

# Stay Driven

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By Frank Claps, M.Ed., C.S.C.S. Her Sports + Fitness



Overweight and inactive, Gina Dyson, 32, thought of herself as fat, slovenly and ugly for most of her life. When you struggle through that mandatory lap around the track in PE, when no one asks you to the prom, when you sit in a pile of empty Hostess wrappers promising yourself it's the last time--feelings of hopelessness grow and grow until its all-consuming.

She tried joining a gym and starting an exercise program, but she just couldn't stick with it. Two years ago things came to a turning point for the university operations manager. "I did the most amazing thing. I set a goal for myself."

Gina signed up for a sprint triathlon and then joined a training group. Crossing the finish line was a milestone that marked a new lifestyle and a completely new way of seeing herself. "With every stroke, pedal and step I started to believe that maybe I was strong, maybe I was worthy and just maybe, I was beautiful." Gina has continued competing in triathlons, completing a half Ironman last year and setting her sights for an Ironman in 2008.

Like many women, Gina initially began exercising to lose weight. But as her motivations changed, exercising became a way of life. What drives her now has more to do with challenging herself and seeing what she's capable of than losing weight. And the best news: Experts say she has a much higher chance of staying active for life because of it.

## Beyond Good Looks

While there's nothing wrong with wanting to look better, the problem with using appearance as a primary motivation to exercise is that it doesn't last, researchers say. A 2006 University of Michigan study shows that women who start exercising for body-shape and weight-loss goals alone not only work out less, but also are less likely to stick to it long-term than those who exercise for other reasons.

An appearance-driven motivation, according to Michelle Segar, Ph.D., lead author of the Michigan study, is usually based on cultural pressures to conform to someone else's idea of what's thin or beautiful. "It feels like something you should do and often results in poor long-term adherence. Who needs another should in their lives," says Segar.

And for women whose goal is to achieve some unrealistic body ideal, their efforts usually lead to frustration and then quitting altogether. Some women go to the other extreme: exercising excessively and developing eating disorders and other serious health problems.

"When women discover that wellness, not weight is the key issue, they find long-term satisfaction and enjoyment in exercise," says Margaret Moore, CEO and founder of Wellcoaches Corp., an organization that helps people with motivation issues overcome obstacles toward improving well-being.

Moreover, better body perception develops when women work out for broader reasons of fitness and overall health. If women can view exercise less as an opportunity to look good and more as an opportunity to feel good, this in turn should improve their body satisfaction and self-esteem, concluded researcher Peter Strelan in a 2003 Australian study on women's exercise motivations.

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## Mental Health

Women who end up turning an exercise program in to a long-term lifestyle usually do so out of what Segar calls autonomous goals: motives originating from within yourself, not from others expectations of how you should look, how fit you should be, or how well you should perform.

Grier McCurdy Mathews, a 41-year-old stay-at-home mom, says she exercises for the sake of her mental health. I have three little kids. On any given day, I have a tenuous grip on sanity--running regularly helps me keep it.

For many women like Mathews, maintaining mental fitness is as powerful a motivator for staying active as being physically fit. Women are twice as likely to experience depression as men are, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, and several studies report that physically active people feel less anxiety and depression than sedentary individuals.

Research points to a possible physiological explanation for this, mainly that exercise may help your body deal with stress more effectively by increasing brain chemicals that help control stress, anxiety and depression, reports the American Psychological Association.

Whatever the reason, the exercise-happiness connection creates lifelong devotees. And with busy lives packed with work and family responsibilities, women say the mood-boosting, stress-reducing effect has much to do with the break exercise gives them from the daily grind. Workouts are time away to do something just for themselves. Los Angeles-based pro triathlete Wendy Ingraham, 43, calls her regular morning run a 45-minute vacation.

## Lasting Friendships

Time alone is important. But spending time with others while exercising is probably a stronger motivator for women. Those who regularly work out with friends or join classes or training groups are much more likely to make exercise a lifelong commitment. By creating social networks, women add an extra level of motivation on top of any other that they have, Segar explains. Nurse Jenn Clement, 32, calls working out "the base of my social life. Some of the most wonderful people I've ever known and my closest friends, including my husband, I've met through training."

Whenever Mathews runs with her girlfriends, she says she benefits from both mental healing and social interaction. "It's time to connect. We share thoughts, fears, ideas, joys, sorrows. It's kind of like mobile therapy."

## From Exercising to Training

Sheri Villani, 38, an office manager, initially started participating in triathlons to lose weight. Four years later and 30 pounds thinner, she says she continues to work out because she absolutely loves training and competing in triathlons.

The competitive fire fuels the active lifestyles of many women, and experts say setting event goals is a strong lifelong motivator for staying fit. Sport psychologist Jenny Susser, Ph.D., of the Women's Sports Medicine Centre at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City believes competition brings meaning to every workout. It provides an excellent format for goal setting, which is an invaluable motivational tool.

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Preparing for events motivates women in a number of ways, including the satisfaction of accomplishing specific goals and of seeing progress (achieving faster personal best times or completing longer races), the structure and sense of purpose that following a training schedule adds to daily workouts, and the camaraderie and encouragement of training partners and team members.

But Segar notes that not everyone has the same level of competitive drive, and women need to individualize their motivation by making sure their goals are realistic and don't discourage more than they encourage an active lifestyle. "Not every athlete competes to win," says Segar. "For some women simply entering an event can be as powerful a motivator as an Olympic competition," adds Susser.

But, if competition is one of the main motives for physical activity, what happens when time eventually erodes performance gains? Many women adapt by accepting slower personal best times, but still enjoy seeing how hard they can push themselves. For some, however, fading personal best times, nagging injuries or diminished interest may force a major restructuring of their outlook toward physical activity.

It's quite common for athletes to drop out of regular exercise when the competitive fires go out, notes Moore. To stay healthy and active for as long as possible, athletes driven primarily by performance gains or competitive desires eventually need to focus on the other things they value about being physically active.

"One must dig deeper to find a more lasting and meaningful purpose for taking good care of physical fitness and well-being," says Moore.

Source: [www.active.com](http://www.active.com)

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