



We're often told that staying active is necessary for good health.

But working out doesn't have to be a chore; in fact, finding an activity you love can make it something you look forward to. Here's how three people with diabetes found a form of exercise that became part of their identity—and how you can find what clicks for you.

BY CHRISTINE YU

Shay Erlich (left), PWD type 1, practices with dance partner Jenna Roy in a Toronto studio.

Moving with Joy



On November 2019, Paul Waterstraat, 69, crossed the finish line of his third half-marathon. A few years ago, he never would have dreamed of this goal. Back then, his last run had been a timed mile in high school gym class. He had been living with type 2 diabetes since the 1990s, and was man-

aging overweight, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure.

But when Waterstraat retired in 2016 and found himself with extra free time, he began walking to many places in his Davis, California, neighborhood that he used to drive to—the coffee shop, restaurants to meet friends for lunch, and the grocery store. After nine months, he noticed his blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol numbers began improving. He felt more alive and had a renewed interest in doing things like going out with friends and taking his dog, Molly, for longer walks. His mind felt sharper too.

Heartened by his progress, he downloaded a Couch-to-5K program that alternated one minute of jogging and two minutes of walking, then gradually ramped up. He began following a plan that built up to 30 minutes of nonstop running over eight weeks. After that, he joined a running group and gradually increased his distance until he was running 10K races and half-marathons.

How does one go from not running at all to running half-marathons in one's 60s? The secret, it turns out, is enjoyment. Walking and running gave Waterstraat a new way to experience and appreciate the world around him. "At a walking or running pace, you notice more subtlety and nuance: which plants are blooming and if the robins are flocking back for spring," he says. "It's like being a child again, wanting to stop and marvel at something every few feet. It's a beautiful world full of delight!" Waterstraat also began to look forward to the productive solitude that comes with

logging miles. "It feels like being in a subtle meditative state," he says.

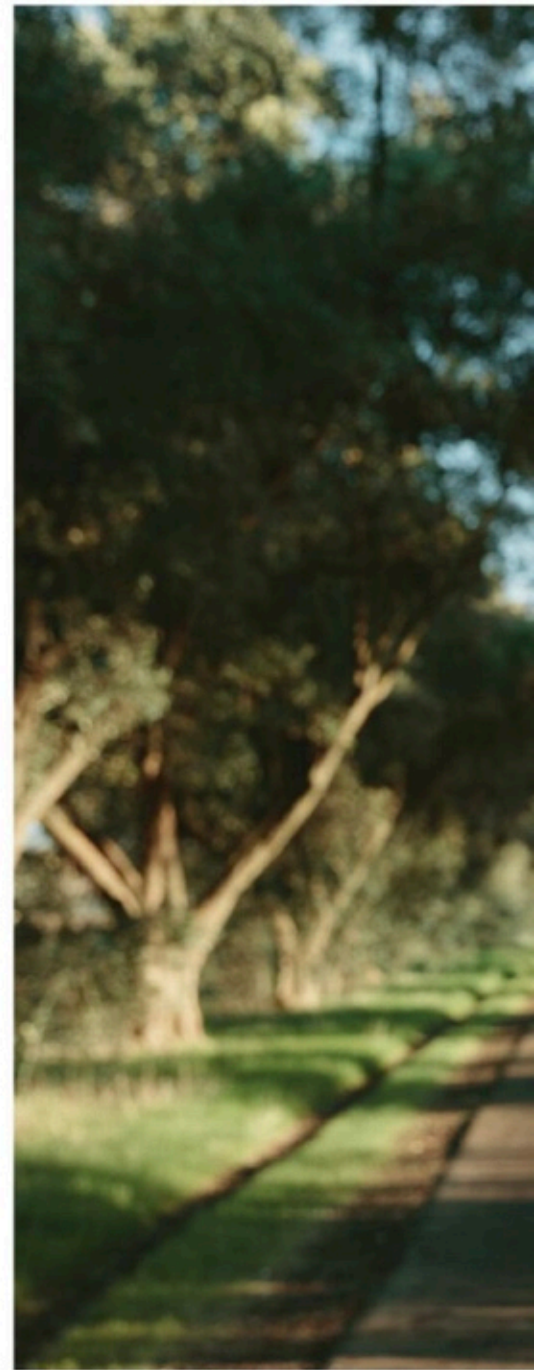
Waterstraat didn't set out to be a runner. "I had no intention of ever running an organized race. I just wanted to get my weight in control," he says. And the activity did help his health. "In the three years since I started walking and running, I've lost 80 pounds, my doctor has dropped about half of my medications, my medical test results are better than ever, and I feel great," he says. His blood sugar and A1C are both in range and he no longer takes medications to manage his diabetes.

