

YOGATM MAGAZINE

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ISSUE 217/ MAY 2021

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HAS EXERCISE BECOME A PRIVILEGE?

Words: Laura Putnam

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In an era of self-help books, yoga pants and high-tech fitness gadgets, getting healthy has never been easier, right? Wrong. Over the past decade there has been no shortage of money spent on fitness. In 2018, the fitness industry generated \$92 billion worldwide, and it's projected to reach \$106 billion by 2020, according to a State of the Industry report. The yoga industry alone is worth over \$88 billion worldwide and is expected to expand to \$215 billion by 2025 – and that's just counting studios. If you factor in retreats, clothing, mats and accessories – the industry is worth over \$130 billion, according to a Market Research report.

You might think that all of these efforts would have translated into healthier lifestyles, but even with 37 million yoga practitioners in the US (and growing), along with millions of dollars going toward fighting obesity, the average American has packed on 15 pounds, according to The National Center for Health Statistics. If that's not telling enough, self-help and fitness books have single-handedly increased non-fiction sales by 9 per cent, but this uptick in sales along with catchy slogans like “sitting is the new smoking” have done little to get Americans off the couch with the average American sitting 10 hours a day.

While health officials and experts have spent years trying to understand this perplexing situation, is it possible that our efforts to promote an active lifestyle are not only falling short, but are actually making things worse?

Arguably, this growing industry has paradoxically made exercise more difficult for millions of Americans by putting profits ahead of people. Fitness clubs like Curves which sought to make fitness more approachable for women of all shapes and sizes, have been supplanted by intimidating and overpriced facilities like Soul Cycle. And, regrettably, yoga which aspires to be all-inclusive is in fact still dominated by white women. And if you want to exercise at home Peleton is today's “must have.” But, who can

afford a Peleton with a starting price of \$2,245, plus an additional \$39 monthly membership fee? Perhaps more importantly, who can live up to Peleton's aspirational images of airbrushed people with multimillion-dollar views? Or how many of us can afford to exercise if what's required is a \$400 outfit and \$200 shoes? Nearly half of Americans don't even have an extra \$400 on hand to cover the cost of an emergency—and that was before the economic impact of the coronavirus.



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Like many social issues, the inaccessibility of exercise and movement begins at a young age. This is most apparent in underserved schools, where there is not only an achievement gap, but a movement gap. In many underserved schools, physical education and sports are often limited, and in many cases, non-existent. Yoga in schools is typically supplied by outside vendors, like School Yoga Project, which require additional funding which these underserved schools can ill afford. Furthermore, social factors like expectations to care for younger siblings lead many kids in these schools to miss out on the few physical activity opportunities that are available outside of school.

Playing sports at a high level like soccer, historically known as “the people’s sport,” now requires the backing of wealthy parents who are

willing to cart their children long distances. Up until about 25 years ago, extracurricular activities such as band, debate club and sports teams, were free. Now, families have to pay for these types of extracurricular activities, at an average cost of \$900 per year. Beyond the physical benefits of sports, these types of activities arm kids with invaluable soft skills, such as teamwork, accountability and grit, which in turn raise their projected lifetime income helping them break the cycle of poverty and create healthy habits.

So, what’s needed to help all of us, including our children, to get more active? Taking collective action and investing in our public infrastructure is what needs to happen. The playing field, both literally and figuratively, needs to be levelled – so that exercise is not just a privilege, but a right for all.



Laura Putnam is a health and wellness expert, public speaker and published author who lives in San Francisco. She has spent the past decade using her energy and insights to inspire organizations and businesses to think differently about their employees’ health and well being.

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