



*The healing
power of*

EXERCISE

Meet three women who turned to fitness to help them
recover from injury, illness and mental setback

'I finally started to like what I saw in the mirror and felt a shift in my mental state'

Cycling helped put Sinéad's life back on track



mentally and emotionally. As a result, I ended up in a psychiatric hospital. I had reached rock bottom; but it was there I realised, it was up to me to take responsibility for my life, make positive changes and start afresh.

While it took time, I changed my job and lifestyle. To meet new people and get healthy, I bought a road bike and joined a cycling club. I had always loved cycling as a child – it gave me my first taste of independence. When I sat on my brand-new bike, all those feelings of freedom and joy came flooding back. I felt like a kid again, alive and enthusiastic for the future. Cycling with my club became the highlight of my week. I had finally found my tribe.

I was happiest when whizzing around, feeling the wind on my face, surrounded by nature and the elements, and I especially enjoyed our long coffee stops and chats about anything and everything. Slowly but surely my fitness and stamina improved. I was amazed at how well my body recovered from the damage I had inflicted on it over the years. I soon began to look toned and was glowing. After years of self-deprecation, I finally started to like what I saw in the mirror and felt a hugely positive shift in my mental state. My self-worth and life were changing for the better. Cycling was the best form of therapy for me.

I couldn't believe it when I achieved my first 100 kilometres (60 miles). After that, I went on to complete tougher cycling events and enjoyed numerous weekends away in Ireland and Europe

with my club. It was wonderful that my travel addiction and love of cycling challenges were compatible. My bike and I have ridden the length of Spain, cycled parts of the Tour de France, completed the longest climb in the world in Colombia, as well as riding parts of the Giro D'Italia and Vuelta a España. However, my favourite bike ride was in Cuba. On Christmas Day, 2019, I cycled around the Bay of Pigs in my shorts and T-shirt on a jalopy of a bike! My "coffee stop" was a lagoon where I snorkelled in the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean.

I love the feeling cycling gives me so much that I made it my job. I set up and run trips in Spain, not for elite cyclists, but for those who are passionate about cycling, want to get fitter and have fun in the sun while meeting new people.

As I'm getting older, I believe having a hobby that's attached to wellness is essential, especially if you're struggling with perimenopause and menopause symptoms. Not only does outdoor exercise clear your head and generate happy hormones, but it may also help to combat weight gain.

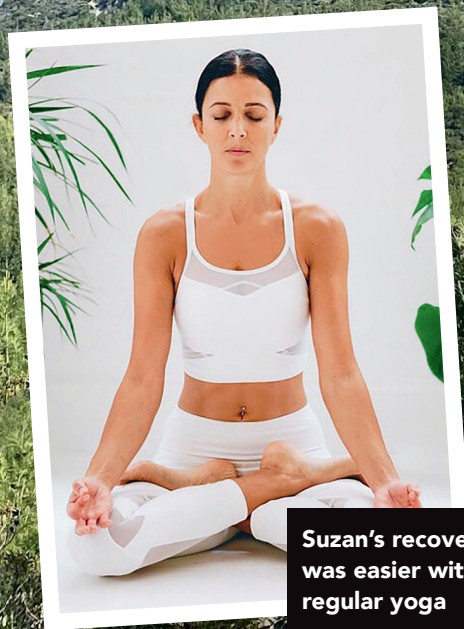
I love my life because I chose to change it and found what makes me happy. And my passion is now encouraging others to also find their happy place through personal development and physical activities.'

