

# WORKING OUT SAVED MY LIFE

When their lives seemed to be falling apart, these women turned to exercise to pull them back from the brink.

by [GINNY GRAVES](#)

**ANDREA  
IMAFIDON**, 34  
Boston

NOT LONG AFTER SHE TURNED 30, ANDREA IMAFIDON STARTED having incredibly heavy periods that left her so light-headed and dizzy, she could barely leave the house. But her primary care doctor shrugged them off as normal. Three other doctors didn't have any answers either. "I started to get badly depressed," she says. "I was exhausted all the time, I basically gave up socializing, and I had to quit two jobs in a row. I felt like I wasn't capable of being a normal human being."

Finally, Andrea saw a new doctor, who diagnosed her with hypothyroidism—a thyroid condition that can cause fatigue—and suspected she might have fibroids. An ultrasound confirmed she had a uterine fibroid as big as a grapefruit, and blood tests showed she was dangerously anemic, too.

She started taking thyroid medication and iron supplements; feeling better, she intensified her weight training with a personal trainer. "Working out increased my energy even more and gave me a sense of accomplishment," she says. When her doctor recommended she get a hysterectomy to treat her fibroid, she felt confident enough to take a stand and instead found a surgeon who could treat it laparoscopically. "Exercise helped me become more fearless and make tough health choices that were right for me," she says.



"Exercise showed me I was far stronger than I was telling myself."

Photographed by  
Bryce Vickmark

"Yoga gave me the power to leave an abusive relationship."

ELEONORA ZAMPATTI, 36  
Highlands, New Jersey

WHEN ELEONORA ZAMPATTI TOOK HER first yoga class at a Bikram studio in New York City, it was far from love at first om. "I hated it," she recalls. "But by the end, I was so exhausted that my mind was empty and quiet and my worry was gone. And that was enough to make me keep going back."

Eleonora's boyfriend at the time was emotionally abusive. "He told me I was weak and mentally ill—and I believed him," she says. In time, his abuse would occasionally become physical. But as she practiced yoga more often, then went through yoga teacher training, she felt a change in herself. "Yoga felt like it was about loving myself and taking care of myself. It was eye-opening," she says. That mind-set changed her life off the mat, too: "Slowly I started to see my relationship more clearly and realize I didn't have to suffer anymore."

She left her boyfriend, began to teach yoga regularly—and started a class to benefit abused women. The class grew into her nonprofit, Ode to the Moon, which has the broader mission of raising money for domestic violence awareness. "We practice on the new moon, when it's invisible, because that's symbolic of my journey and that of so many abused women," she says. "We've all had to be empty and disappear in order to be strong and full of light."



AARON SANTORO



"Sports literally got me up on my feet again."

KIRSTIE ENNIS, 26  
Glenwood Springs, Colorado

AT AGE 21, KIRSTIE ENNIS WAS LIVING THE LIFE OF HER DREAMS, FLYING combat and rescue missions in Afghanistan as an aerial observer and gunner in the U.S. Marine Corps. But on June 23, 2012, her helicopter crashed in Helmand Province. Kirstie suffered a traumatic brain injury as well as severe damage to her face, spine, shoulders, and left leg. She endured dozens of surgeries and became suicidal. "When you're recovering from a traumatic injury, you don't just lose yourself physically but mentally and emotionally," she says.

A group called Disabled Sports USA taught her to snowboard, and training turned out to be her lifeline. "Snowboarding restored my confidence and gave me joy," she says. In 2015 doctors had to amputate Kirstie's left leg—first below the knee and then, after an infection set in, above the knee. But that didn't stop her: She threw herself into mountain climbing. In March of this year, she summited Kilimanjaro, then in July she topped Indonesia's technical and treacherous Carstensz Pyramid, becoming the first combat-wounded female amputee to achieve both peaks. Now she has her sights set on snowboarding in the 2018 Paralympics in South Korea.

"Being physical gave me a sense of purpose, made me believe in myself, and showed me how resilient my body is," she says. "It gave me the courage and strength I needed to move past my injury and into the future."

THE VETERANS PROJECT

SUSAN HEARD, 45

Easton, Pennsylvania

IN FEBRUARY 2011, SUSAN HEARD LOST HER 10-YEAR-OLD SON, DAVID, TO neuroblastoma, a type of childhood cancer that starts in the nerve cells. Her grief was all-consuming. "After he was gone, there were days when I was amazed I was still breathing," she says. But on New Year's Eve 2014, she had a realization: "I had a choice—to live and reengage with the world, or not."

She decided to start exercising, but it wasn't easy. "When David was sick, I used food as comfort, and as he got sicker, I got fatter," she says. "At first, I could only walk or do the elliptical slowly for 30 minutes." But she bought a Fitbit and started participating in challenges with other people on the app. By 2016, she was ready to run her first half marathon. At the start of the race, she wrote "David" on her arm. "At mile 12, I was exhausted, but I looked at my arm and it was a reminder: If David could push through the hellacious treatments and horror he went through, I could run 13.1 miles."

Susan still misses her son every day. "But I feel his presence most when I'm pushing myself physically," she says. "Here I am, running half marathons and even doing triathlons—a big lady who was never an athlete and who grieves every day for her son. If exercise can change my life, it can change anyone's."

"Pushing myself physically helped me heal after my son's death."



Photographed by Gabriel Rivera  
Shot at LA Fitness



"I abused drugs for 10 years, but fitness keeps me sober."

DANA SMITH, 33

Denver

MOST RECOVERING ADDICTS TALK about a "bottom"—a devastating low point that finally made them see they needed to change. "Mine haunts me and fills me with enormous remorse to this day," says Dana Smith.

It was July 2009. Dana was 25 and had been abusing drugs for a decade. One night, while driving under the influence of heroin and Xanax, she fell asleep behind the wheel, crossed the center line, and struck and killed a man going in the opposite direction on a motorcycle. "He had been married for 20 years and had a 15-year-old daughter," says Dana. "I took an innocent person's life."

In prison, Dana began meditating and working out. She even earned a personal training certificate while behind bars. The physical activity gave her life structure and discipline and brought her out of the murky mental state she'd been living in while she was addicted. "I also started to regain a sense of self-worth and self-control—things that had been missing from my life for years," she says.

When she was released in 2014, Dana worked as a trainer in Chicago—then, after completing her parole, she moved with her husband to Denver to volunteer at Phoenix Multisport, a fitness center for people recovering from a substance-use disorder. Now she's director of the facility's programs and partnerships. "I can't change what I did," she says. "But I can do my best to heal myself and help others."

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