



Stop Telling Yourself to Eat Less and Exercise More: The WISE Approach to a Happier & Healthier You

If you want to be an active person, find an activity you love.

By Jim Gavin, PhD

I was talking with my friend Fabio recently about his falling off the “exercise wagon.” He seemed totally committed to getting back on — but he said something that troubled me.

“I hate exercising, though I love the results,” he said. “It’s rarely fun.”

Sadly, statistics validate Fabio’s attitude. A 2011 Statistics Canada report indicates only 15 per cent of the Canadian population gets sufficient exercise. Of course, 2014 New Year’s resolutions will pump up the percentage with well-intentioned promises to join the gym, do yoga, or dust off the basement treadmill one more time. But evidence tells us these commitments will be short-lived.

Some of my recent research causes me even greater worry. But it also holds good news. In my studies of adolescents, I was elated to learn that the younger generation is attracted to exercising for lots of reasons other than what we might expect.

My bias had led me to believe that teens only want killer abs, hourglass figures or bulging biceps. Thankfully, I was wrong. They see exercise as a path not only to a healthy body but also to personal growth, self-management and better relationships. What is more, unlike Fabio, they think physical activity is great fun.

My worries lie with the older set. In a study of 1,885 people, not only was it found that interest in many physical activities declines with age, but the passion and joy derived from active living seems to shrink with each passing decade as well.

The older we get, the more we focus on outcomes — like health benefits, or steering clear of the Grim Reaper. Fun and friends are nowhere in the motivational mix. Of course, this isn’t universal — but remember, our starting point is only 15 per cent of Canadians being sufficiently active before the percentage begins to slide lower with aging.

Ultimately, I shouldn’t have been so surprised by Fabio. At 55, he represents the prevalent view on exercise, which can be summed up as: ***“You’ve got to do it — even though you’re going to hate it.”***

Most motivational researchers will tell you that if this is why you exercise, it probably won’t last. Thus, Fabio and millions of others will be pinching their growing girth sometime in 2014 and saying once again, “Yeah, it’s time to get back on that joyless wagon.” Well, frankly, it doesn’t have to be that way.

The key lies in discovering what matches your unique personality.

If I love being with people, why would I ever torture myself on a basement treadmill?

If I hate routine, why would I pump iron on a high-tech circuit?

There has to be something I can do that will ignite my spirit, lighten my step and delightfully reconnect me to the childhood ecstasy of rolling down a hill screaming the whole way.

And so I challenge everyone — including my dear friend Fabio — to find a physical activity in 2014 that they will be able to do with joy, and with passion.

Jim Gavin is a psychologist and professor of applied human sciences at Concordia University.

