

Who's Doing (Or Not Doing) Your Exercise

By Judith Hendin, Ph.D., Somatic Therapist

I am fascinated by the interplay between selves and the body in everyday life, so I am taking a lighthearted look at a familiar life challenge: Getting the exercise your body needs for optimal health. I will be familiarizing you with the many different selves that have something to say on this subject. You will meet each self that can contribute to your exercise regimen—or lack of it—and so increase your consciousness of your own self system.

It is vitally important to match your exercise with the energy of your inner selves, and that inner state fluctuates day to day, like the weather. Letting your exercise reflect the needs of your inner selves lets you breathe and flow more naturally in your own physical rhythms. You'll find that boredom is minimized and the conscious dance of your many selves will promote health.

Selves That Urge You To Exercise

A group of selves urge you to get your quota of exercise. You can rely on these selves to remind you go to the gym or take your walk, and they all have your best interests at heart.

The **Responsible** voice says, “You really ought to exercise. You must take responsibility for your body and your health.” This is the self that most people tap into when they face the dilemma of exercise. But many more players stand on the field.

When the **Pusher** puts exercise on its list, then exercise you must do. You must get to the gym often, visit each weight machine, and take lots of classes. When the Pusher puts exercise on the agenda, there may be so much rush and anxiety to get it done, to squeeze it between appointments, that, although you set out to do a good thing for your body, the overall effect may add negative stress.

The **Health Monitor** gathers and evaluates the latest fitness information to ensure you follow the optimum exercise regimen. These days the Health Monitor is inundated with

options—Pilates for core strength, elliptical machines for ease on the knees, glucosamine for rebuilding cartilage. Sometimes it is hard to remember what life was like before we had so much information available.

The ***Movement Monitor*** observes your motion and corrects alignment to ensure your body is moving in optimum ways. Whether pumping iron or doing gentle yoga, the Movement Monitor is vigilant about good form. While this has obvious benefits, the downside is a Movement Monitor that takes over. My Movement Monitor is such a primary self that it tells me to align my body properly even when I'm trying to relax or go to sleep!

The ***Inner Critic*** has volumes to say about your exercise. "You didn't do it today, you lazy bum. You should have worked out longer. If you had stretched before you ran yesterday, your muscles wouldn't have cramped up." The Critic loves to compare us with others, so it will compare you to every other person in the gym. It is the Critic who looks in the gym mirror and sees every centimeter of possible imperfection. Actually, your Inner Critic is anxious about your wellbeing. It wants you to be attractive and healthy.

The inner ***Cheerleader*** braves when you've done a good job. "You worked up a sweat. That's great. Even though the class was hard, you finished it. Good for you," it says, figuratively patting you on the back.

Selves That Crack The Whip

We often pay a personal trainer or a class leader to play the role of these selves. These parts motivate us, yet with consciousness we can moderate between their demands and our body's needs in the moment.

In the American tradition of "better and better," the ***Goal Setter*** sets its sights on ever-increasing heights. "These weights should go up at least five pounds per week." Or "In yoga, learn to do a full shoulder stand." The Goal Setter keeps us progressing, yet without our awareness, it can ignore your own body's capacity. As I got older, I needed to unhook from this part without guilt and allow myself to enjoy a slower walk or a shorter workout. Ultimately, my body has been happier.

The ***Disciplinarian*** sets a schedule to meet your goals (which, of course, may be escalating). It says, "You set out to work out three times a week, so three times a week it must be." No variations and no days off the routine are allowed. If you had planned to do the treadmill all week, and it's a gorgeous sunny day outside and your body would rather walk, the Disciplinarian may be inflexible and want to stay with the original plan.

The ***Drill Sergeant*** keeps you moving. "Hup, two, three, four! Ten more minutes on the bike. Sixteen more arm circles. Lift those knees. Come on!"

The **Competitor** slyly notices how many pounds the guy on the biceps machine is pressing and urges you to up the ante.

Selves That Spice It Up

Exercise is not all work and sweat when you allow these spicy selves to have their say. Making room for these selves adds surprise and variety to an otherwise tiringly predictable exercise plan.

In juxtaposition to a planned schedule, **Spontaneity** wants to exercise when the spirit moves. Out of the blue, Spontaneity may walk in the house and yell, “Let’s go dancing tonight.”

The **Adventurer** seeks exciting, challenging ways to exercise. The Adventurer might say, “Instead of going to the pool, let’s go swimming in the river today.” Or “Let’s ride the bike along that new trail.” The Adventurer may need special gear and advance planning as it adds new flavors to exercise.

Sensual **Aphrodite** adds luxurious energy that sparkles in any exercise session. In dance, Aphrodite, in a man or woman, loves the wafting arms of a ballet class, the sexy hip wiggles of a jazz class, or the intimacy of partnering in ballroom dancing. In the gym, invite your Aphrodite onto the treadmill and the body will be thrilled. Try it. By the way, Aphrodite may wear next to nothing at the gym or on the beach.

