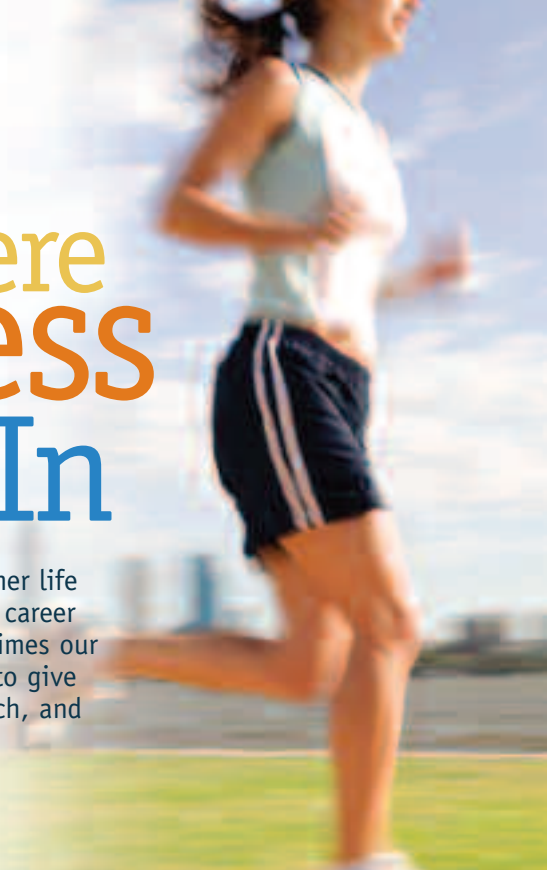




# Where Fitness Fits In

In the context of other life priorities — such as career and family — sometimes our workout plans have to give a little. But how much, and for how long?



By KARA DOUGLASS THOM

**L**ife has always felt best to me when I've had a lot going on. In my 20s, even though I had a full-time job, freelance projects, volunteer work, and obligations with friends and family, I gravitated toward endurance events like marathons and triathlons. I simply found joy in squeezing long workouts into the mix.

My priorities shifted as necessary: When I wanted to make time to write a book, I trained a little less. When I wanted to train for an Ironman triathlon, I adjusted the amount of time I spent with family and friends. But everything I enjoyed always seemed to fit (with varying degrees of snugness) into my life.

Then I became a mother of twins. Suddenly I was participating in an entirely different type of endurance event — one that left precious little room for anything else. I had two new and very demanding priorities that didn't take well to being shifted. And with my hands both literally and figuratively full, I didn't have much room for juggling.

Instead, I chose to push the pause button on serious training and competition — at least for a while. But in the meantime, I couldn't deny the important role that exercise played in my life, and I wasn't about to give it up altogether. To me, activity was the key to my good health and energy. It was also an important part of setting a good example for my children.

I knew finding the time wouldn't be easy, but I was sure that abandoning exercise and feeling mentally and physically dissatisfied would be harder by far. So I looked for, and eventually found, a happy medium.

Over the next two years, exercise and activity remained a priority for me, but a drastically changed priority. I learned to enjoy it in much smaller servings, on a far-less rigorous schedule, and without aggressive training goals. I learned to go about exercise differently, and to appreciate its benefits on more diverse and subtle levels.

I know I'm not the first person to have experienced this kind of shift in fitness urgency. In fact, most of us must regularly wrestle with competing goals and time demands — demands that challenge us to maintain our personal fitness commitments while also respecting our other life priorities.

Inevitably, those priorities change with time and circumstance. Very often, though, the implications of these shifts take us almost entirely by surprise. We don't realize that tough calls are necessary until we find ourselves stressed out, dissatisfied, or both — typically because we're trying to do too many things at once and not doing any of them as well as we might like.

## Choosing Change

So when facing a shift or drift of our life's tectonic plates, what's our best bet for finding solid fitness ground? The first step is becoming conscious that you may have →

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some difficult choices to make. It's easy to automatically keep doing things the way we've always done them, but if the eight-mile morning run or daily weight-training routine that used to make you happy is now eating away at your life satisfaction, then it might be time for a change.

