



# great expectations

If you've ever considered training for a big event like a 10k or a marathon but weren't sure it was worth all the effort, you'll be heartened by the results of a new study. According to researchers at a New York City fitness center, working toward a major fitness goal may do more to improve your physique and eating habits than simply exercising with those goals in mind. What's more, they say, completing your event — whatever it is — may give you a greater sense of control over other aspects of your life.

Each year, members of La Palestra Center for Preventative Medicine train to run in the New York City Marathon. In 1997, the center's psychology staff, led by clinical psychologist Ellen McGrath, Ph.D., examined the factors that caused some participants to finish the race and

others to drop out during training. The study has been accepted for future publication in *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, a journal of the American Psychological Association.

At various times before, during and after the training, researchers interviewed and gave questionnaires to the 40 people (11 men and 29 women) who agreed to participate in the study. The subjects were divided into three groups: 14 who completed the marathon, six who began training for the marathon but dropped out about halfway through the training, and 20 randomly chosen La Palestra members who served as a control group.

## Losing Weight Without Even Trying

Although the study didn't measure physical changes, those who ran the marathon reported losing weight, whereas the dropouts and nonrunners largely didn't. In fact, McGrath says, even though the marathoners enjoyed eating virtually anything they wanted while in training, they reported being up to the challenge of resuming

A new study shows the benefits of setting lofty fitness goals. By Ben Kallen

their usual eating habits afterward. They said they knew how to stop eating when they'd had enough — an issue the dropouts and nonrunners continued to struggle with. They also indicated being better able to control their eating in the face of social pressure or negative emotions. Even though it was the marathoners who lost weight, the regular exercisers who didn't train for the marathon were most likely to have said that weight loss and improved appearance were their main workout goals.

## A Psychological Boost

Compared with the dropouts, marathoners reported feeling more confident and powerful in all areas of their lives after the race. "It was a feeling of, 'If I can do this, I can do anything,'" McGrath says. "They seemed to get a much greater insight into their potential. They all reported feel-

# fitness frontline

ing stronger mentally and physically, and more able to master problems at work and in relationships."

## Training for the Right Reasons

If you decide to work toward running a marathon, climbing a mountain or achieving some other significant fitness goal, this study has a lot to say about what it'll take to complete your task. For one thing, it may help you meet your goal if you do it for the right reasons — and surprisingly, completing the event itself isn't necessarily one of them. Compared with the dropouts, those who completed the marathon were more likely to be motivated by pure enjoyment, the idea of performing their best or meeting a personal challenge. Many of the dropouts, on the other hand, were focused solely on completing the race. Perhaps they were not successful, McGrath speculates, because their goal was so far away and less in their control, whereas the marathoners' goals could be achieved on a daily basis and were more personal and under their control.

Another key difference: Marathoners were more likely to recognize that they'd have to rearrange their lives to make time for training. Many of the dropouts, on the other hand, grew frustrated with the time demands of their workouts. Marathoners also expressed greater confidence in their physical ability. This positive attitude and willingness to commit appeared to make all the difference, McGrath says. "The dropouts felt a lot of impatience and frustration, so [that may explain why] they didn't hang in there long enough."

## A Little Help From Your Friends

Camaraderie and social connections were extremely important in getting the marathoners to stick with the training program. "Everyone who stayed connected to one another succeeded," McGrath says. To build up team spirit, the participants ran with "fitness buddies," wore group T-shirts and met the night before the race. They reported that being part of a group with a shared goal was their main source of satisfaction from the training. Dropouts, on the other hand, tended to work out alone and skip the group training sessions. They didn't identify themselves as part of the group. "The lone-ranger approach to training is not preferable," McGrath says. "[This study shows that] you succeed at fitness by being as connected as possible with other people."

The marathoners also sought the advice of fitness trainers, whereas the dropouts wanted to be self-sufficient. "It's

very helpful to have an expert tell you about your body and what realistic goals are," McGrath says. "[The marathoners] set a goal a day, and that helped them work through their frustration without getting to the point where they wanted to quit."

## Keys to Success

Although this study looked only at the benefits of doing a marathon, McGrath believes the results may apply to



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"anything challenging that requires a long-term commitment and sustained training." Here are some tips to help you succeed, regardless of your fitness challenge.

- Go in with a positive attitude and firm commitment to your goals. "If you think [your attitude] doesn't affect your performance, you're underestimating the power of the mind," McGrath says.
- Realistically estimate the time and effort it will take to reach your goal. If possible, get help from a trainer, and set daily goals on the way to achieving your larger objective.
- Make your workouts social. "Find people in your neighborhood, school or work, and do a fitness activity together at least a couple of times a week," McGrath advises. "You'll increase your satisfaction enormously."
- Don't focus on weight goals. Even if you're working out to lose weight or look better, focus on internal goals such as improving your performance or enjoying the opportunity to spend time with friends.

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