



Finding Joy in Exercise

By Tasha Walsh

On New Years Day my husband and I had planned to go to the YMCA to do the noon RPM class. We were enjoying coffee in our breakfast room late that morning, and I was extremely resistant to getting off the couch. My husband said, “Well, if you don’t want to that’s ok. If you don’t enjoy it then it’s not that important.”

I started thinking about that. Do I enjoy RPM? Does anyone enjoy that type of exercise? RPM stands for Rotations Per Minute. In RPM class you sit on a bike for 45 minutes and sweat. The music is designed to give you a complete workout – warm-up, speed, hills, endurance, cool down, and stretching. You set your own pace, but if you stick to the beat, you work your cardio, lactic threshold, overall strength, etc.

I like the way I feel after an RPM class. My body senses are alive and the endorphins released in my brain elevate my mood. When I first took an RPM class I thought I was going to die. Though I’ve been doing RPM for years now, I still don’t usually *enjoy it*. I mean, it’s nice to see friends I’ve made, but honestly – most people don’t have enough breath to say much in that class. The music’s good, and sometimes I close my eyes and imagine I’m on one of the mountain roads near my home, and that’s pleasant. Yet is something like RPM really enjoyable?

I wonder how many people actually get excited about exercise? The greater Roanoke area has a multitude of gyms and outdoor clubs. We have some of the most beautiful locations for outdoor recreation, whether it’s playing golf or rock climbing. And how many people take advantage of them?

We live beside a long incline of a popular circuitous bike route. It is a killer hill that a biker has to climb for over a mile whichever way he or she takes the loop. I don’t imagine anyone *enjoys* going up that hill, I know I don’t. But on a nice day, we always see people either working their way up or whizzing by on their way down. I often wonder about the bikers and runners I see regularly out in our community or at our local gym. What motivates them to lace up their shoes and go? What’s different about them than all those other people who don’t exercise?

Most people who exercise regularly have found a way to value it. They’re not just doing it to lose weight, or to get in shape, although certainly that’s part of it and a clear benefit. When they break down the experience, most of them look for aspects to appreciate. They look forward to how they know they’ll feel once they get going and after they’re done. For instance, if you asked members of the Start City Running Club what they enjoy about running, they might talk about the friends they run with, or some of the beautiful routes, or the sense of accomplishment at working towards a race, or the elation at finishing a 5k or half marathon. Those who get the most pleasure from exercise have made a choice to approach it with a positive attitude, looking for things to relish and expecting to get something good out of the experience.

While the physical health benefits of exercise are well known, many people still dread it. The mental benefits of exercise are also clear. Researchers have shown that doing some type of regular aerobic

exercise, such as walking for 30 minutes 3 times a week, is just as effective as taking an antidepressant, with fewer side effects and a longer term benefit. Some say that NOT exercising is like taking a depressant. Still, some people don't exercise because it's boring, or they're too busy to do something they don't think will be fun.

It is possible to turn a mundane or even dreaded activity, like exercise, into something enjoyable by making an intentional decision to approach it positively, anticipating the satisfaction you expect when it's done, and finding even small moments to savor while you're doing it. And with exercise, even though it might not be the most pleasurable experience, it can cause happiness. This past New Years Day, I knew I could make a choice. So, I got off the couch and went to the RPM class joyfully.