
LESSONS FROM THE LOYAL

It's a bizarre but wonderful feeling, to arrive dead center of a target you didn't even know you were aiming for.

~ Lois McMaster Bujold

Can one odd, unexpected question solve the struggle? Unlikely, but in Damon's case, it opened his mind to a different fitness perspective. He wouldn't be limited to choosing just one activity. But Damon's tribulations would have persisted under his old mindset. Part of the problem was he'd been churning in the same pattern for so long he'd become comfortable with the familiarity of it all. If anything, our conversation jostled the status quo.

Although I've worked with many people in Damon's shoes, I've interviewed many regularly active people, too. I defined this group as active at least three days a week for at least the last three years. I spoke with many who exceeded this duration. By most accounts, we're all exposed to the same culture, so I wondered what made this group so committed. How did they keep things up year after year when so many people can only hang on for a few months or weeks? What separated them from the pack?

Three cases have stuck out. Although the context of each story differs, two significant lessons connect them. Each wholly transformed my beliefs about loyalty.

Case 1: Elisa

Take Elisa Kurylowicz, a retired international freestyle skier. Her event, moguls, entails a breathtaking descent down a bumpy course as steep as the Egyptian pyramids. On the way down, the athletes must perform two jumps off icy ramps that catapult them over twenty-five feet in the air—usually with a twist or flip or even both. Their efforts are timed, requiring them to push their self-control and risk injury if they fall.

After retirement, Elisa turned to coaching. I had worked with her team to help them shape their mindset for competing.

Elisa and I spent many frigid days in beautiful mountainous places watching teenagers try to get faster and more daring at their craft. Pushing your limits down a mogul course is not for the faint-hearted. Elisa excelled at it, and she had taken her mogul career as far as she could, falling a hair's breadth away from qualifying for the Olympic Games in Torino, Italy. She found retirement challenging, especially after coming so close to a lifelong goal.

"The intensity of freestyle training is crazy. Your body has to endure a lot of impact. That means a *lot* of heavy lifting. After I officially called it quits, I vowed never to spend another hour in a weight room," she explained.

Naturally, the hours of hard training she poured into her career were difficult to replace. As most retired athletes do, she put on weight and lost a lot of her fitness. When your physicality is a big part of your identity, the slide down can be even harder than the climb up, just in a different way.

It had been several years since I had worked with Elisa and her team. When we sat down to catch up at a café, she showed me a photo of herself at her heaviest, a couple of years after retirement. It

was from her wedding day. At first, I didn't realize it was her. It didn't look like the same person sitting across from me.

"Depression, anxiety, you name it. I was in rough shape," Elisa shared, cradling hot green tea in her hands.

She explained how down on herself she felt at the time the photo was taken. This was compounded by a trying divorce shortly after tying the knot. Her struggle opened her up to change, but not before she hit bottom.

"Things were really bad. I couldn't take it anymore. I was a World Cup gold medalist, for crying out loud. I had to put my energy in a new direction. It was time."

As many do, she tried running, motivated at first to change her appearance. At the last minute, she entered a ten-kilometer race, replacing her brother's spot after he withdrew with an injury. In the past, she had run to prepare for competing on the ski slopes but had never raced before. This race brought different challenges than flying down treacherous ski slopes.

"In a way, I was just motivated by fear of embarrassing myself. It was hard. Near the end of this race, with about a kilometer left, I felt great. Physically, I was exhausted, but I still felt terrific, if that makes sense. The crowd was there cheering, and I knew I was about to finish. I was very proud of myself, but it was so difficult."

The pride was enough for Elisa to stick with running, but this wasn't the difference maker for her. That came later. Meanwhile, many people in her life saw what running had become for her. She ran nearly every day. Naturally, alongside dietary adjustments, she reaped the benefits of her extra physical activity. She felt healthier, and her weight started to melt away. People noticed. Some gave unsolicited advice.

"People kept telling me what to eat, what to wear, and how to train. Some of them I hardly knew. I got so much advice that it was overwhelming. None of it connected with me until one guy, an excellent trainer, suggested I try running at a specific heart rate. This was the one thing that has stuck with me. It made a big difference."

"How so?" I asked.

"Running this way felt very different. As an athlete, I always pushed myself to the limit. This new way was super slow, but I decided to stick with it anyway. For some reason, I trusted him. Sure enough, I started liking my runs more and even got stronger and faster the more I did it."

Despite her improvement, Elisa still wrestled with her inner voice. It kept interfering with her comeback, jabbing at her sense of self-worth, but she caught on. This conflict culminated in one defining moment.

