

My goal for 2011 is to add yoga into my exercise routine at least once week. This might sound simple to someone who has great flexibility, but I was born to run, not to do “Janu Sirasan” (head knee pose). My hamstrings are uber-tight, so touching my palms to the floor with my knees straight will only happen in my yoga fantasies. In my second class, our instructor helped me do a head-stand. Patiently, she held my legs until I gained my balance. As she assured me of her presence and let go of my legs, I felt a flood of emotions. Her touch and her voice allowed me to trust myself and I stayed inverted for what felt like eternity! I was grateful for her help and felt more connected to her and to my body.

We all long for connectedness. No one will argue that our high-tech world has now made us more hyper-connected, but sometimes we find ourselves disconnected from human contact and touch. Many people work from home or in cubicles and are separated from coworkers, making it easy to feel disconnected from the people surrounding us.

Most of us want to be healthy and physically fit as well. While some of us are seeing the fruit of our New Year’s fitness goals, many of us still need to make time and find the energy to stay disciplined. Finding a group exercise class or workout partners might just be the key to maintaining positive exercise habits while benefiting from being connected to others.

New research suggests that endorphins released from doing group exercise triggers the same responses that have made collective activities from dancing and laughter to religion such enduring aspects of human culture. Which might result in turning fitness routines into a healthy addiction!

Alex Hutchinson (an exercise and performance blog writer) sites research from Oxford’s Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology. The report compared the university’s rowing team exercise with individuals who exercised alone. The report indicated that the rowers’ pain threshold was twice as high after exercising with their teammates compared to exercising alone in identical workouts. The endorphin surges are most likely traced back to the evolutionary benefits of group bonding.

Similar studies suggest that synchronized physical activity elevates mood and is associated with greater altruism.

Synchronization is only one factor involved, but also being with others who share the same goals and values, and being motivated by others in the group are a big part of the enhanced endorphin release. The Scandinavian Journal of Medicine reported that women who played team sports experience increased muscle mass and better

physical performance as well as sticking with the sport longer than women who preferred solo exercise regimens.

Also, the membership of groups from basketball teams to book clubs to professional and/or volunteer organizations gives us a sense of social identity. Groups provide a sense of belongingness and add happiness to our lives.

Exercise is vital to our health and social connectedness is equally important for mental functioning and overall wellness. While sometimes we crave the solitude and quiet time of working out alone, working out with others offers the support and camaraderie we often need to take greater risks and have the courage to endure difficult challenges. Sharing the pleasures of talking, laughing and smiling with friends during a workout, makes the experience

twice as rich. And, I’m convinced that with some help of my friends, “Padahasthasana” (forward bend with hands under feet) might just get checked off my bucket list!

Strength in Numbers

By Michelle DeCola, LCPC



Group exercise might help you maintain your exercise habits.



Michelle DeCola, L.C.P.C., is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice and a Member at FFC Oak Park. You may contact her at www.lifecounselinginc.com.