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SUPPORT IS HEALTHY

by Meagan Shand (BSc. Health Promotion)

I have an excess weight problem, due to a severe and chronic mental illness and medications I have been morbidly obese, 118kg for over 8 years. I realised that if 'I didn't do something about it, not only was I going to have to live with a serious mental illness, I could be heading for a future of serious physical health problems. I was also sick of being tired and not able to move around much. I knew that doing exercise would not only help me feel better physically it would help combat the symptoms of mental health, but I lacked motivation and didn't believe I could sustain exercising for long.



I recognised that not only was my mental health problem affecting my ability to get out in the community, my physical health was too. I didn't feel good about myself and how I looked and also worried that other people might think 'I was just a lazy slob – you get that often when people don't know about how mental illness can affect your life'. I wanted to be able to present myself better physically ... this makes you feel better.

I question anybody with serious weight issues who are not doing something about it, to ask themselves ... "Is this affecting how I feel about myself? It's not about becoming a super model, it's about being able to feel comfortable with yourself and say "I look quite good today"

I got serious about losing weight in 2006 when my sister announced she was getting married. I just wanted to look better for her wedding. My Mum pitched in to get me to a personal trainer. This was very expensive, but it helped a lot – I lost a total of 20kg. I learned so much about nutrition and exercise, but more importantly how helpful it is to have someone to monitor and motivate you. I learned that you can be healthy and look good despite your mental health. It was fantastic to have more energy, it showed me the value of endorphins ... you can get a real buzz from them.

Over the year after the wedding I put back on 13kg, but I never forgot what my trainer had taught me. I could no longer afford the personal trainer, it was just too expensive, but I knew there had to be some way of replicating what she had taught me without having to spend a lot of money. I started going to GROW and they taught me one of their wisdoms 'You alone can do it, but you can't do it alone'.

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GROW is a self help group that teaches you how to take control of your life, and overcome problems and barriers. They helped me to enlist the help of others until I was strong enough to become self-reliant.

With the help of my Mum and my support workers we decided that we needed to find a way for me to exercise regularly, that wasn't expensive, was supportive, wasn't too overwhelming to achieve, but most importantly was effective. We came up with Curves gym, it is :

1. For Women only and their gyms are usually easy to get to.
2. Uses a Scientific program: Circuit work with a number of stations that combine muscle strengthening and cardiovascular exercises – ideal combination of exercising to lose weight and become strong.
3. Is achievable and realistic: They recommend you do ½ an hour 3 times a week, which is achievable and better than doing nothing.

To start with I needed a lot of support to get there three times a week. Sometimes I hated it. But I kept going. Quickly my body and energy improved. In the beginning I was realistic about what I could achieve. I didn't feel any shame or sense of failure if I needed assistance to get there. The most successful people in the World have a network of people to support and help them. That principal applies for all of us, if we want to achieve, we need to ask for support when necessary to make it happen. The alternative is failure and that doesn't feel good.

Putting all of the pieces together WORKED. It was challenging at first, often I didn't want to go, but I persisted. After a few months I managed to get there by myself unless I was really unwell. Every Saturday Mum and I would go together, it's was an enjoyable time, we would go out for coffee after. As I got better, our friendship got better, I could give something back to her, we now have a relationship that's not all about me.

One year on, I look back – it is the first time in my life I have been able to sustain exercising regularly for a year. I no longer need the help of a support worker to get to the gym, and I continue to go regularly by myself. I've recognised that exercise does help with your mental health and that motivates me to keep going. The key thing is you have to find something that is sustainable, have support until you have the resilience, confidence and habit to go it alone. This is a healthy thing to do.