But working up a sweat can bring benefits beyond your physical health. When you find a form of movement that clicks with you, being active can give you new perspective, a sense of freedom and joy that you look forward to. Find the right type of exercise, and it may no longer feel like a chore that helps you stay healthy. "Running has taken on a life of its own," says Waterstraat. "The medical benefits used to be the main focus. Now they are just the sideshow."

More Than an Endorphin Rush

Perhaps you've heard of or even experienced a "runner's high"—an exercise-induced mood boost that happens after a workout session or race. There's a physiological explanation for that post-workout euphoria: Exercise elevates levels of serotonin and norepinephrine, neurochemicals that transmit messages within the nervous system and regulate your mood, sense of well-being, and energy levels, says J. Kip Matthews, Ph.D., a performance and sports psychologist in Athens, Georgia. Plus, researchers have found that doing an aerobic activity you enjoy can activate the endocannabinoid system—the body's "feel-good" system—and improve mood and symptoms of anxiety more than a workout that feels "prescribed."

Yet, it's not just the immediate mood boost after exercise that can make movement a valuable part of your life.



There is a long-term benefit as well. "When you stumble upon an activity you click with, you start to immerse yourself in the culture of that activity," says Matthews. "It becomes part of your identity. You move from saying, 'I'm going for a run' to 'I'm a runner.'" When an activity becomes part of your identity, it influences your internal motivation. "You're no longer doing it because your doctor told you to. You're doing



Paul Waterstraat picked up jogging in his 60s, once he retired and had more time on his hands. He has found it gives him a new way to appreciate the world around him.

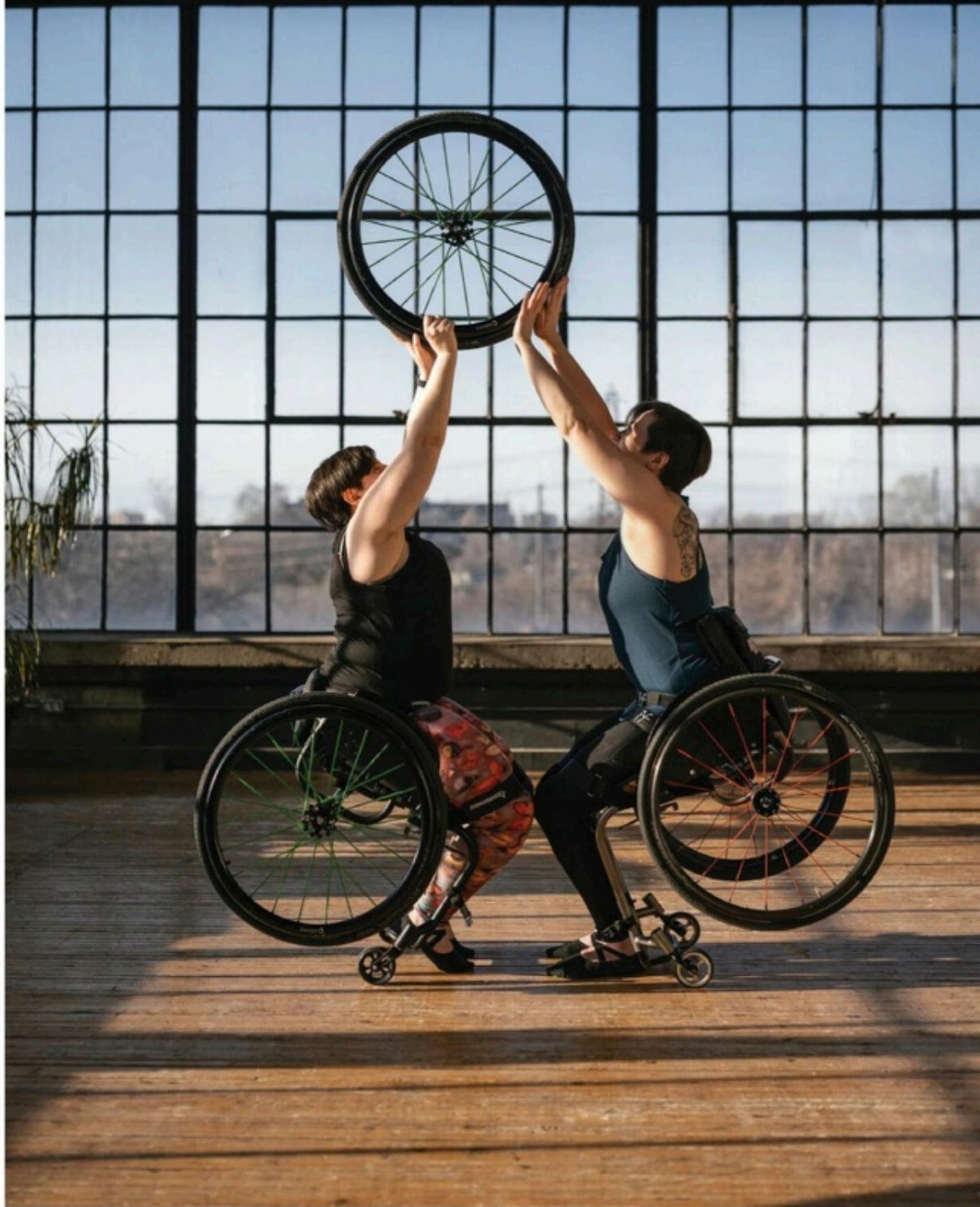
it because you see it as part of who you are," adds Matthews.