Elisa's friend Jeremy liked to join her on runs from time to time. Running with Jeremy usually meant pulling up her socks and pushing herself more than usual. This meant increasing her pace and breaking the rhythm that she liked. One day, on a scenic Rocky Mountain trail, something gave way.

"Although I looked forward to my runs, I still found myself running for other things than myself. The advice I was getting from people was always about something I *had* to do to be a serious runner. It was never about me as a person. Well, I think that all changed that day. I would normally feel that I had to suck it up and keep up with Jeremy's pace. I felt bad about him coming down to my level, so I'd speed up. I didn't like it though. That's the people pleaser in me doing something I didn't like to get approval. But on this run, I insisted that he slow down. It was important to me."

A few miles in, Jeremy started to drift up the trail as usual. Exasperated, something overcame Elisa. She slammed on the brakes.

“Jeremy! Enough! Come on! Stop going so fast! This has to stop!” she yelled, surprised at her reaction.

“I’m tired of this happening every time. I said I don’t want to go faster. You’re either running with me, or you’re not! That’s the deal.”

Jeremy froze in the face of Elisa’s resolve. He didn’t know what to do. She had never said anything like this to him before. He didn’t realize that this wasn’t about him. Regardless, he decided to honor her request and left Elisa to carry on by herself.

Elisa returned to the rhythm she preferred. Things felt different, not just with her pace but emotionally.

“When I think about it, I woke up. That was the first time I ran completely for me. It felt awesome, and I’ve been trying to run this way ever since. After everything I had been through, I needed to run more for me. I’m not going to be a professional runner. I don’t need all that hoopla. I finally let go of the urge to make someone else happy at my expense. It was a big moment.”

This honest confrontation even strengthened her relationship with Jeremy.

Case 2: Tim

Tim’s story was much different.

“I think of swimming before I go to bed now,” he told me, almost embarrassed to admit it.

A fifty-something financial advisor, Tim was a typical struggler. After several years of haphazard activity, he sought a change. He was disappointed in himself for being a chronic dropout.

“I consider myself smart enough to know exercise is important,” he said, “but my job had overtaken my life. My body revolted.”

When he felt things had gone too far, he did what most people do: he joined a gym. By now, you can guess how things began. Ambitious, Tim had his goal but was going to do what he’d always done to reach it, expecting a different outcome.

“I struggled as badly as I ever had before. I’ve never been a fan of gyms, but this one was so close to home it made sense to join. I used all the tricks, too. I’d listen to my favorite music, watch TV during my cardio, and I even brought a friend sometimes. A month or so in, I could tell I wasn’t going to stick with it for long. I was running out of gas. I thought: *Here we go again.*”

Suddenly, it all changed.

“During a heat wave, after seeing a bunch of kids jumping around in the gym’s pool, I thought it would be refreshing to go for a swim like the good old days. Besides, I needed something different. It had been at least twenty-five years since I’d been in the water. I couldn’t tell you why either. Anyway, I checked the schedule, bought some new swim shorts, and went the next day. I can remember that first plunge. What a rush. I forgot what that was like. The water was freezing. It woke me up all right!”

Like Elisa’s, Tim’s awakening was more than physical.

“To me, there’s something youthful about pools. Maybe it’s because there are always kids around them. When I jumped in, I felt it again. I didn’t do much in the water at first. I just enjoyed it, floated

around, and got my bearings. Now I do laps before work. It's my main thing. These days, when I walk past the weight room, I sometimes think how those folks are missing out."

Case 3: Tracy

A nurse and mother of two young boys, Tracy Klien is highly motivated, strong, and fit by any measure. A dedicated regular, Tracy digs obstacle-based fitness. Even though she admits that she's in better shape now than she was in high school, it took a while for her to build this healthy relationship with fitness.

"I was shy back then. I still am, but it's a lot different now. I've overcome a lot of it. Being active is such an important part of my life. It's helped with my stress, my mood, my stomach issues, and my sleep. I wasn't completely inactive in school. I danced. There was gym class, too. But being active was tough because I found most things so boring. It was hard for me to find something to stick to. I couldn't figure it all out."

"What changed between then and now?" I asked.

"After I went to college, I still struggled to find something that worked for me, but I kept looking."

"And what were you looking for?" I wondered.

"I'm competitive, and I like the intense stuff. I love getting winded and nearly falling over when I'm done. My friends have told me I'm a bit crazy. I thought about trying a marathon, which is certainly hard enough, but the thought of all that training and running for hours and hours turned me off. It would bore me to death. I tried kickboxing, which was good for a while, but it still wasn't a fit. I've done spin cycling, aqua fit, yoga, barre, and taken many other cardio and strength classes. There was nothing wrong with these things, but there was still something missing."