When your **Inner Child** becomes part of your exercise, a whole world opens up to you. You’ll be absolutely amazed at how the world feels different. Rather than an obligatory march around the block, walking the dog becomes a romp. A stroll in the neighborhood becomes a magical experience when you let the Child see through your eyes. You notice different things, like cute markings on flowers or the fascinating grating over a neighbor’s window. At the health club the Child may say, “I don’t want to do the stair stepper. That’s boring.” I used to swim across a small lake for exercise. But one day an Irish setter jumped in with me, and my Inner Child was delighted as the dog and I paddled together. When I got tired, I—or my Inner Child—hung on to him and he carried me for a while. It changed exercise into bliss.

Selves That Add Another Dimension

While your body exercises, other selves in you can be fed at different levels, including the practicality of just getting the errands done.

The **Spiritual** self wants a form of exercise that promotes meditative peace, such as yoga or t’ai chi. Or it may want to commune with nature in a canoe on a pristine pond.

The **Warrior** loves the fierce exchange of energy in the battle of karate, kung fu or fencing.

The inner **Artist** may choose a ballet class in which beauty and musicality weave together in a noble art form that also provides exercise.

Practical loves the exercise that comes from doing what needs to get done. It votes to ride your bike to the store or walk to the post office four miles away. When I lived in the woods of Nova Scotia, my Practical self enjoyed stacking and carrying logs and hauling water from the well—all in the fresh air. During travel, Practical carries luggage and opts for stairs rather than the escalator.

Selves That Are Social

Personal selves that enjoy the company of other people enliven an exercise routine.

The **Conversationalist** engages in repartee as it chats with companions while lifting weights at the gym. Walking or hiking together side by side gives this part a chance to talk.

Team Player loves the camaraderie of volleyball, soccer, or any team sport.

The **Knower** makes sure that others acknowledge his expertise. The Knower strolls around the gym offering advice, whether welcome or not. A truly knowledgeable Knower can be a boon to any athlete. A strutting, uninformed Knower who wants to appear insightful without substantial background becomes a prickly annoyance.

Notice Me thrives on recognition. Notice Me gets bored and lonely when someone else is not keeping it company or applauding its efforts. A personal trainer or attentive teacher gives this self comfort and confidence. The staff at my gym must be trained to acknowledge this self, for whenever someone walks in the door, the person behind the desk cheerily calls out, “Hi, how are you?” It makes me feel noticed, and it feels good.

Selves Who Stop The Doing Of Exercise

*These selves are just as valid and important as the selves that **do** exercise. They carry the opposite energy of the pro-exercise contingent, and may let you know when rest is more beneficial to your health than a workout. The more conscious you become of the entire family of selves that gives input on your exercise, the more choice you will have.*

Carefree balks at routine and discipline and obligation. Often the day is already too full of doings. The doing-dance-card is full. Many of us lead such full, responsible lives that our Carefree part needs somewhere to express itself, some way to hold the energy of,

“I’m not going to follow a schedule for one more minute.” If you find your Carefree self diverting your path away from exercise, try giving it another outlet. Don’t call someone you were supposed to, or don’t go to the store that day.

Being gives you respite from too much doing. It may say, “I don’t want to exercise today,” and, in fact, that may be healthier for your body than doing a workout! Every now and then, I will head out to the gym, but en route I hear the Being voice gently whisper, “I’d really rather just lounge on the sofa and nap.” Although dressed and ready, I will sometimes turn the car around, drive home and snooze—and feel better for it.

On the other hand, the **Pusher** may appear in a different guise. Rather than urging you to exercise, it may say, “You cannot possibly fit exercise into the schedule today, or tomorrow, or all week for that matter. There is too much *else* to do!”

A Wonderful Physical Day

Whew! And we thought exercising was simple! Here is an example of a day replete with selves that took me from the gym to the river.

It was a beautiful sunny Sunday. My partner and I were lazing around, not motivated to do much of anything. Then he showed me my horoscope and it said, “You’d better exercise if you want to keep your figure.” That immediately sparked my **Inner Critic**. My partner suggested we go biking at the Y. **Responsible** loved this idea, and in three minutes we were dressed and out the door. Heeding the **Disciplinarian** and the **Goal Setter**, we dutifully biked 25 minutes, and my **Movement Monitor** reminded us both to keep our heads high, our spines long, and our knees aligned. My **Notice Me** self liked having my partner there to see my efforts. His **Inner Child** really wanted to have fun too, so after biking we played basketball. (We couldn’t remember the rules of one-on-one, so we made up silly rules as we went along, which our inner kids loved.) I won the first game, so my **Competitor** and **Cheerleader** were thrilled. When we went outside it was so hot, yet so beautiful, that my **Spontaneous** and **Adventurer** selves suggested we go to the river for a swim. He agreed. The body was thrilled with all of this, and afterwards **Aphrodite** stretched out on the shore, pulled the bathing suit straps off the shoulders, and soaked up the sun. My **Spiritual** self enjoyed communing with nature. What a marvelous day our bodies and our selves had.

In a society that urges you to exercise and gives you many rules to follow, you can enjoy more variety and spice when you allow your diverse family of inner selves to contribute to the effort. Your health will benefit, and your body will rejoice.

What selves do, or don’t do, your exercise?

Thanks to Mary Disharoon for her warm and clear feedback on this article.

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