



# STRONGER THROUGH FITNESS

YOU ALREADY KNOW HOW EXERCISE  
CAN STRENGTHEN YOUR BODY, BUT TO THESE FIVE  
WOMEN, IT'S ALSO HELPED THEM  
OVERCOME CHALLENGING TIMES BY BUILDING AN  
INNER DETERMINATION.

BY KRISTIN MAHONEY



---

---

We've all turned to the gym to improve our physical strength, but fitness can also be a way to strengthen your resolve to work through challenges in your life. See how these five women used exercise as an outlet and how it helped them overcome the obstacles that stood in their way.

---

## Robin Arzon

---

35; TRAINER; NEW YORK

---

In 2002, Robin Arzon was enjoying a night out, catching up with friends after a long day at her job as a legal assistant in New York City. As she and her friends enjoyed their drinks, a heavily armed gunman burst through the entrance of the bar, shooting someone at the front of the crowd. He grabbed Arzon by her hair and dragged her into the restaurant's kitchen, where she was soon joined by 19 other hostages. He doused the then 21-year-old with gasoline and held a gun to her head. Arzon was used as a negotiator between her assaulter and the police. After about three hours, a fellow hostage tackled the gunman and Arzon was able to get free.

The night was traumatizing, but Arzon found that lacing up a pair of running shoes was an important step in helping her deal with her emotions. "I was compelled to run out the trauma that happened to me," she recalls. "There's something very raw and

empowering about just pushing your body to an uncomfortable place.” A few years later, Arzon found that training for her first marathon also helped her get through a breakup. “Running is cathartic. There’s a lot we can experience in life that can be purchased, but this is one that has to be earned.”

In 2012, Arzon left her job as a corporate litigator to dedicate more of her time to health and fitness. She got certified as a running coach and became a Peloton group cycling instructor. “Fitness has been a tool to write my own story,” she says. “I’ve discovered much more about myself than I could have ever imagined.” Arzon has now completed 22 marathons and currently teaches eight to 10 cycling classes a week; last year, she

published her first book, *Shut Up and Run*, to make running less intimidating for newcomers. “Whether you’re just starting your running journey or have done dozens of races, you can miss how simple running really is,” she says. She advises those going through struggles of their own to try to recognize a situation for what it is and use it as a way to get stronger. “Challenges sometimes force us to reassess where we’re going versus where we really want to go,” Arzon says. “I found fitness helped me dig into my intuition and take a closer look into what I wanted out of life.”

**“RUNNING HELPED ME RECOVER FROM A VIOLENT CRIME.”**



## Amanda Dettman

35; COSMETOLOGIST AND FITNESS INSTRUCTOR; BOWLING GREEN, KY

When she was 10 years old, Amanda Dettman received her first diagnoses of depression. Two years later, she was hospitalized after a suicide attempt. Medications to combat her depression put her on a downward spiral, and by her early 20s she had developed a serious drug addiction. In 2009, at age 28, she survived an overdosed of pain pills, which she took as a wake-up call. “I wanted to get clean and start from scratch,” she says.

Dettman was able to break her habit but in the process gained 50 pounds. By 2011, she weighed in at 160 pounds at 5'11”.

Her turnaround started with group fitness classes and cleaning up her diet. Before long, she started seeing changes in her confidence—and her body.

Her husband encouraged her to start lifting weights. “Once I started doing it and getting stronger, I was hooked,” Dettman says. She got certified as a group cycling instructor in 2014 and

now teaches three classes a week.

“Exercise is now my medicine,” says Dettman, who has

been drug-free for eight years. “Fitness allows me to set goals and achieve them. When I reach a new goal, I’m just amazed at what my body can do!”

**“EXERCISE BECAME MY MEDICINE.”**



## Stacey Griffith

49; SENIOR MASTER INSTRUCTOR AT SOULCYCLE, NEW YORK

In the 1990s, Stacey Griffith was living in Los Angeles, teaching spin classes and looking like the picture of health. Her diet was superclean, and she worked out constantly. But behind this seemingly healthy facade, Griffith was a party girl, often showing up to teach her classes after being out all night. She was drinking and taking cocaine and ecstasy; soon she started doing crystal meth.

In a way, Griffith says the physicality of her career helped her from slipping too

deeply into a drug habit. “I always had this physical job that I had to show up for. After a big night out, I’d be back at the gym the next day, sweating, training, and helping to otherwise minimize the physical damage I might have received from my drug use.”

Eventually, she adds, fitness also helped pull her out of her addiction. As her classes grew in popularity, she had more and more students waiting for her. “I felt accountable to them.”