The more things Tracy tested, the more she learned about what she liked and what she didn't. She didn't cling to what wasn't working for very long. But her journey didn't turn passionate until nearly twenty years after high school.

"It all happened with my first obstacle race in 2012. I saw it advertised on social media, and I thought it looked cool. I recruited a few friends to do it with me. It only took one race and I was hooked."

Obstacle fitness has surged in popularity in recent years. These events feature a collection of creative challenges that competitors must complete, like rope climbing over walls, wading through pits of mud, or even jumping over burning logs. It's anything but boring. For Tracy, it was love at first sight.

"This race was much different than anything else I'd done. I got butterflies and was afraid I couldn't do it, but that's what compelled me to register in the first place. Now, I train at an obstacle-based gym. I get as excited as a little kid when I drive there; so much so that it surprises me sometimes. I look forward to the endorphin high."

Four years after her first brush with obstacle-based fitness, Tracy qualified to compete internationally. She loves her regimen so much she involves her family when she can. Her two young boys attend obstacle training camps. They come to her races and have even competed. It's not just something she does on the way home from work. It's part of her life.

"It's a community. It's supportive, competitive, and thrilling. I finally feel a sense of belonging to something."

Lesson 1—Attraction to the Action

The loyal showed me that they're not much different than everyone else. Some were members of big gyms or boutique studios, while others only stayed active outdoors. Some used fancy gadgets and others didn't. Some were single, and others had families.

They all took hiatuses from fitness, too. Everyone misses workouts they had planned. Nobody's perfect. But, boy, when a regular is on a break, they really miss it. In fact, instead of using willpower to go work out, several told me they needed it to take days *off* for recovery. The saying "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" fits this group. Whenever I heard someone fiercely loyal speak about their favorite activity, the strength of the bond was undeniable.

This attraction reflects what's known as hedonic motivation—how pleasure and pain influence a person's willingness to persist in certain behavior.ⁱ The word *hedonic* derives from the Greek word "sweet." Negative, or "sour" fitness experiences make avoidance the easier choice. How often have you mindlessly plowed through physical activity just to get it over with?

As a child, I applied this strategy with Beef Stroganoff. To me, Stroganoff tasted like grimy old shoelaces. I couldn't bear it. However, to get my pudding, I had to finish it, so I would plug my nose to kill the aroma and then shovel it in before my taste buds caught on. It turns out that most people, me included, have done the same with fitness.

But it's the nature of the loyal's attraction to exercise that truly separates them. The loyal enjoy the *act* of doing their favorite thing.ⁱⁱ Sure, wishing to look better might get people started on their journey,ⁱⁱⁱ but the research clearly shows that disliking physical activity creates problems down the line.^{iv} In fact, the closest many people get to relishing physical activity is soaking in the sweet relief they feel shortly after it's over. That's not enough.

To illustrate further, let's break the exercise process into four parts: before, during, immediately after, and later on. Of course, the loyal like how they feel when they're done being active, too. That's universal. This "finish-line effect" feels great. Our heart rate returns to its resting state, breathing slows, and our body temperature cools back down. This segment of the process is inherently nice, tranquil even.

Even if people dislike exercising, most enjoy a healthy post-exercise afterglow later on, too. You've felt this before; you're more relaxed, mentally sharper, and have a stronger sense of well-being hours afterward. These positive after-effects, which can include a sense of prideful accomplishment, are attractive features for nearly everyone. However, no matter how pleasant, this afterglow has less long-term motivational power than people think.

A research review conducted at the Behavioral Medicine Lab at the University of Victoria found that post-exercise feelings had no relationship with future exercise behavior.^v The experience *during* exercise has a stronger impact. Research also suggests that the feelings we have as we exercise influence our state of mind toward the activity the most.^{vi} This state of mind—whether you feel like doing it or not—drives devotion.

If not in fitness, you've experienced this "feel like it" phenomenon before. Think about another activity you've "crushed on" in the past, like a fun hobby. Our focus is naturally drawn to our next encounter with an enjoyable activity. We daydream about it. We might even get a little giddy inside as it approaches.

All told, if you dislike the exercise experience, you'll rarely feel these things. Of course, if you rarely feel like doing it, your heart will indeed wander, choosing to do other things and showing up less and less as time wears on. It's why fitness mimics dating in so many ways. You may enjoy some peripheral

stuff about a person—their clothes, their friends, their cat—but if you don't admire their core personality traits, then the relationship will be on shaky ground.

Lesson 2—Choice or Chance?

