People who stick with an exercise program see activity as a central part of their lives. It’s a way they express, rediscover, test or define themselves, or even find spiritual meaning,” says Jack Raglin, PhD, a professor of kinesiology at Indiana University.

Ask these exercisers about the benefits of fitness, and you won’t hear a word about dropping pounds, burning calories or even lowering their cholesterol. Instead, the mantra-quoting weight lifter will tell you that she now has the confidence to speak up for herself when her hot-tempered boss lets loose. The businessman in shades will talk about experiencing a form of meditative reverie as he cycles. And Pillarella will say that a low-intensity walk through nature—followed by a lavender-scented bath—is restorative after a day filled with ringing phones, beeping emails and back-to-back meetings with clients and staff.
HEALTHY DIGESTION GOES WELL WITH ANY MEAL.

What these workouts have in common is what exercise psychologist William Morgan, EdD, has dubbed Factors P (purpose) and M (meaningful). "People give all sorts of reasons for not exercising, such as lack of time, but I think the real reason is that they don't want to do pointless, nonpurposeful things like running on a treadmill to nowhere," he says. Raglin agrees. "Purpose is not the kind of thing that's easy to measure in a questionnaire or study," he says. "But many experts would agree that without it, most exercise programs are doomed to fail." Fifty percent of people who begin a workout regimen will quit within six to eight weeks.

Find your purpose—what your mind and spirit need—and your body will also reap benefits: more energy, better sleep and moods, a lowered risk of many diseases and, yes, a trimmer waistline.

How to make this work for you? First, identify a goal.

GOAL: You want to quietly decompress after a demanding day in a busy office

Workouts: Walking, running, bicycling, swimming and slower-paced forms of yoga, such as Iyengar or Hatha

Choose activities with rhythmic, meditative movements that don't require a lot of interaction. Even a jog on the treadmill can fit the bill. For example, research suggests that when people say the word "down" every time their right foot hits the treadmill and they time their movements to their breathing, they experience a state of relaxation similar to that achieved through meditation, says Raglin.

Iaido, a form of Japanese swordsmanship, can be a surprisingly meditative experience. Raglin, a onetime practitioner, explains, "As you become proficient, you reach a state when you're one with the movement, and the sword is like an extension of your body."

Outdoor workouts that let you focus on nature—hiking, biking—can be just as soothing. "When you're paying so much attention to the trees and the birds that you don't notice what your body is doing," says Raglin, "you're able to work a lot harder without being aware of the exertion." Inclement weather? Create a sensory landscape indoors. College students who walked for 20 minutes on a treadmill while viewing a virtual-reality movie of the campus on a sunny day reported feeling calmer and less tired than students who walked without the virtual aid, according to a study by psychologist Thomas Plante, PhD, of Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, CA, that will be published this month in the International Journal of Stress Management. To set the mood for your own meditative workout, create a soothing environment with a Sounds of the Earth series CD, such as Mountain Stream or Ocean Waves ($14 at amazon.com).

GOAL: You crave social interaction to balance a mostly solitary day of working at home

Workouts: Team sports, group fitness classes, charity runs

Whether you run, walk, swim or Spin, you'll do it more consistently if you have a workout buddy. And that's not just because your sense of responsibility keeps you from leaving Ted or Sue waiting at the running track at 7 a.m. Working out with—or even just beside—
another person feels good. In another Santa Clara University study (this one done in 2001), 136 people were randomly assigned to ride a stationary bicycle alone, alongside another person while talking, or next to another person while not being allowed to talk. The results: People who rode with another person reported feeling calmer—whether or not they actually chatted. Want to boost that sense of camaraderie? Participate in a charity fundraiser such as the American Lung Association’s Asthma Walk (lungusa.org) or the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s Team in Training marathon (teamintraining.org).

**GOAL:** You want to feel focused and strong

**Workouts:** Weight training, martial arts, power yoga and kick-boxing

At first, that woman from Munster, IN, didn’t have much conviction when she began saying “My power comes from within” while lifting weights. But a few weeks and some bicep muscles later, she did indeed believe “the stronger I get, the more powerful I am.” With buffer arms and stronger legs comes greater confidence. For a vigorous full-body muscle workout, try a boxing class; for practical self-defense skills, consider karate or the Israeli system called krav maga.

Want a new spin on weight training? Give kettlebells a try. Using cast-iron weights that look like cannonballs with suitcase handles, kettlebell classes focus on moves that both use your whole body and mimic real-life demands, such as toting grocery bags or a three-year-old tyke. Gyms and Ys across the country are introducing kettlebell classes, or you can buy workout DVDs and weights at ironcorelaajolla.com.

**GOAL:** You want to connect with your sensuality

**Workouts:** Dance classes, Pilates training, vinyasa (flow) yoga

Samantha Dunn, a Los Angeles writer, began taking salsa lessons three years ago when a man she was seeing invited her to a Latin nightclub. The relationship lasted just weeks. The romance with salsa has proved far more enduring, as she recounts in her book *Faith in Carlos Gomez: A Memoir of Salsa, Sex, and Salvation*. Today, Dunn has a new community of dance friends and, at 40, the best body of her life in a physical transformation that goes beyond dropping 25 pounds. “I’d always felt clumsy and as if my body was not quite right,” she says. “But salsa is inherently sexual, and now I walk around with a sense of my sensuality and my femaleness.”

Prefer to dance solo? Skip ballroom or swing and try hip-hop, jazz or tap. Like to dance but hate learning steps? Try belly dancing or check out NIA (neuromuscular integrative action), a free-flowing amalgam of dance, martial arts and yoga. Find a class near you at nia-nia.com.

**GOAL:** You’re seeking competence in an area you can rely on because life has its ups and downs

**Workouts:** Team sports, tennis, racquetball and marathons

Pick a workout that’s skills-related and where progress can be measured. For those who grew up playing team or school sports, competition is part of play, whether we’re competing against...
others—as in tennis, volleyball, soccer or fencing—or against ourselves, as in swimming faster or running farther than we did last week. For a fast-track to competence, try racquetball. "In most sports, you need to temper aggression with control," says Bill Pierce, EdD, chair of the health and exercise science department at Furman University in Greenville, SC. "In racquetball, you can hit the ball with all your power, and even an errant shot can be explosively effective." Or go outside the fitness box and check out a tribal drumming class. You can't beat it for working up a sweat and gaining upper-body strength.

Finding your purposeful workout can take a bit of experimentation. Raglin suggests giving each activity at least a month before you move on. That's long enough to see if, say, swimming or lido matches your temperament and your skill set. Remember, too, there's purpose in all this experimentation. Stay open to a sense of discovery, and you just might discover that those two left feet you had the first time you tried a swing class have become nimble masters of the lindy. You might also find yourself shopping for a smaller pair of jeans, or a sleeveless top to show off those newly toned arms. Not the purpose of your workouts, of course, but a nifty perk nonetheless.

Shelley Levitt is a Los Angeles—based writer who found a new sense of competence two years ago on the public tennis courts.®