

THE HEALING POWER OF FITNESS

Life-long learning: how exercise can help to overcome the trauma of sexual abuse.

BY DORIS WARD

He targeted me. He groomed me. I was 13 when it started. I knew him well. I was vulnerable and he took advantage of that. As abusers do, he told me not to tell. One day, in a moment of inner strength, I said, "Stop! No more." Twenty years later, I faced my fear and I told, knowing I risked losing people I cared about.

I've been working hard to heal from trauma brought on by the sexual abuse I experienced when I was young. I've learned a lot of things in the process. Self-care is key. It's crucial to set boundaries with other people. And physical health and mental health are equally important.

After a lot of research, I am comfortable saying the abuse I experienced may have contributed to health issues I've been diagnosed with: generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fibromyalgia, chronic migraine and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD).

Studies show that people who have experienced trauma and live with PTSD are at a higher risk for developing chronic pain. I've discovered that exercise decreases my perception of pain, raises my energy and improves my mood. The key is listening to my body and working within my limits on any given day.

I've learned from experience I can exercise safely through my pain—even when my pain tells me otherwise. I modify my workouts accordingly by adjusting the intensity, sets, reps and method.

Listening to your body, responding and adjusting is an important skill. It lets you remain active and work towards your fitness goals even on the more difficult days.

Doing your best with what you have to work with is a guideline I often use to help motivate me to be smart about exercising while in pain. These guidelines and techniques allow me to stay on track and help me to push forward in my healing.



MIKE BERNARD PHOTOGRAPHY

I've learned that practicing self-care is an act of kindness towards your body. It promotes the self-love that is such an important factor in healing. Those of us who have suffered abuse can struggle with guilt and shame, which may lead to self-punishment among other harmful behaviours. To prevent this, we need to develop a healthy relationship with our bodies. Mindful movement, tuning into our bodies and participating in exercise that we enjoy can help.

In my late teens, I started to run. It was love at first step. Over time I discovered something powerful about how running makes me feel. We've all heard of the "runner's high," but this was something much bigger. I started to feel strong, empowered, as if I could overcome anything, including my past. I was transcending my trauma through the power of fitness.

Research supports the notion that traumatic experiences are stored in the body. They say that one way to heal is to work with the body through movement.



**'A GIFT OF TRAUMA
RECOVERY IS THE
REDISCOVERY OF
THE LIVING, SENSING,
KNOWING BODY.'**

—DR. PETER LEVINE

In the book *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk writes, “Only by getting in touch with your body, by connecting viscerally with yourself, can you regain a sense of who you are, your priorities and values. In order to overcome trauma, you need help to get in touch with your *body*, with your *Self*.” Fitness has helped me do that.

There are many types of physical activity that will facilitate healing. I started with running. Over the years, I integrated other methods of exercise that have been very effective for me.

RUNNING

Running helps me reduce stress, physical tension and anxiety. Studies show it also helps alleviate depression by producing brain chemicals such as mood-regulating serotonin and uplifting endorphins. Running has gifted me with mental clarity. During my long runs, I’ve been able to work through a number of my stressors.

It’s just me and the road joined in a moving meditation where my thoughts flow freely and easily. Moving my body

forward step by step, I feel in charge of myself and my choices helping me to be more confident and independent.

Running is my first choice for healing movement. It gives so much back. It lifts me up and helps me be grateful for what my body can do rather than focusing on what happened to it.

STRENGTH TRAINING

Strength training can make you feel powerful, strong and in control. Trauma can leave you feeling powerless and out of control, whereas strength training empowers and helps restore your sense of self.

Bringing back the feeling of strength from the inside out helps face fears and doubts about the past, which allows healing to occur. I have often “hit the weights” to release intense emotions like irritability, anger and even rage. Letting go of negative energy in this way assists in regulating my system and releasing stress, enabling me to clear space for more positive emotions to find their way in.

PILATES

Pilates is a mind-body method of exercise that teaches you to stay in the present moment, leaving no room for other thoughts to rush in. It’s a way to put your attention back on your body and to work on your relationship with your body rather than trying to think from outside of it.

People who have experienced sexual abuse often “disconnect” from their bodies, so any mind-body exercise can be useful in gently re-establishing that connection by helping them register bodily sensations and feelings.

Pilates has helped me improve my body awareness, increase my self-confidence and has taught me how to develop the skill of body control. Feeling in control of your body gives you a sense of control as a whole, reinforcing the mind-body connection.

YOGA

Yoga allows me to connect more deeply with my breath and listen more patiently to my body, versus other traditional workouts commonly performed



in a gym. Yoga teaches important emotional self-regulation, which is key to healing.

Being barefoot on the mat gives me a sense of control, the feeling of being grounded, enabling me to feel powerful and cultivate a more positive relationship with my body. Regaining control is key for those who have experienced sexual trauma because in the past our bodies were used against our will. Yoga teaches the ability to stay present while processing and registering bodily sensations. This, in turn, creates the mind-body connection that is integral to healing.

The body gives us feedback through bodily sensations. By acknowledging and responding, we can create our own mind-body connection. When we follow this chain of command of signals we can then become fully aware of what our body needs to heal. Yoga provides a method for us to slow down, breathe and turn inward so that we're able to listen to and follow through on these signals.

BALANCE WORK

Balancing demands a constant series of adjustments that require muscle awareness, centering, grounding and core strength—all which bring a new level of body consciousness.

My personal preferences for balance work are the stability ball and the

BOSU balance trainer. When I use these tools, I am focussed on balancing my body in a gentle way by contracting my core muscles and simultaneously being mindful of my posture, alignment and breathing. Staying aware of all these elements is extremely effective in keeping me engaged in the “here and now” and teaching my body to respond to stimuli.

Learning how the body moves and reacts to movement is very helpful for people dealing with PTSD. Experiencing the body's response to unexpected movement can help, as sometimes a sudden movement can “trigger” a flashback or difficult emotion. Working with balance helps improve body awareness. Knowing our response to triggers allows us to work on feeling safe in our environment, which is a large component to healing.

Not only has my fitness routine been an important factor in my healing, but it has also been my best stress management strategy. The time I dedicate to exercising gives me space to center my thoughts, re-focus, tune into bodily sensations and be in the moment. Focussing on mindful movement has propelled me along my healing path, allowing me to calm myself when I experience anxiety and flashbacks.

I have also experienced decreased pain, higher energy levels and

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improved mood—fitness has helped me honour my body. I continue to heal with the support of my husband and therapist. Medication, balanced nutrition, rest and sleep also contribute to my ongoing healing and overall quality of life.

One in three Canadian women will experience some form of sexual violence in her lifetime. In the era of the #MeToo movement, women are encouraged to speak up, speak louder, hold space for one another, begin and continue the process of healing. I've learned that working on my fitness and engaging in mindful movement are powerful tools on the path to healing from abuse—tools that help build strength from the inside out. [Z](#)

If you or someone you know has experienced sexual violence, please call the free, confidential Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime line at 1-877-232-2610 or visit their website at: crcvc.ca

Doris Ward has completed training in Yoga for Trauma, Mental Health First Aid and is a Level 2 YogaFit Instructor, STOTT Pilates Instructor, Certified Personal Trainer, BOSU Trainer, Schwinn Cycling Instructor and Group Fitness Instructor.

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