

How a Lazy Couch Potato Became an Exercise Freak

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Pain is good.

I was lying face-first on black Astroturf that smelled like a mix of sweat and feet, and trying not to dry-heave when I came to a harsh

realization: I actually *like* this pain. I'm an exercise masochist.

If you told me ten months ago I would turn into this person, I would have laughed out loud while sipping my whiskey and eating some fried chicken from Pies 'n' Thighs. I've never been consistently athletic. The closest I got to being on a team was managing the high-school boys' volleyball team — mostly because the guys happened to be cute. I did a whole lot of nothing in college. I didn't hate working out exactly, but I would much rather be on a snowboard and feel the adrenaline rushing through my body as I weave through the trees. And that was only an option for a few months a year.

Then came [ClassPass](#), the [insane cultlike app](#) consuming my friends' minds, bodies, and souls as the only topic of conversation during brunch, dinner, and drinks. They wouldn't shut up about their favorite studios, teachers, and that sense of panic-meets-exhilaration they felt at 12 p.m. each day when they fought for coveted spots in certain classes. I really hated being left out so I gave in and forked over the \$125 plus tax per month fee.

The first class I took was boxing at [Overthrow](#) and I hovered in the back, not quite understanding all the jumping around. I was out of breath and glanced longingly at the stairs that led to freedom. Technically, it was dark enough that no one would even miss me if I sneaked out. But when they gave us boxing gloves (which smelled like feet) and instructed us to hit something, I felt like I was [punching every person](#) who had ever wronged me. It was enough to

get me through the class.

What followed was a wave of insanity, driven by thriftiness. I figured if I was paying so much money, I'd get every last cent out of it — meaning the more painful the workout, the more it was “worth” it. I started running and lifting weights at Barry's Bootcamp, rowing a boat to nowhere at [CityRow](#), and sweating my brains out at Modo Yoga. I even worked my way up to the scariest workout in New York — [Tone House](#). I had become one of the mindless ClassPass zombies.

These exercises are not fun. No one willingly does [burpee after burpee](#) out of pleasure. There's nothing enjoyable about crawling around on all fours and feeling your lunch come up your throat. But I'm not alone in my love of pain. Scientists have looked at why some people enjoy being tormented by exercise and have [described elite athletes as “benign masochists.”](#) For this subset, embracing the soreness and exertion that comes with a hard workout is a sign of progress versus an excuse to give up. They found [comfort in the uncomfortable](#) and used it to their advantage in life.

But it's not just elite athletes who derive pleasure from the pain. Even if you're the average gymgoer, intense exercise has been shown to [trick the brain into releasing brain](#) opioids and endocannabinoids, both of which have psychoactive effects. It also stimulates dopamine, which is a key ingredient in how you perceive pleasure. It's the chase toward that elusive runner's high.

In the 45 minutes to an hour, my brain finds release in the pain. It finally shuts off. All of the negative thoughts that creep into my head during the day are suddenly replaced by **the need to focus on the task at hand**. I stop overanalyzing every last work-related stress and I think instead about how badly my bicep is quaking. I fantasize about the moment I can stop to catch my breath. And when I do, the subsequent flood of chemicals in my head tricks me into believing I can accomplish anything because sprinting up an incline for a minute straight was really damn hard but I pushed through.

There are definitely moments I want to give up and lie down. It would be so easy to quit but I won't because I'm really, *really* competitive. And these workouts only fueled that fire. There were quantifiable measures — **Peloton** and Flywheel had leader boards while other places I could simply track my progress in terms of how high I jumped or how fast I ran compared to my neighbor.

I'm never the fastest or strongest person in a room but even if I best one person because I decided to push a tiny bit harder that day, I'm thinking, *Hell yes, suck it*. And then when it's all thankfully over, I can **smugly enjoy a drink**.