



Exercise-refusenik
Annabel with her five-
year-old daughter, Ava

CAN'T EXERCISE, WON'T EXERCISE

Annabel Brog is a self-confessed sloth – but she knows she should get fit. Is 'incidental' exercise the answer? She puts it to the test

Photograph **Jenny Lewis**

When it comes to fitness, the population is divided into four types.

A-TYPE: Loves being fit, loves exercise, does a lot of it.

B-TYPE: Enjoys feeling healthy, recognises the need to move around.

C-TYPE: Really not into it. Avoids it wherever possible.

ME: Stonefish*

*Stonefish (noun): malevolent, poisonous marine specimen, which lies on the bottom of the ocean pretending to be a rock.

Also, my nickname.

Of course the idea of fitness appeals - for the sake of my health, my family and my vanity - but I despise the means to make it happen. I loathe sport, I find exercise repellent, and as a full-time working mum

I resent anything that takes me away from my family, my bed and my friends.

This would be why, for 15 years, I have not done anything more strenuous than swing Ava, aged five, around in circles. Here is my daily schedule. 8.45am: drive Ava to school. One-minute walk to Tube. Three-minute walk to/from work. Tube. Drive home. Put Ava to bed, eat, roll into bed, read, sleep. Weekends are as above with an occasional excursion to the pool or zoo. My energy levels? Catatonic (hence: 'Stonefish').

You would think 'incidental' fitness, incorporating small exercises into life that don't take extra time or effort, would be perfect. However, like many women who know exercise is good for you, I still have an almost pathological aversion to it. Like »

FITNESS FOR ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS

Trainer *Tim Weeks* (timweeks.co.uk) specialises in non-exercisers. He says:

- Kid yourself you're not exercising. I started one client by making her cancel her Ocado orders and walk to the supermarket, a 20-minute journey. Walking is the ultimate beginner's exercise: shoes on, out the door.
- Like Annabel, find a partner – a friend, child or dog. Annabel could also try tennis or dance classes, a climbing wall or just going to a park and throwing a ball with her daughter.
- Examine why you don't want to exercise. School humiliation? Or thinking you're not coordinated? Often, non-exercisers have an overwhelming fear of failure. I tell my clients it may not always be easy, but once you start and feel the benefits and begin to love it, it'll get a lot easier.

a dieter who thinks about 'forbidden' food (and so eats more of it), when I think about exercise I become more sedentary.

Yet here I am, agreeing to investigate the effects of a month of incidental exercise. Poised on the brink of making my first inessential movements in nearly two decades, I feel twitchy, resentful. I can't even bring myself to inflate the exercise ball the *Red* team has had delivered to my home.

GETTING UNDERWAY

It takes a two-hour session with personal development coach and hypnotherapist Annie Ashdown, author of *The Confidence Factor* (Crimson, £12.99) to get me started. Ashdown relates my reluctance to childhood rebellion and says patients often 'block' themselves from achieving things they want. We crunch my needs down to: 'I want to be fit, I want to think light exercise is fun.'

Ashdown lies me down and says things like, 'You deserve to have energy, to feel good about yourself, to make healthy choices around exercise every day, if only for a few minutes.' She sends me home with instructions not to judge myself whether I exercise or not. I've always been sceptical about hypnotherapy, but the next day, for no apparent reason, I start my fitness plan.

THE AT-HOME PART

Trainer and nutritionist Zana Morris sets me a quick workout. Owner of The Library personal training centre in West London, Morris champions the concept of brief daily bursts over lengthy routines. 'Short, intensive exercise results in the release of hormones that cause the body to burn fat for up to 48 hours after you exercise,' she explains. While she recommends the bursts be fast and furious for maximum effect (ha, right!), she sets me a realistic routine (see right).

For a body as neglected as mine, it is Not Fun. If we're talking RPE (rate of perceived exertion), where 1 is 'drifting in clouds' and 10 is 'rolling on salt-coated nails', the first three days were RPE 9, while doing only five reps of each exercise. But by the fourth day, my RPE is nearer a 7 and I am adding reps. By the end of the month, I am driving myself as fast as I can at an RPE of 4 to 5.

In my second week, I also start sitting and bouncing on the balance ball to activate my core muscles. Initially I only manage two minutes, but by week four I bounce through a whole episode of *Game Of Thrones*.

THE SCHOOL/WORK COMMUTE

I don't have time to walk to work so I have agreed to modify my journey to incorporate

some extra effort. I've bought New Balance trainers and an adult Micro Scooter, to go with Ava's little one.

Scooting is great exercise. I know this because after just three minutes, my buttock cramps. Not the one topping the leg that is doing the pumping. No, it's the one carrying my weight. I try swapping legs, but this is where I learn that scooting is like writing – I can only do it on one side (my lack of balance is why we ruled out cycling to work). My right buttock is in seizure for 24 hours.

I try again, but no success, so I settle for racing around Ava's school square on sunny mornings. Ava loves it, and my neon-pink footwear earns me serious fashion cred with her classmates.

I also take the stairs instead of lifts. Initially, the three flights of stairs at work are RPE 10. By week four, I am tripping up them smoothly, if not easily (RPE 6).

WEEKEND WARRIOR

My final task is adding movement into my weekend fun with Ava. So where swimming had meant following her around the pool at a leisurely pace, incidental fitness means chasing her. Easy-going (RPE 3) but great fun.

We try out riding at Huntersfield Equestrian Centre in Oxfordshire. Who knew sitting on a horse for an hour could leave a grown woman waddling for two days? The second session (45 minutes, with some trotting) was more fun, and even more punishing on the muscles. RPE during exercise = 3. Pain afterwards = 8. But I'll always cherish the sight of Ava mastering a standing trot.

Finally, trampolining... I traded our usual weekend game (seeing who can

jump higher) for an ingenious game of 'Jump/Chase' – basically 'You're It' with bouncing and a set of variable rules. It killed me the first two days (I had to stop after five minutes, RPE 11), and every muscle (legs, bum, tummy, even shoulders) protested for two days. But by the final weekend I was doing 20 minutes at a stretch, both days, twice a day. RPE 5. Worth it.

DID IT WORK?

Back at The Library for a final assessment, it transpires that four weeks of exercise that takes almost zero time out of my day has resulted in me losing 0.3lb fat and gaining 0.6lb muscle. My body-fat percentage has dropped from 27.7% to 27.4% (the mid-twenties are ideal for a woman in her thirties). I feel healthier and I think I look better – more muscle in my upper body and my waist and hips are smaller, both by half an inch. I certainly think I am a better mother; Ava has loved our mutual aerobic excursions. Will I keep it up? I hope so. Will it spur me on to greater fitness? I would like to think so, but it will take another hit of hypno, as well as the beseeching 'pleeeeee' of the five-year-old keeper of my heart, to keep me committed. ■

6 THE -MINUTE HOME WORKOUT

Start by doing as many as you can and work up to the total

20 SQUATS

By week three, try holding small water bottles.

20 LUNGES

By week three, with small water bottles.

10 PUSH-UPS

Back and neck straight. (I never got off my knees.)

20 CRUNCHES

Knees together, hands behind neck, remember to keep your chin up.

20 LEG RAISES

Arms out flat on the floor, palms up, legs towards the ceiling, not swung overhead.

20 BICEP CURLS

Holding water bottles.

To do the six-minute workout with trainer and nutritionist Zana Morris, owner of The Library personal training centre in West London, go to redonline.co.uk/news