

The Orange County Register

OPINION

The Orange Grove: Fitness at 50 is worth the fight

May 29, 2007 Updated Aug. 21, 2013 1:17 p.m.

By EILEEN SPATZ / A writer in San Clemente



I know, I know, please - not yet another article espousing the benefits of exercise and weight loss.

This, however, is not an article about losing pounds, inches, or dress sizes. This is a story about gaining the intangibles - confidence, a sense of purpose and, ultimately, joy.

Let's face it, while raising a family, the constant demands on a woman's time and energy cause many of us to put fitness on the

back burner. A gym membership was a luxury item that wasn't feasible at that stage of life when every cent was tagged for paying bills and buying groceries, and every ounce of strength and energy was spent just keeping up with the relentless schedule of raising children.

But as life would have it, after 19 years of marriage I suddenly found myself in the throes of a most unpleasant divorce, weak and stressed to the point that I knew instinctively that I needed to begin taking care of my physical health. Burdened with the intense emotions generated by this dreadful experience, I timidly entered the local ladies' gym with a slouched, sad demeanor that screamed "loser" to anyone who looked at me. Haggard and thin, I gladly signed the contract to bind me to spending \$600 for this opportunity to sweat and suffer for a year.

I showed up in those early weeks burdened with pent-up emotions that alternated between depression, fear and utter rage - depending on what divorce-related events were transpiring at the time. I wore baggy sweats and t-shirts and frumpy shoes that were several years old. I would gaze at the babes in the tight little Spandex numbers with awe and envy, thinking that I would never be caught dead in such unforgivingly form-fitting fabric.

Weeks became months, as I religiously appeared every other day to work some of the anxiety out of my pores. I soon noticed I could increase my weights and that I could crank up the resistance on the elliptical trainer. By summer I found myself shedding those baggy sweats for something a little trimmer, and I bought new cute shoes. The personal trainers that I admired were the ones with strong, muscular bodies. They looked healthy and happy and, although watching them work out was a humbling experience, it motivated me even more.

I noticed something about the regulars at the gym, those intrepid

souls who actually didn't bail on their memberships within two months, as so many well-intentioned folks do. No matter their ages, these hearty women had a unique look about them. They ran the gamut from young mothers, to middle-age boomers to elderly ladies who shuffled from one machine to the next. They all had in their eyes a sense of purpose and a confidence that is difficult to describe in words. You just know it when you see it.

By the end of the year I had ventured into other classes - hip-hop dance, step, and light weight toning, to add some variety to my workouts. As I tackled dance steps that are virtually impossible for a midlife white gal, I found myself grinning in the mirror. I was actually feeling joy again, even if I looked goofy trying to keep up with the gorgeous creature who was teaching the class. I not only felt great physically, as I had by this point acquired a modicum of muscle tone and flexibility, but I'd also discovered the thrill of endorphins, positively impacting my state of mind. At 50 years of age I felt great.

Yes, fitness is all those things we've always heard about. It is good for our overall health to stay in shape physically, no doubt about it. But fitness has other benefits that are not about the muscles you develop, but more about the sense of accomplishment you acquire when you wake up one day and realize you didn't give up hope on yourself. I made it through my own personal crisis helped along by caring friends, lots of prayer and hours of sweat at the gym.

This morning I put on my new firetruck-red tank top, spandex pants and trotted off to my usual workout. There was a new gal there today, wearing baggy sweats and a sad face. I wanted to go up to her, give her a hug and tell her not to quit, that in a year she will be smiling and shopping for Spandex, too.

