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Couch potato to fitness fanatic?

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WASHINGTON DC (myDNA News)

Did you find yourself gazing in awe earlier this week as Russian figure skater Yevgeny Plushenko twirled, swirled and swooped his way to lead the pack in this year's Olympic medal race in Torino?

Did it inspire you to hit the ice and start training - possibly even strive to become Plushenko's competitor at the Vancouver Games in 2010?

Well, you might want to think again.

"You can't go from couch potato to the Olympics," said Debbie Wilson, Ph. D., a sports psychologist and associate athletic director for academic service at George Mason University in Virginia. "There's an incredible difference between us as average human beings and these extraordinary performers."

She continued: "My brain and body won't work that way, so they won't inspire me to get up and work on the treadmill. There's just too

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major a difference."

But don't throw in the towel just yet. There are ways to turn our television habits into exercise.

Some viewers might indeed find inspiration in the Olympics, said Rachel Coolman, M.P.H., a registered dietitian, certified physical fitness specialist and project manager with the Cooper Institute in Dallas, Tex.

"By watching the Olympics, people might discover new ways to be active," she said. "Ice skating, downhill and cross-country skiing and even sledding - if you include the walk up the snowy hill - are fun activities" that are also good for your body.

Wilson wasn't as sure. She said that the reality TV show, "The Biggest Loser," in which contestants compete in losing the most weight, might be more inspiring.

"We see them engaging in activities that we might actually be able to do. I can watch them walk or bike, and I know I can do that just as I see them doing it. It's the same as if a neighbor or a friend calls me and say's 'let's go for a walk,' " Wilson said. "Now if she'd said, 'Let's go out and do a few double axels,' I'd laugh, tell her no and ask her to call me when she knew what hospital she was recuperating in."

The key to getting up off the sofa and into exercise mode, though, is not just finding an activity that's fun - but also something you're passionate about.

For Jenny R. Susser, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the Women's Sports Medicine Center at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City, that passion was once competitive swimming, but now it's horseback riding.

For Susser's younger sibling, it's paddle tennis. "My little sister's remained in relatively good shape, but she was never the athlete I was," Susser said. "She absolutely loves paddle tennis, though. So, now she goes to the gym for a cardiovascular workout and core strengthening because she knows it's going to help her game."

Go For The Goal

Once you've found an activity you're passionate about, you need to set goals.

"Saying I want to be thinner isn't enough," Susser said. "But saying I'd like to lose 10 pounds, increase my cardiovascular fitness and feel better about myself is."

Dan G. Tripps, Ph.D., director of the Center for the Study of Sports at Seattle University and a former coach of world-class swimmers and triathletes agreed.

"Remember, the Olympic athlete began training eight to 13 years ago and probably didn't begin with this tremendous success," he said. "To become an athlete in your own life, look at your dress size, get a sense of how you feel or move, then set a series of goals and take them across time."

Use rewards, too, he said. "Athletes get medals and news media coverage. For you, try self-affirmations that you can put on the refrigerator, get support from your spouse or have an array of photos showing changes in your body over time."

"Being an athlete isn't just talent, it's about making conscious choices of who you want to be and how healthy you want to be in life," he added.

Making the U.S. Olympic Team may not be a realistic goal, so set one that's more in reach.

"Sedentary people must be realistic with their expectations for becoming active," Coolman said. "They are not going to become highly fit overnight."

Once you've found your passion and set realistic goals, you need to unlock your motivation.

"It's important for people to not only be aware of, but also feel the benefits of physical activity," Coolman said. "This will help motivate them."

Susser viewed motivation more personally. "Being fit and strong and healthy is important to me," she said. "If I'm not, I feel horrible. Exercise is a great release. It's part of maintaining total balance in my life."

And if you don't share these same aspirations?

"Being motivated is a natural consequence of being connected to our healthy core, which is always trying to surface," said Robert Solomon,

M.D., a consulting psychiatrist at the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine in La Jolla, Calif.

And it's "our learned, habitual patterns of thinking" that is the only thing that keeps us from "experiencing this innate healthy core," he added. So, if you're not motivated now, Solomon said, it's only temporary, and eventually our desire to be healthy will connect with our core, and we'll be hitting the treadmill.

Whenever motivation strikes, rejoice - and then get yourself off the recliner.

"I'd like to ski, but if you put skis on me, I sure wouldn't look like those Olympians. My goal would be to go 2 miles per hour - not 80. I want goals that are reasonably challenging," Wilson said.

"I believe that if I have the perseverance and motivation, I can achieve this goal. And because I think I can achieve it, I'm motivated."

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