That's what happened to Waterstraat. When he first joined a running group at his local Fleet Feet store, he worried about being a "nonrunner" in the group. But his fears were quickly allayed. "When we started training, no one looked down on me because I couldn't run a full mile," he says. "It was a community that challenged me, cheered me,

and helped me build a fitness-oriented lifestyle."

He began to look forward to the company of his training crew, and he ran farther and farther each week. One day, as he was getting ready to leave the house, his wife asked how far he was running. "I answered, 'Only 8 miles.' She replied, 'Did you just hear yourself? Only 8 miles!' At that point I realized I am a runner," he says.

Dance focuses Erlich in the present moment and helps them appreciate the ways their body can move.



Finding a New Source of Confidence

While deeply connecting with a form of physical activity can be inspiring, finding the right activity “fit” can be challenging. “It’s natural to get stuck in certain identities and put (and keep) ourselves in boxes,” says Carrie Cheadle, a certified mental performance consultant and director of the Mental Skills Training Program for Diabetes Training Camp in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. To help people move beyond preconceived ideas of what they can and cannot do, Cheadle says it’s critical to have a safe space to try something new. Beginner classes or workshops, especially those geared toward people with diabetes, can be good way to dip your toe into an activity for the first time. Or enlist a friend or trainer to show you the ropes. “Often what we think of as lack of motivation is really a lack of confidence,” she says. And with greater confidence, Cheadle has seen significant changes in how people see and think of themselves and what they’re willing to try. She’s even seen some people who had never ridden a bike prior to participating in a Diabetes Training Camp not only try and enjoy cycling, but go on to complete Half Ironman and Ironman triathlons.

Take Shay Erlich, 32, for example. Because Erlich has faced a lifelong struggle with proprioception (knowing where and how your body is oriented in space), team sports were never appealing. “I’ve had a body that has wanted to be active my whole life, but participating in organized physical activities was a major challenge for me as a young person. I hated gym class and was awful at most organized sports,” they say (Erlich uses gender-neutral pronouns).

It wasn’t until the Toronto resident and PWD type 1 started participating in dance and aerial circus that something clicked. “I can feel present in my body when I move. I can feel muscles stretch and activate.” Erlich also notices that because these physical activities demand their absolute attention, they are forced to stay in the present moment. “It gives me freedom from everything else in my head and that keeps me motivated.”



“Getting into adapted sports that met my body’s needs was the key to having a life that was more active and full.”

—Shay Erlich

But it hasn’t been easy. Due to chronic illness, Erlich has used mobility devices, including a walker and motorized scooter, for almost 10 years and began using a manual wheelchair two years ago. “When I started [aerial circus], I was so disconnected from how to use my body. It took me three to four weeks to just figure out how to hang from an aerial hoop,” they say. Erlich used a training log to keep track of their goals—and the dates they accomplished them, which helped develop their confidence. “I can look back and say, ‘Oh right. It took me this many weeks of trying to figure it out,’” they say.

More recently, Erlich stepped even further outside of their comfort zone. Over the winter, Erlich started playing sledge hockey, an adapted form of ice hockey in which players sit on sleds. “It’s been a real switch moving from individual activities to a formalized team sport. I was nervous,” they say.

Erlich was surprised by how far out of the way their teammates have gone to make them feel included. And the time on the ice? “It’s so much fun,” they say. “For me, getting more into adapted sports that met my body’s needs was really the key to having a life that was more active and full.”

I Get to Do This

According to Cheadle, research shows that just knowing the health benefits of physical activity isn't enough for most people to get started (or to stick with!) an activity. Often, it's only when you're in the driver's seat and get to choose what's interesting to you that exercise switches from something you have to do to something you want to do.

