

Overcoming Sabotage

What to do
when your
friends or family
interfere with
your workouts.

By Karen J. Bannan

My friends always call me at the same time—30 minutes before I'm heading out the door to my favorite yoga class. My heart sinks whenever they catch me in because I know I won't make the first set of sun salutations—I'll be too busy trying to get off the phone.

My friends, who aren't mean, don't understand my exercise fanaticism. They'd prefer I talk on the phone with them. Some even try cajoling me out of classes if they're in a chatty mood. "You can miss one class," says one friend I'll call Sarah. "You go all the time; missing one class won't hurt."

Sarah is engaging in what I call exercise sabotage—a phenomenon that sports psychologists say is fairly common.

The problem usually starts when people get serious with an activity and are spending hours each week participating in it (example, runners who

train for two or more hours every day). As a result, friends and family who are used to spending that time with you feel slighted or jealous, says Dr. William F. Gayton, Ph.D., director of the annual Sports Psychology Institute at the University of Southern Maine in Portland.

"If the time you're spending in the gym is time the other person feels you should be spending with them, you can have a problem," Dr. Gayton says.

Surprisingly, some saboteurs aren't jealous; they're simply taking out their own frustrations about exercise. Think of it as a twisted, "If you can't beat

'em, join 'em," scenario with you as the joinee.

"The emphasis that we've put on fitness and exercise has made it very difficult for people who aren't fit not to walk around feeling guilty," Dr. Gayton says. "It's not like you're showing it in their face, but they feel like they should be doing what you're doing on some level."

While making friends and family happy is important, keeping yourself looking and feeling great is too. Here are a few suggestions from Dr. Gayton to help ferret out and eliminate the saboteurs in your own life.

How to eliminate the saboteurs in your life:

- [1] Be a ringleader.** If you get your critics involved in the activity they're pushing you to give up, they may end up loving it as much as you do and become a favorite workout partner. "If someone enjoys what you're enjoying, they're less likely to complain about your workouts," Dr. Gayton says.
- [2] Practice balance.** Occasionally, your friends aren't griping, they're trying to tell you something. Look at your schedule. Are you obsessing about exercise too much? Is it keeping you from other activities? Sure, exercise is grand, but not when it interferes with other important facets of life: friends, family and work.
- [3] Quell the guilt.** If the complaints don't stop and exercise is an augmentation to your life—not the sole reason for it—don't let your friends bully you into feeling guilty. "A lot of those things you're thinking to yourself—the guilt—is that you should never let your friends down and that's not a terribly healthy thing to be saying," Dr. Gayton says. "Push those negative thoughts out of your mind." 