As you probably know well, the fitness industry is fixated on the observable or measurable benefits of being active—the magazine cover stuff. These outcomes are dangled as goals that tend to reinforce a problematic mindset, one that requires us to plug our noses rather than smell the roses.

On occasion, you'll hear someone say, "Don't forget to do what you enjoy," a refreshing departure. Indeed, this is what the loyal do. It's an approach strongly linked to adherence, but also associated with improvements in fitness levels and body composition because of the continued commitment enjoyment creates.^{vii}

But is falling in love a choice? How do some people come to enjoy being active when so many people have never liked it? On a hunch, I began asking the loyal to share their fitness love stories. Whether it was squash, swimming, or soccer, how did they meet their main squeeze?

As I asked, I noticed how nearly all love connections originated from one of three states. The first state is curiosity. For example, Tracy followed her nose to something she loved. Something caught her attention, sparking her into action. It wasn't that she chose the activity—it chose her. The advertisement she saw for an obstacle race teased her penchant for competitive and creative activities—ideal activities in her eyes.

The second state is nostalgia. In Tim's case, he stumbled across a charming scene that reminded him of his youth, a fulfilling time when he was happily active and took the time to play. To be fair, not everyone has warm memories of physical activity from when they were younger. Some of my interviewees shared some dreadful experiences from their school days that affected their relationship with fitness later. For others, physical activity peaked during their youth and dwindled as they aged, their love of movement buried underneath layers of adulthood responsibility. For Tim, the charm of swimming remained—he just couldn't feel it anymore. Tim's memories, prompted by the sights, sounds, and smells of a busy pool, stirred up a sincere appreciation for swimming.

The third state, dissatisfaction, is a much less romantic situation. Elisa was profoundly frustrated by how her life felt. Necessity being the mother of invention, her exhaustion opened her mind to change, any change. She'd tell you that running was an imperfect solution at first—drastic even—but she couldn't continue down the path she was on.

Despite the role of these three states—curiosity, nostalgia, and dissatisfaction—the love stories I gathered wouldn't exist if not for one dominant factor: *luck*. Enjoyment, crucial to building a committed relationship, wasn't a conscious choice but an accidental discovery.

When you think more about it, most of our passions start this way. Randomly, something comes along and strikes our imagination so poignantly we can't ignore it. Story after story, the loyal told me they found what they liked by chance. A timely online advertisement triggered Tracy's curiosity for obstacle fitness. Tim's accidental reconnection with the pool prompted his nostalgia for swimming. In Elisa's case, some random advice dramatically changed her relationship with running by changing how she ran. She might never have fallen in love without this conversation.

The Love Lottery

It's something no one talks about. Not only was I surprised by the role of serendipity, but most of the loyal were, too. Look at it this way: if you really dislike exercising, get bored with it, or even loathe it, there's nothing wrong with you. Take comfort in knowing that even the loyal dislike many activities. However, every regular I interviewed acknowledged that chance played a role in their motivational breakthrough. Here are a few other examples:

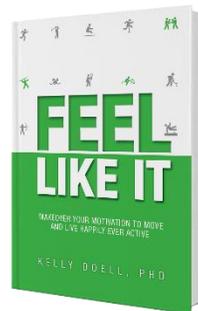
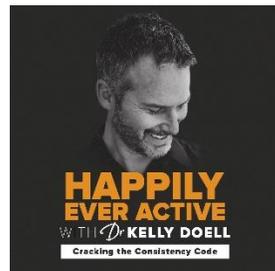
Kickboxing was the only exercise class available that afternoon, but I needed to work out. That was the first time I tried it. I love the energy in the room. I've been going ever since.

I ran because I thought it would help me lose weight. I didn't like it or hate it. Then I decided to run in the woods instead of on the sidewalk. It turned out I love being on the trails. There's a big difference.

All the exercise machines were full, and I was pressed for time. I had always used the treadmill. When an elliptical became available, I had no other choice but to take it. It was so different, so smooth. I thought, "Why didn't I try this earlier?"

As I started sharing this finding with fitness professionals, some resisted it, arguing that the most loyal have the most willpower and that's that. Ironically, even the fitness histories of these skeptics included strokes of luck that connected *them* with their most motivating activities. The dominant narrative just isn't true. This is not to say that the loyal aren't tough or hardy. The people who struggle also show these characteristics. The difference is those who struggle keep swimming upstream by repeating demotivating fitness experiences, something regulars rarely do.

Suffice it to say that this discovery presented a problem; relying on luck is not a useful strategy to stop the revolving door. To just tell someone to go out and enjoy themselves isn't helpful either. So, what next?



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