+ Life is a Cycle by Sinéad Kennedy (£14.50, [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)). To join Sinéad on a cycling break, visit sineadekennedy.com >>

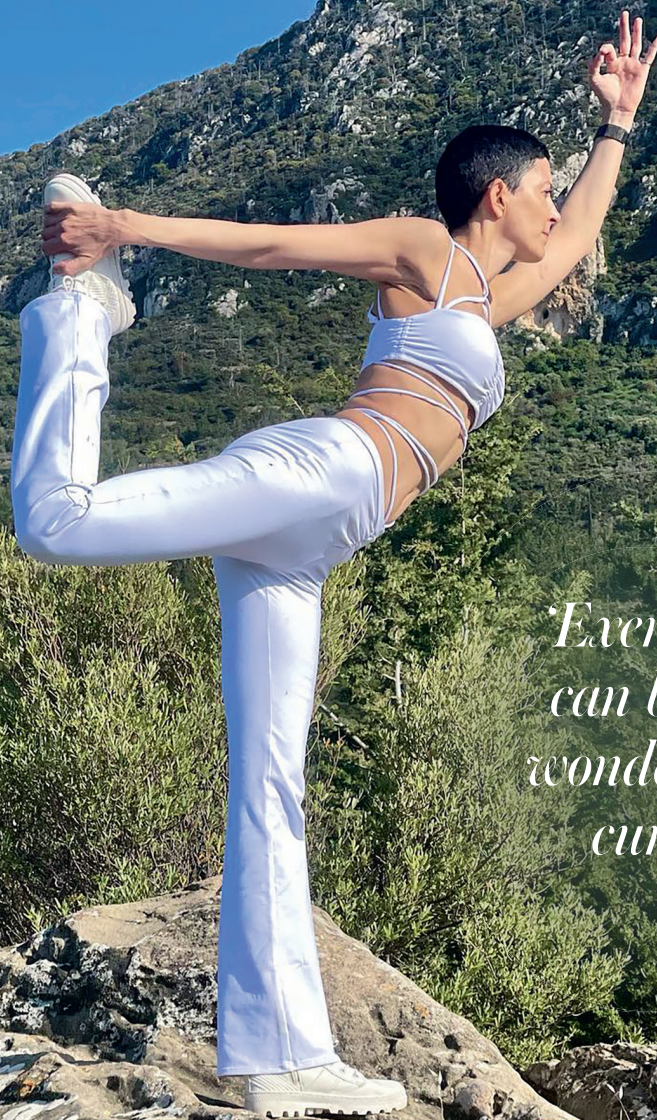
'MY BIKE HELPED ME RECOVER FROM BURNOUT'

Sinéad Kennedy, 50, from Dublin, cycled her way to better mental health.

'In 2005, when I was 32 years old, my life was a mess. I felt immense pressure to settle down, get married, buy a house and have children. I was completely overwhelmed. Not only was I drinking heavily and partying too much, but I was in a very dark place physically,



Suzan's recovery was easier with regular yoga



'Exercise can be a wonderful cure'

YOGA GAVE ME THE STRENGTH TO CARRY ON'

Yoga teacher Suzan Altay, 46, from London, found solace on her mat after being diagnosed with cancer.

'On a winter's morning two years ago, I felt a round hard mass on my right breast. I tried not to panic, but I had an inkling it was the calm before the storm.'

My mum, my maternal grandmother and great grandmother all had breast cancer so I'd already had a genetic test. As I was not a BRCA carrier and my last extensive check-up five months prior was all clear, I tried to remain positive. I also felt very healthy at the time – I had never smoked, rarely drank, exercised daily and ate well. I was diagnosed with Stage 1, Grade 3, ER-Positive, HER2-negative breast cancer. I felt numb and couldn't comprehend how this had happened. The only thing that kept me

sane during that terrifying time was yoga, so I continued practising and teaching until I started treatment.

When the future seemed overwhelming, I was able to seek refuge in the peacefulness of the moment. Yoga has so many benefits that can help us physically, mentally and spiritually, and it really helped me to feel grounded and focused at a time when I needed it the most. I also knew I had to be fit and strong in mind and body for what was to come.