This doesn't mean abandoning your fitness routine altogether. On the contrary, the more demanding your work and family life is, the more important it is that you find at least some time and energy for self-care and strengthening. That's because virtually all your other life priorities depend upon your energy, vitality and resiliency.

That said, if you're holding down a top executive position or committed to raising three kids, you may simply not be able to maintain the same aggressive training routine you pursued as an all-star college athlete. Or you may not be able to attain the same body-fat ratio as your pal the professional dancer. And that's nothing to be ashamed of.

## Finesse Your Fitness Priorities

Not sure where fitness fits into your life — or how you can make it fit? Start by asking yourself these questions:

- **What are my top three life values or priorities? How does my current fitness commitment support these concerns? How does it compete or detract?**
- **If I were to dial back my fitness commitment — or ramp it up — what would the likely results be?**
- **Are there any areas of my life in which I'm "overdelivering" at the expense of my personal health and fitness? What can I comfortably put on hold or leave undone?**

It is, however, something to be aware of. And that's why it makes sense to spend at least some time every day putting your values and priorities in order. Abby Seixas, a psychotherapist and licensed mental-health counselor in Weston, Mass., and author of *Finding the Deep River Within: A Woman's Guide to Recovering Balance and Meaning in Everyday Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), suggests making a daily "time-in" your very first act. "In essence," she explains, "a time-in is an intentional pause, a time when you can collect yourself and remember what really matters."

Your "time-in" could be drinking a cup of tea or just sitting still for a few moments. Even five minutes of this kind of daily downtime makes it more likely that what you do in a given day will be in line with your deepest values and intentions — your deepest sense of who you *are*, and not just what this particular day calls for you to *accomplish*.

For example, if your family is your main priority, but your body is yearning for movement, you might decide to get active *with* your kids. Then again, you might conclude that spending a little alone time on the jogging trail today would be the best thing for everyone. Same thing with work: If you're cranking on a career-making project, you might have to get comfortable with cutting your two-hour

workouts down to 45 minutes this week. But if you've skipped every last workout you had scheduled this month, you might also get clear that fitting in some kinds of fitness routines is essential to your continued health and sanity.

Whenever you feel pulled in more than one direction, take some time to clarify the values guiding each choice. Check in with what your heart and gut are saying about each option. Trust them. What you hear can help settle the score between "should" and authentic desire.

## In and Out of Sync

Balance is a beautiful thing. Sometimes, though, when faced with a huge opportunity or a personal crisis, you may decide to give those circumstances your full attention, knowing you'll return to nurturing your other priorities when the crisis or situation has passed.

For example, before the twins turned 2, I gave birth to a third child, which meant I had to press the "pause button" yet again. While I embraced being a mother, it was difficult — and scary — not to feed my identity as an athlete and writer. By consciously making the choice to scale back those priorities, however, I controlled my destiny. I was comfortable with my decision because I knew I made the best choice for that particular season in my life. I also knew that seasons come and go, that change would present itself when the time was right, and that I would eventually return to a life of greater balance.

After six months of "nothing but mother," I stepped up my fitness routine from walks and short trips to the gym to building base miles for a fall marathon. Three months later, I took a writing class. A few months after that, I started working again. Once I gained my footing and confidence as a stay-at-home mom, I found that I could successfully add balls to my juggling act.

For the time being, I feel like I've found a good balance of fitness and life priorities. Sure, someday I'd like to be more active at church, and I'd also like to get back to rock climbing. But I trust there will be plenty of time for those things, too, and that when the time is right, I'll know it.

Kara Douglass Thom finished third in her age group in the short course at the Life Time Fitness Triathlon last July and, in October, ran the Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon in 3:53:18. Dusting, vacuuming and making beds remain low on her list of priorities.



PHOTOS: CHRISTINA GAMBOLFO

Kara Douglass Thom runs the Twin Cities Marathon, October 2006.