But even if you don’t have a following of dozens of loyal class members, Griffith says fitness can help pull you past life’s challenges. “So many amazing things happen in your body when you exercise, and it doesn’t take a



**“FITNESS HELPED ME CLIMB PAST ADDICTION.”**

lot of time to get that effect.”

Today, Griffith, 48, lives in New York, teaching 18 to 20 classes a week at SoulCycle to celebrities like Kelly Ripa and Madonna. This past year she published a book, *Two Turns From Zero*, recounting her journey and giving advice on how to reach new heights in health and fitness.

“I needed to get my story out to show I was not born this amazing teacher. I had years of struggle,” she says. “I wanted people to know that if I can come from the depths of addiction and turn around, so can you.”



## Tiffany Lee Gaston

39; FITNESS MODEL AND WRITER;  
SCOTTSDALE, AZ

A natural athlete, Tiffany Lee Gaston started doing gymnastics and dance at a very young age; by age 8 she was already drawing attention for her muscular build and becoming self-conscious about her body. “I really struggled with how I should look,” she recalls. “I felt like I didn’t fit the mold for the types of bodies I thought were appealing.” By age 12, Gaston had developed anorexia. “I was trying to starve the muscle off my body.”

At age 14, she’d withered away to 82 pounds when her parents stepped in, and Gaston started working with a counselor, learning to embrace her natural build.

Gaston started weight training after taking it as an elective in high school. “It was such an amazing feeling to be getting stronger and watching my body change.” She’s now been lifting for more than 20 years, following a structured five- to six-day-a-week routine, including isolation exercises, functional training,

**“LIFTING WEIGHTS MADE ME REALIZE AN ATHLETIC BODY IS BEAUTIFUL.”**

and body-weight workouts. In 2015, she authored a book, *From Broken to Badass*, about her struggles.

She continues to set new goals for herself and recently took up Olympic lifting. “I

started it because it’s not something I’m good at, and that makes me want it even more.” Challenges like these are key for your mind and body, she says. “No matter how big or small, it’s important to have a goal to work toward.”

## Jessamyn Stanley

29; YOGA TEACHER AND WRITER; DURHAM, NC

When Jessamyn Stanley was in graduate school six years ago, a friend invited her to join her in a Bikram yoga class. Stanley, who was going through a severe period of depression at the time, tried to skip it. “I didn’t want to go, but she wore me down, and I wound up loving it!” she recalls. “It was extremely difficult and moved me far out of my comfort zone.”

She continued to attend yoga classes, finding that it gave her the space she needed to move past her perceived limitations. “I was always the fattest person there and frequently the only person of color, but it helped me see beyond the definitions that I was drawing for myself at school and at work. I pushed myself there in a way I was not able to do in my day-to-day life,” she says.

Stanley says she frequently struggled with body image growing up. “I felt like I needed to look like whatever was going to be the most acceptable way for a black girl to look at my age,” she explains. “I thought my body had to look a certain way, but it was never about health—it was about fitting an image and worrying about what other people thought.”

To help get past these roadblocks, she says, you need to be comfortable with what you are doing. “In yoga, we often hear that you have to have a teacher there to make sure you’re doing it right, but when you’re starting out what you need most is an environment where you’re not embarrassed,” says Stanley, who recommends practicing at home with a video if you are too self-conscious to start out with a class. “This gives you the time to work into the poses

**“YOGA HELPED ME FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH MY BODY.”**



COURTESY OF TIFFANY LEE GASTON, CHRISTINE HEWITT

at your own pace and to take breaks as you need them, or try poses you'd be too intimidated to do in front of others."

The more confident Stanley grew in her own body, the further she took her own yoga practice. She began to post pictures of her practice on Instagram as a way to check her alignment and get feedback from fellow yoga practitioners, and was soon surprised to see how much positive feedback she was getting from others, who told her she inspired them to become more active themselves. Today, she has a robust social media presence, with more than 300,000 followers on Instagram. "I continue to use social media to show what a yoga practice really looks like in the 21st century from the perspective of someone who is not white, wealthy, heterosexual, etc.," she says. Stanley also recently wrote a book, *Every Body Yoga*, to further inspire people to try yoga or other fitness activities.

While yoga hasn't gifted her with instant body confidence, it has given her something more valuable: the opportunity to find that confidence in a genuine way. "Yoga doesn't really create body confidence, mostly because yoga is about something much bigger and ultimately more important than body image," she says. "However, yoga does create space for you to trust yourself. It can allow for any human being to look beyond the opinions of others—and ultimately, ignoring what other people think is the root of confidence!"

