

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Steps Toward Sustainable Exercise

Weight-training instructor teaches the mind-body connection and how to find joy in being active

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 02.07.2011 4:40 p.m.



I joined the [Santa Barbara Family YMCA](#) on Hitchcock Way to mix it up, adding swimming to my preferred hiking and biking routine, but the pool was crowded. One morning, as I swam my enforced-leisurely circles in a shared lane, I gazed up to see women (and a few men) dancing energetically in a glassed-in second-floor exercise studio. They were getting aerobic exercise *and* enjoying themselves. That's how I ended up in Tracy Schmidt's Latin dance class and the follow-up weight-training called "Sculpt and Stretch."

Schmidt is the ideal baby-boomer grandmother: fit, fabulous and enthusiastic beyond measure. When I asked her for sustainable exercise tips, we met in her ocean-view living room on the Mesa and snacked on berry compote and chamomile tea. As we talked, her son's fishing boat returned from a two-day trip.

"What I like to convey," she says, "is that physical activity should not be independent of the whole person. Do what brings you joy. Do what blesses you."

Schmidt interprets whole-body health as a three-legged stool, where aerobic, strengthening and stretch exercises allow you to exert, balance and recover. Stretching and balance routines also help maintain a mind-body connection.

At the beginning of each class, Schmidt asks everyone to find a place where they can see her and themselves in the room-wide mirror. This helps me make a mind-body transition, merging the instructor's super-fit body onto own body image, so that by the time class is finished I'm convinced I'm [Jack LaLanne](#) reincarnated.

Schmidt's class manages to challenge fit exercisers the ages of her kids as well as those who haven't sweated since gym class in the 1960s. She finds pleasure in changing chronically out-of-shape newbies into regular exercisers.

“The first step can be very difficult,” she says. “It’s critical for me to be warm and welcoming in class. If someone’s feeling insecure or self-conscious, it colors her exercise experience. I remind them of the joy of movement. Laughter is good — it doesn’t matter if I miss a step or if they do. I love it when people are there every week, making improvements, with smiles on their faces.”

I forgot to mention that. We’re required to smile, even when the weight-training repetitions evoke something more of a grimace. Smiling sweetly, she demands that we work past our comfort zones to gain real improvement.

I ask her for her top tip for someone new to regular exercise. Her response was a little surprising for a gym instructor.

“We live where every day there’s an opportunity to do an activity in a beautiful place. Utilize the environment — don’t limit yourself to the gym,” she said. “Mix it up with swimming, dancing or yoga.”

It’s helpful to work exercise into our sedentary everyday lives. “Get up and stretch, then take a walk later,” Schmidt says. “Park a little further away and climb the stairs instead of elevator.”

She challenges new exercisers to step out of their comfort zone: “Make it a goal to explore one new park each week.”

For a flaky exerciser, Schmidt advocates exercising with a buddy. “Gyms are good for developing a sense of community and accountability. You can schedule with a friend: ‘Monday, Wednesday and Friday we’ll meet and exercise.’”

Does all this add up to a sustainable exercise? Schmidt believes so: “You have to find an activity that you enjoy. My life would be really different if I didn’t hike.”

February is not too late to get started on a healthier and happier 2011. With regular exercise, Schmidt says, “you can become more confident in life overall; you can like yourself more. Your body is a wonderful, miraculous ally.”

A Few Local Places to Exercise

» [Santa Barbara Family YMCA](#), 36 Hitchcock Way in Santa Barbara; 805.687.7727

» [Montecito Family YMCA](#), 591 Santa Rosa Lane in Montecito; 805.969.3288

» [24-Hour Fitness](#), 820 State St. in Santa Barbara; 805.899.4008

- » [Santa Barbara Athletic Club](#), 520 Castillo St. in Santa Barbara; 805.966.6147
- » [Spectrum Club](#), 3908 State St. in Santa Barbara, 805.563.8700; 21 W. Carrillo St. in Santa Barbara, 805.965.0999; 6144 Calle Real in Goleta, 805.964.0556
- » [Santa Barbara Agassi – Sport](#), 820 State St. in Santa Barbara; 805.899.4008
- » Every park, beach and sidewalk in town

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*