

Sports are fun but is exercise really something Epicurus would have lauded?

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 21, 2024 at 6:41 AM

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Exercise is not very conducive to pleasure as it's mostly a painful activity. It also not as health-promoting as it's usually made out to be. Harvard professor Daniel Lieberman makes the case in the linked book below that humans have not evolved to exercise.

Observations of hunter gatherers today who spend much of the day just sitting around suggest that our remote ancestors were in fact no less couch potatoes than we are. Dan Buettner who has studied populations around the globe with a high concentration of people blessed with stunning longevity shows their lifestyles to have many traits in common. Among these traits and perhaps the most surprising is the fact that they never exercise. Instead, they tend to engage in lots of natural low-Intensity physical activity, mostly just walking around.

As Lieberman shows, the commodification of exercise today has led to unnecessary hustles, psychological pressures, weird mental complexes, injuries and expenses. Even in antiquity there were those who said that people highly passionate about exercise are weird. Fitness junkie Ross Enamait who wrote some excellent training manuals says he's been called crazy for his fitness passion.

What are your personal views on the issue? Does exercise make a lot of sense from an Epicurean point of view? Why shouldn't the time and money spent torturing the body with high-Intensity exercises just for some vague notion of 'feeling good about yourself' and impressing your 'bros' not be better invested in more pleasurable activities? Epicurus sure loved visiting the theater but as far I know he didn't visit gyms at all. Do we have any evidence that he did?

Metrodorus would say that we should endure lesser pains to enjoy greater pleasures or avoid greater pains. From this line of thought we should expect that if we live an overly sedentary life as many people do in modern times, that artificial exercise might be

necessary as maintenance for health.

The hunter gathers and farmers of our ancestry may have not engaged in what we consider exercise, however they did engage in greater physical activity than modern day humans in many ways. Early hunters were endurance hunters, long distance runner who would need to stalk prey upto 8 hours a day. Whatever they may have done with their down time I think their time spent hunting would outweigh their sedentary time. In the same way anyone who has worked on a farm can attest to the same physical nature of farm life. These lifestyles didn't need the addition of what we consider exercise as it was built into there lifestyle.

I do agree that alot of the mentality around modern exercise is likely unhealthy, this however does not negate the benefits of moderate exercise applied to an otherwise sedentary lifestyle.

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As Lieberman says in the book, the modern hunter-gatherers he observed don't engage in any physical activity that exceeds moderate levels of exertion - not even on the hunt - and if you ignored the fact that they don't have a couch and a television you could easily call them incorrigible couch-potatoes because they spend surprisingly many hours just sitting on their bottoms.

I agree that exercise can be a good thing (although the true reason why the masses engage in it is rather the vain desire to conform to contemporary beauty ideals) and it's almost necessary today but its benefits have mostly to do with counteracting the effects of a hideous diet rather than our inborn and natural tendency to sit a lot.

The idea of the hard-working peasant who breaks his back working from sunrise to sunset is also mostly a modern misunderstanding. Peasant life was indeed miserable but what really made it so was the fact that these were effectively enslaved people. They had to work not just for themselves but also for pampered local aristocracies and they were also subjected to periodic depredations by marauders and militaries. We have many reports of Roman army personnel of all centuries fleecing and abusing the local peasantry.