



Ugh, Sweat, and Tears

Exercise hater **Amy Maclin** goes in search of her missing endorphins.

I F I HEAR ONE MORE thing about the mood-lifting effects of exercise, I may just throw a free weight through a window. Working out never gives me that feel-good chemical thrum. Do some people just *not have* endorphins? I decided to stop moping, anxiously wondering why exercise doesn't make me less mopey and anxious, and consult the experts instead.

"Don't ever say *endorphins* in my presence," snorts Rodney Dishman, professor of exercise science at the University of Georgia. "You can't reduce the complex human brain to a handful of biochemicals. I feel better after exercising, but I've never felt *euphoria*. That's something you get with drugs or sex."

Okay...what about the studies that call a workout nature's antidepressant? Dishman says yes, animal studies have shown that the brain has similar responses to both exercise and drugs. Studies on humans are more complicated, though. Our sadness might be lifted by moving, sure. It might also be eased by being in sunlight. Or by connecting with other people. "And you can't rule out the placebo effect," Dishman says. "If I'd already tried three kinds of drugs, I'd be desperate to see an improvement."

Some people just have a negative visceral reaction to the idea of exercise, says **Panteleimon Ekkekakis**, an associate professor of exercise psychology at Iowa State University. In his research, Ekkekakis has found that almost everyone responds positively to moderate activity. But when subjects reach a certain point of exertion, some feel just fine while others exhibit what's called a deteriorating affect. (I call it spirit-crushing despair.) "Part of that could be inherent, like genetics," Ekkekakis says, "and part could be acquired through experiences." Like, for instance, the humiliations I endured as a fat kid struggling through the annual Presidential Physical Fitness Test.

Huffing and puffing will be less miserable if I keep my eyes on the prize, says Emily Balcetis, an associate professor of psychology at New York University who has studied motivation, perception, and exercise: "Swap the low-level thoughts like *I hate sweating* for high-level thoughts like *I'm improving my cardiovascular health*."

I recall the night my entire office went to a SoulCycle class. Once we started pedaling, my fat-kid angst fell away as I focused on the highest-level goal of all: not dying. At the end, I was exhilarated to still be breathing. I felt, literally, happy to be alive. *Is that* the exercise boost people are talking about? I admit I'd like to feel that way again.

Last week a coworker told me I should come to her rowing class (that's a thing now). My first impulse was to invent an excuse—something serious and long-term, like an impending kidney donation. But when I thought of that SoulCycle class, I actually said I might join her. A small victory that left me feeling almost, well, euphoric.

A GIRL CAN DREAM

A sleep-deprived, Lunesta-loving **Leigh Haber** looks for a few fresh ways to make it through the night.

“I NEEDED SLEEP, AND IF THAT MEANT PILLS, SO BE IT.”

EN ROUTE TO a resort in Costa Rica five years ago, the van I was traveling in got robbed. My passport, credit cards, cash, and fearless optimism—all taken. But the loss that shook me—the thing I grimly drove four hours on a twisty, two-lane highway to replace—was my Lunesta.

Disturbing as it was to face the extent of my little (or not so little?) problem, it didn't change anything. I needed sleep, and if that meant pills, so be it. But the memory never left me. Recently, a well-meaning friend told me about an app featuring "binaural beats," computer-generated sound files that play different tones in each ear, somehow coaxing your brain waves into moving more quickly into sleep. It sounded like something from *The Jetsons*. I explained the universe of difference between a "light sleeper" and a true insomniac, the years I lay wide awake before succumbing to the prescription pad. I was way beyond beats. But, against all reason, I agreed to try it—maybe I was just too fatigued to put up a fight. For six nights, I faced bedtime sans pill, earbuds in, serenaded by what sounded like a cross between howler monkeys and house music.

I barely slept that week. But, surprisingly, the world didn't come to an end, which led to a strange thought: *Could I find an alternative to pills?*

A doctor friend had told me that doses of vitamin D were helping some of his sleep-challenged patients. I bought several jars. Another insomniac had read that when you wake in the middle of the night, you can fall back to sleep by thinking your way into the dream you were having. Weird, but worth a try. Chamomile tea was once part of my nightly ritual. Couldn't hurt. And—don't judge—I found that humming Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" was a tranquilizer. I read up on cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia and was surprised to learn that *many* people wake a couple of times in the night—it's normal. Maybe I could try not panicking next time my eyes pop open at 3 A.M....Joni Mitchell.

It's been a few weeks. I'm tired, so tired, of viewing sleep as a battle. But I've looked at sleep from both sides now—the pharmacologically aided and the drug-free. And while a pill is easy, might I be missing something by fading right to black every night?

I still have that prescription bottle in my nightstand. But increasingly, it remains closed.

