

Mental health is the biggest trend in fitness. Two celebrity trainers point the way toward more mindful workouts—and a happier you.

Amid the exercise equipment in fitness trainer Erin Oprea's home gym, you'll find something unexpected: plants. Oodles of them. The Nashville-based trainer-to-the-stars (she's coached some of country music's biggest names including Carrie Underwood, Kelsea Ballerini, and Maren Morris) has stashed more than 40 plants in the converted-garage space, which doubles as the studio for her app-based strength-training program Pretty Muscles.

Oprea began stepping up her greenery game a couple of years ago when the COVID-19 pandemic first rocked the globe, a time when people's fitness routines were disrupted by gym closures and stress levels skyrocketed. The plants are apt mascots for the new age of fitness that has taken root in the wake of the pandemic's upheaval. "I think plants are symbols of happiness," says Oprea—something we're craving not just from our leafy companions, but also from our exercise routines.

Prior to the pandemic, physical-health outcomes including weight loss, strength building, and appearance goals topped the list of motivators for exercising. Today, we're more motivated by mental-health outcomes including stress reduction and anxiety relief.

"Mental health has taken over the world of fitness," says Oprea. "The realization of what fitness can do for you ... has just gotten a lot broader. It's not all about looks anymore."

Get lifted

The benefits of exercise for mental health are well-documented. Regular, moderate workouts can elevate mood, decrease stress, and ease anxiety and depression.

That improved mental state can have a ripple effect on your overall quality of life. "When you mentally feel better, everything is better," says Oprea. "Your work is

better, you sleep better, you eat better ... fitness just makes you feel better all around."

While workouts can boost your outlook, the converse is true as well: Your outlook can boost your workouts. "Positive self-talk ... can be the key to breakthroughs in physical activity," says Jessica Schatz, a Los Angeles-based Pilates instructor and integrative wellness coach whose notable clients have included fashion mogul Ashley Olsen, NBA player Wesley Matthews, and former Alvin Ailey dancer Olivia Bowman-Jackson.

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Research has shown that in a range of sports, positive self-messaging can improve endurance and performance. When the going gets tough during a workout and you feel like quitting, Schatz recommends countering any mental negativity with mantras like "You've got this," "I am strong," and "I am capable."

She draws the infinity symbol with her fingers when explaining the relationship between our physical and mental fortitude because "you can't see where one starts and where one ends," she says. And that may be part of why, in this new age of fitness, we're seeking not just to work out, but also to work "in." >

WORDS | Rachel B. Levin

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Mindful muscles

Mindfulness—the practice of being aware of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and/or environment on a moment-by-moment basis—has become a wellness buzzword. And for good reason: It's been shown to improve conditions ranging from depression to hypertension. Applied to fitness, mindfulness involves tuning into your body's ever-changing needs and tailoring your workouts accordingly. "Every session can't be balls to the wall," says Oprea.

People often assume that the former Marine—who served two tours of duty in Iraq—trains like a drill sergeant. Instead, Oprea emphasizes balance. Sometimes that means a hard HIIT workout, while other times it means going for a walk and talking. "I base my workouts on my clients' needs [on a] day-to-day basis," she says. "I think that you've got to listen to what your body's telling you."

Schatz concurs: "Our body is sending us messages all the time ... Never sacrifice the intuition of the body for

STOP SCROLLING

Fitness apps are fantastic for everything from delivering workouts to tracking your fitness milestones. But if your eyes are glued to a screen too often, you may be missing out on some of the mental health benefits that can accompany exercise. Here are some mood-boosting ways to shift your attention.

- **Focus on nature:** When exercising outside, attend to the wonders of nature around you. Studies show that relating to nature while working out lowers anxiety.
- **Engage with a group:** Those who join group fitness activities report lower anxiety and higher mental and emotional quality of life than those who only exercise alone.
- **Notice your breath:** "Your breath is your recovery tool," says Schatz, who teaches her students how to slow their exhales to recover their breath and lower their heart rates. "You can take this same tool off the mat in the face of life's many challenges."

the glory of the ego." Her Core Expert classes—which blend elements of Pilates, yoga, biomechanics, and functional fitness and can be streamed via her website and YouTube channel—aim to help participants strengthen not only their core muscles, but also their mental and spiritual resiliency.

The more we can get in touch with our body's messages, Schatz says, "the more we can understand what it is in life that makes us feel better"—both on and off the exercise mat.

Attitude of gratitude

In pre-pandemic times, we may have gotten bent out of shape when our favorite fitness class was booked. But after adjusting to pandemic disruptions to our exercise routines, we've learned that there's more than one way to stay fit and that the gym isn't the only place to get our fix.

That shift in mindset from scarcity to abundance can benefit us even as the pandemic wanes. Seeing

opportunity instead of a lack of it motivates us to seek satisfying ways to exercise no matter what obstacles we encounter, from injury to aging.

Physical fitness promotes longevity and protects against depression in our later years. Yet Oprea points out that many people develop a negative attitude toward exercise as they grow older, along the lines of “I can’t do that. I’m too old.”

To flip that script, Oprea encourages people to stay open and flexible to novel activities and up the happiness factor. “You’ve got to find what truly brings you joy,” says the 45-year-old, who loves to twerk and will do so whenever the opportunity arises. “How can you dance and not smile?”

That joyful perspective sums up the essence of this new age of fitness: embracing gratitude for everything our bodies can do and celebrating all the ways movement can uplift us. Like Oprea’s plants, we thrive when we reach toward the light.

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JESSICA
SHATZ

PHOTO | JESSICA SHATZ

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Trend alert

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FUEL UP

Here are some favorite supplements for supporting our bodies during workouts.

- **Collagen** improves joint functionality, helps build lean muscle, and promotes muscle recovery.
- **Beetroot** contains nitric oxide, which increases blood flow and boosts oxygen to fuel muscles.
- **Magnesium** is vital to the process of energy metabolism and assists in normal muscle function.
- **CBD** may significantly improve sleep quality. Poor sleep affects everything from your cardiovascular endurance to your muscle strength. ▲

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