As the cancer had already spread to my lymph nodes, I had two surgeries. The first was the removal of my breasts, a double mastectomy. I then had 16 sessions of chemotherapy, followed by the second surgery to remove my lymph nodes. Finally, I had 15 sessions of radiotherapy. It was an incredibly difficult year. My immune system had weakened, causing complications, infections and delays. There were days that I wondered if I ever would see the end. My body did not feel like mine

anymore and my mind was drifting into dark places. Despite all my greatest efforts, there were some days when my positivity and hope were non-existent. Yet the sun kept shining, the world kept spinning and I kept fighting.

The hardest part was accepting the changes in my body. I was able to preserve my nipples, but my breasts didn't feel or look the same. I felt I was less of a woman and when I lost my hair, I felt I had lost myself completely.

During the eight-week recovery, period after mastectomy surgery, I couldn't physically practise yoga. But I kept getting on my mat just to breathe. Once I was able to move, release the tension in my body and open my heart, I was ready to get to know the new me who was a strong and resilient survivor.

Looking back, my recovery was quicker and easier because I practised yoga regularly. Without a doubt, exercise has a great healing power and can often be a wonderful cure.'

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'I CAME BACK STRONGER AND FITTER'

Lou Thorp, 38, from Cheshire, got the running bug after breaking her hip.

'I'm not fast, I'm not thin and I'm not your "typical athlete" – nor do I want to be, but my body can run for miles and miles and I'm so proud of myself. Surprisingly, I have a broken hip to thank for my running achievements, as I was forced to challenge myself, set goals and go on to do things that I never thought were possible.

I started running after having my last child six years ago, in a bid to get fit and to lose weight. I couldn't walk to the park without being exhausted and I wanted to be able to run around with my kids or go for a jog without being out of breath. I managed to do the Couch to 5k programme and was building up to complete 10k when, midway through a run, a sharp pain stopped me in my tracks. It turned out to be a stress fracture in my femoral bone, likely as a result of not warming up or focusing on proper strength training and nutrition. I was put on double crutches to allow it to heal and resigned myself to hobbling around.

A few weeks later, I was pottering at home and tripped over in my living room. I landed on my bad hip and heard a crack, followed by intense pain. An ambulance arrived and I was whisked to hospital where I discovered I'd snapped my femoral bone. Emergency surgery, a lot of painkillers and one dynamic hip screw

later, I was pinned back together. I remember lying there just thinking that I'd never walk properly again, let alone run – but that was just the start of a journey that would change my life.

I was determined to heal, so I did all my rehab exercises religiously, had sports physiotherapy and hydrotherapy and, five months later, I was given the OK to start a run/walk programme. That first three-minute run felt like complete freedom. I built up my fitness from there, finally completing a 10k race and collecting my first medal. This felt huge, especially as some people doubted that I would be able to complete the race.

As I got more into running, I realised how much it was improving my mental health. To walk out of the door and go on a run after a tough day at work, or a long day being a mum, was so important to me. I've always been a solo runner, just me and my music, and it really is my happy place.

My next challenge was a half marathon. I worked hard to get

ready for it but in the final four weeks of training, the noise of COVID-19 started to rise and I was worried it wouldn't happen. But on 15 March 2020, the Liverpool Half Marathon went ahead and I was so emotional crossing the finish line in such an incredible city – the running bug had truly bitten!

As all the major races were cancelled during the following lockdowns, I set off to run a solo marathon in February 2021, not even sure if I could do it. After five hours and a lot of tears later, I finished. Since then, I've run more marathons and completed ultra-marathons, my longest being 50 miles. The sense of achievement crossing the finishing line was indescribable.

Since breaking my hip and becoming a runner, I am now a completely different person, both physically and mentally. I lost over four stone and I'm more confident, more resilient and much happier in myself. I now know I can do anything if I set my mind to it.'

**+ Follow Lou on Instagram
@lou_c_getsfit**



Lou: Reaping the benefits of running

'I can now do anything if I set my mind to it'