

Learning to Rest

Category: Exercise

written by Holly Ann Russell | July 15, 2021

My story is about *not* exercising.

I had always defined myself by my activity. In my youth, I was a runner and a swimmer, then I was a college athlete, and later on a physician who taught medical students about health promotion counseling and who researched physical activity interventions. I was the person my colleagues, family, and friends turned to for advice on how to incorporate exercise into their busy lives.

In the early days of the pandemic, as a member of a two-physician family with school-aged children who were in virtual school, I felt as if exercise was the one thing in my life I could control, so I did online workout classes as though my life depended on it. I soon developed a nagging case of tennis elbow that left me unable to swim or do yoga, so I switched to running exclusively.

Then in November, my mom was admitted to the palliative care unit at my hospital after a slow and then fast decline from multiple sclerosis. The "Fitness" rings on my Apple Watch became life preservers that I had to close every night.

But even as I was doing it, I knew I shouldn't be running every day. Surprising no one, I developed an overuse injury in my hip. In desperation, I reached out to my sports medicine colleagues, who told me what I already knew—that I needed to rest.

It's hard to rewire a brain. I never felt great about not exercising, even though it was the right and necessary thing to do. But I did learn to be a little gentler to myself. I learned that pushing yourself to your physical limits isn't the only way to seek good health and that restorative yoga can have as much value as high-intensity interval training.

Holly Ann Russell
Rochester, New York