



Photograph by John Burcham

I Did It!

Michelle Steinke

41, Phoenix

Healthy Advice

Sweat Through Sadness

Grief can be all-consuming, but just a 20- to 30-minute walk in the fresh air can boost energy, help with sleep, improve appetite and increase concentration. Losing a loved one throws your body into a state of emergency; brain imaging studies have shown that grief causes changes in the areas of the brain associated with mood and memory. Exercise alters your brain chemistry positively and triggers the release of feel-good endorphins.

Source: Jo Christner, a psychologist in Encino, California

“After My Husband Died, I Found a Way to Live”

On October 9, 2009, Michelle’s husband of nine years, a pilot, was killed in a plane crash. “Mitch was the love of my life, and I was devastated,” Michelle says. The hardest part was explaining the tragedy to her then 3-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son. “My daughter asked if we could get Daddy a Band-Aid,” she says. “It was so hard to tell her, ‘No, Daddy won’t be getting better or coming back.’” For her kids, Michelle pulled herself together and vowed to be the mom they needed. “It was incredibly difficult, but it’s what Mitch would have wanted,” she says.

Exercise Rx

About two months before her husband died, Michelle had embarked on a healthy new lifestyle. The 5-foot-8-inch real estate agent, who had weighed 207 pounds, had started working out with a personal trainer several days a week. After Mitch’s death, these new habits helped her through the darkest days. “When I was active, I felt sane. Nothing else relieved stress like intense circuit training,” she says. “Exercise was my antidepressant.” Michelle fueled her workouts with nutritious foods

like scrambled eggs and grilled-salmon salad, and in December 2009 she reached her goal weight of 142 pounds.

Paying It Forward

Michelle knew firsthand about the healing power of exercise. Over the next few years she decided to share that knowledge, quitting her job to become a personal trainer. She was particularly interested in working with people who had gone through the same emotional hell she had. In December 2012, Michelle launched One Fit Widow, which specializes in training women and men who have lost a spouse. In addition to nutrition and fitness advice, clients get some grief counseling and weekly check-in calls. “When my kids see me headed to the gym, they say, ‘Mommy’s going to get fitter!’ They know that exercise makes me stronger, inside and out,” she says.

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