

DISCOVER YOUR FITNESS FORTITUDE AND UNLEASH
THE ATHLETE WITHIN **BY CAREY ROSSI**

Test Your Exercise IQ

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES the occasional gym-goer from the five-times-a-week gal? The pursuit of physical fitness is multifaceted, but whether or not you identify yourself as being “athletic” may be the secret behind your fitness future.

“In our study of about 400 adults, we found that those who reported being vigorously active had a stronger identity as being a physically active person,” says Kim Miller, PhD.

“OTHER RESEARCH has shown that behavior and identity reinforce each other,” says Miller, an assistant professor of health promotion at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. “This means that my behavior has to support or be consistent with my identity, otherwise either my behavior has to change or my identity has to change to be consistent. Therefore, with regard to adherence, the more I identify with physical activity as part of who I am, the more likely I am to adhere to activity.”

Cheryl Anderson, PhD, assistant professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, calls this *athletic identity*. The questionnaire she devised can help you see which aspects of your athletic identity are strong and which ones may need work, says Anderson. The questionnaire that follows is adapted from Anderson’s research that appeared in the *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* (2004). Use it to help you assess how you think about exercise and yourself.

**ANSWER TRUTHFULLY AND YOU MAY FIND
THE KEYS TO BEING A
FIVE-TIMES-A-WEEK GIRL**

Check the box that you agree with the most.	Definitely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Uncertain	Somewhat Disagree	Definitely Disagree
HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO ME?					
1) I don't let things get in the way of me working out.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2) I use several specific strategies to help me maintain a regular exercise routine.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3) I would be very irritated if something prevented me from participating in a planned workout.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
HOW WELL DO I DO THIS?					
4) I feel that I can become skilled at most physical activities with sufficient effort and practice.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5) I am confident of my athletic skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
DO I RECEIVE ENCOURAGEMENT FOR BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE?					
6) I have received encouragement from others for exercising.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7) My friends and family are enthusiastic about any efforts or progress I make concerning exercise.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8) My friends and family are very willing to accommodate my involvement in exercise.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
HOW DO I LOOK?					
9) I look like I work out.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10) I look physically fit.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

HOW IMPORTANT IS EXERCISE TO ME?

If something isn't important to you, you usually don't spend time doing it. Look at how you answered questions 1–3 to assess the value of physical activity to you. If you agreed with most of the statements, then you make exercise a priority in your life. If you didn't agree with some or all the statements, think about the role exercise plays in your life. "People organize their roles into a hierarchy," says Anderson. If exercise is important to you but doing it is the problem, devising a plan of action may be in order. Studies in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that those who have action plans were more likely to perform goal-driven behavior.

How you think about what you're doing may determine the importance of exercise. "For example, let's say a person who hasn't been very active decides she wants to become more active. If she attempts to increase her activity while thinking, 'What am I doing here? I've never been an active person so it's silly to try,' she'll be much less likely to continue, compared to another person who, while making the behavior change, thinks 'I am (or am becoming) a physically active person, and this is what physically active people do,'" says Miller.

In the second example, thinking in a positive way may increase the likelihood that a person will keep at it. "In a way, it's about visualizing the person you want to become. So, become aware of your thoughts and really try to shift negative messages to more positive ones that support your new identity. If you want to become more athletic, you can if you desire to do so. It's possible but not necessarily easy," she says.

HOW WELL DO I DO THIS?

Arizona State University (Tempe) researchers studied 445 male and female adolescents to determine what motivated them to stick with physical

activity. They found that the children's positive perception of their ability and mastery of the activity increased the likelihood of their continued participation. "No one likes to do something that they're terrible at — it's human nature," says Anderson. Depending on your answers to questions 4 and 5, choose activities that you enjoy doing or try increasing your skill in other activities, even learning new ones. Remember, it takes patience to achieve mastery. "Once you acquire competence, you'll have a higher level of self-confidence," she says.

However, sometimes you don't need to master an activity to enjoy it. "It could be that you're still bad at [the activity] but you have a wonderful time. Even though you're awful, you get

Visualize the person you want to become. Thinking positively about exercise increases your chances of sticking with it.

enjoyment out of it because it isn't a struggle." There's a place in the world and the gym for a full range of abilities. "Without a doubt there are athletes who are born gifted — for instance, Lance Armstrong. Find comfort in knowing that there will always be people who are better and worse than you."

DO I RECEIVE ENCOURAGEMENT FOR BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE?

We must have a network of people who support our endeavors. If you agreed with questions 6–8, congratulations — you've developed that support system. "We tend to surround ourselves with people who foster our self-concept," says Anderson. If you want to strengthen your athletic identity, make friends with other like-minded individuals. "When your identity is changing, the 'new' self needs a lot of support," adds Anderson. Sometimes the change is dramatic.

Don't be surprised if this transformation is difficult for the people who remember you the way you were. "The bottom line is we strive for consistency, so if other aspects of our lives are inconsistent with our identity, it would be more difficult to maintain that identity," says Miller.

HOW DO I LOOK?

We tend to put ourselves into situations that foster how we feel, says Anderson. If you agreed with questions 9 and 10, then the way you feel about your body's appearance helps drive you to the gym. Your muscular body helps you feel like being an athlete. If you disagreed with these questions, look in the mirror and flex your biceps. Even the smallest



muscle is a baby step in the direction of looking like a woman who's fit. "You can look more physically fit. Even if you're overweight, you can develop a firmer and stronger body as you improve your fitness," says Anderson.

A fit appearance is usually the end result of a good exercise plan. "If you work on the importance of exercise to you and [exercise] competence, then the improved appearance will come later. You have to have patience — bask in the small changes," says Anderson. "Once your body changes, you'll enjoy positive reinforcement." **17**

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