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Theme - GoodGym - Fit Bodies Make Healthy Communities

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THEME

GoodGym —

Fit Bodies Make Healthy Communities

For most people getting fit, or sustaining a reasonable level of activity, is a chore. Forget high-tech solutions to this very modern problem, the key to staying fit, motivated and happy may be as close as your pair of jogging shoes.

Text by Steve Jarvis Photographs by GoodGym

GoodGym

Gym memberships are as notorious for being sold beyond a facility's capacity, as New Year resolutions are for being sidelined. While the human psychology behind resistance to exercise is complex, one organisation in the United Kingdom has come up with a simple approach that seems to increase the desire to commit to regular exercise. To make things even better, it is an idea based on helping people in need and building community. The core concept behind GoodGym is connecting people that want to get fit, with things that need to be done in the local area—and there is no shortage of good things that can be done.

Big city life, while convenient and rich in possibilities, can also be very isolating. The elderly and immobile are often the most severely affected, and not only do they feel ostracised from community, and even basic human interaction, frequently they struggle just to do simple tasks. Starting in 2009, in East London, GoodGym seeks to break down these walls of isolation by connecting aspiring runners with

those in need of an energetic and able-bodied person. What started as a small group of runners helping out local elderly with chores, has grown to a UK-wide social movement with more than 50 groups and over 1000 people a week actively involved in making their communities better.

The programme of GoodGym could not be simpler, a volunteer runner is assigned a mission to do something positive, they run to the location, do the task, and then run back. There are three basic patterns to GoodGym activities. A "Mission Run," where a runner is assigned a specific one-off practical task, such as changing a light bulb for an elderly person. A "Coach Run," where a runner has an ongoing relationship with an elderly or immobile person, they run to see them regularly and spend time talking or doing simple tasks. Knowing this person, and the importance of the visit, serves as motivation to run and simulates the role of "coach" for the runner. Finally, there are "Group Runs," where a group of runners converge on a larger project to



contribute muscle to do things such as maintain parks, help at food banks, or any other community-focused activity that can benefit from having a lot of hands at work.

Accumulating good deeds for those in need is not the final tally of worth for GoodGym, as the runners get as much out of the experience as any of the direct beneficiaries. Whether it is an elderly person, or school function, or any other of the array of possible missions, knowing that somebody is relying on you to carry through on your exercise regime becomes a strong motivation to run. This level of personal investment builds a form of commitment to improving yourself and your community, creating a positive feedback loop that standard gyms will never be able to replicate. It is a different type of runner's high, one so addictive many of the runners go on to seek other ways to be involved in their communities.

GoodGym doesn't just point to a better way to exercise, it also highlights that we are missing something fundamental in our lives and in our communities. A simple act such as volunteering has the ability to generate a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose, within both runners and those residing on the

margins of society. It is a powerful lesson, indicating the drive to do good is a strong human trait; one that, potentially, can be used as a positive force to change society. At the very least, it goes to show that the simple act of helping someone is far more motivating to would-be couch potatoes than any personal aesthetic goal could ever be.



Name: GoodGym
 Location: United Kingdom
 Contact: www.goodgym.org