When Toronto resident Carol Ching, 29, started college, the stress of school and work pushed exercise to the back burner. Then, in 2013 at the age of 22, she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. "Having to carry insulin with me and do fingerpricks, it became a full-time job," she says. At times, Ching thought about getting back into skiing, which she picked up in seventh grade, but she had a hard time gauging how exercise would affect her blood sugar levels and wondered how she would manage symptoms like thirst and fatigue. "Everything [with diabetes] was purely physical, which led me to believe I couldn't do much and that I wouldn't have the energy to work out," she says. "It was just too overwhelming to add anything else to the equation."

It took some experimentation (and eventually a CGM), but Ching began to figure out how to manage her blood sugar while being active. Then, she found that reengaging in physical activity was a turning point. In 2016, her partner at the time encouraged her to try rock climbing. Her first session on the wall was terrifying. "I was and still am super afraid of heights and I had zero muscle strength," she says. But now, Ching chooses to climb on a regular basis because it's more than just a physical activity. She explains that rock climbing is like a puzzle, a mental workout to figure out which holds to use on the wall, how to coordinate your feet, and how to manage your strength and endurance. In some ways, she says, as with managing diabetes, figuring out each challenge in climbing is rewarding. "It feels impossible to reach the top,



but you do it and you can move on to the next thing." Ching also returned to skiing in 2016. When she zooms down a mountain, carving side to side on her skis, she's chuckling inside. "I just like the freedom when I point my skis down a slope and push off. Even if it's for a couple of minutes, I feel free," she says.

These activities have given her a sense of endless possibilities. "I can climb at a gym or outdoors. I can ski in Toronto or in Japan. I'm not stuck. I don't feel tied up with life and what I'm dealing with," she says. "At the end of the day, because these activities are kind of extreme, it's allowed me to feel like my

diabetes is no longer a barrier."

After taking up rock climbing and going back to skiing, Ching also started cycling. Now, she bikes to work regularly. She has found that in addition to the bike commute giving her more energy to start the day, it has helped her maintain her blood sugars and reduce her insulin intake. "I was able to lower my A1C from double digits to single digits in the matter of a year and six months," she says. While she still finds motivation to be a challenge from time to time, she knows that she feels 10 times better when she's active. "It makes me feel good to be alive," she says.



The challenges of climbing have helped Carol Ching realize diabetes isn't a barrier to a rewarding life.

5 TIPS FOR FINDING AN ACTIVITY THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

Brainstorm

Remember middle school music class when you got to try different instruments before committing to one? Take the same approach with physical activity. "Tap into your creativity and sense of adventure," says Matthews. "There are so many fun sports and activities like pickleball, kite flying, racquetball, and disc golf." Cheadle recommends making a list of 15 activities that have piqued your curiosity. Then read the list aloud and identify two activities that you can feel in your belly.

Take a Small Step

Once you've identified potential activities, ask yourself—as Matthews asks clients—what are you willing to commit to *today*? Maybe it's going to watch a practice session of a sport you want to try, or making an appointment to tour a new gym. "Each little step moves you closer to your goal," he says. "Sometimes people surprise themselves and they do more than they expected." Another approach? Cheadle suggests rating your confidence on a scale of zero to 10. Then, think about what you could do to bump your confidence up one level. This can help you pinpoint a place to start, she says. For example, if you're interested in trying boxing but don't want to walk into class alone, enlist a workout buddy. Or, if you're anxious because you don't know what to expect in a class, call the gym or studio beforehand.

Start Slowly

Even if you are over-the-top excited about an activity, make sure to start with just a little bit at a time: Establishing a new habit doesn't happen overnight. "You need to be measured in your approach and give your body

time to acclimate," says Matthews. "The first few weeks, you're trying to figure out how to build the activity into your schedule. Once you iron out the wrinkles and stick with it for a month, you start to anticipate and look forward to it," says Matthews. That's when you know it's clicked.

Find Your Crew

Sometimes it's not the exercise itself, but the relationships and connections to others that make an activity meaningful and motivating. For example, it was the other people in Waterstraat's running group that helped make the time fly for him. Even if you prefer to exercise alone, find someone with whom you can share your success—perhaps it's a post-workout coffee with a friend that keeps you motivated.

Be Kind to Yourself

Life is full of ups and downs, and that goes for your exercise habits too. It's normal to fall away from your routine from time to time, says Cheadle. It may help to track your progress and look back on how far you have come. "Even on a bad day, it's important to remember what a bad day looks like now compared to a bad day a little while ago," says Erlich.