



**April 2010**

**Sue Ann Says: Why Exercise? Because it makes you feel good!**

Were you as discouraged as I was by the recent news that postmenopausal women need at least an hour – *an hour!* – of exercise each day if we don't want to gain weight? And hey, if we're already overweight and not on a diet, an hour a day isn't nearly enough. The research, published in the March 24, 2010 Journal of the American Medical Association, is based on a long-term study of almost 35,000 women.

But weight! – all is not lost. I was inspired by a fascinating talk by Michelle Segar, PhD, a motivational psychologist at the University of Michigan. Dr. Segar's research is focused on women's lifestyles and behaviors, primarily around issues of weight loss. Her webinar, hosted by the National Wellness Institute in Stevens Point, was an eye opener.

Like most women, I have a hard time sticking to a diet and exercise regimen. I learned why from Dr. Segar. Just look at the words we use: *work out, regimen, routine*. Where is the fun in that? We need to change our belief that exercise is an onerous task, a chore we have to perform because it is good for us. Does that line work when you try to get your kids to eat brussel sprouts? If we want to make healthy lifestyle changes that are sustainable for the long haul, Dr. Segar says, we have to find a reason that truly motivates us.

Right now I'm pretty darn motivated to look great in my gown for the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation spring gala (visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) if you want to buy tickets). But after it's over... poof! My great burst of effort will disappear like Cinderella's coach. And I'll be the pumpkin.

Dr. Segar observes that most women launch a diet and exercise plan together. They are complex, require a lot of planning and demand behavior and attitude changes that don't happen overnight. "It is not realistic to try to make all these changes in a short amount of time and expect that we will be successful or able to sustain them in the long run," Dr. Segar says. Lifestyle changes are most successful when they are started simply and slowly. She suggests we make good eating decisions one meal at a time. And that we increase exercise in increments –with an activity that we enjoy.

Dr. Segar urges women to think about why they want to lose weight. It is important to find reasons that will give us the motivation to do it and stick with it. Seventy-five percent of the women Dr. Segar surveyed said they start an exercise program because they think they "should" lose weight and gain health benefits. But when she surveyed these women 10 months later, Dr. Segar learned that those who stuck with it were doing it for a very different motivation: an increased sense of well-being. Stress reduction was the second most common motivator. "When the goal is weight loss, there is a misguided focus on the scale, which for many women is not positive feedback," Dr. Segar says. Shifting the focus from weight loss to feeling good is a sustainable approach to healthy behaviors.

Why isn't better health a compelling reason for women to exercise? Dr. Segar explains that women have difficulty prioritizing our own self care. We are busy juggling dozens of other things. Caring for

others usually takes first priority. Additionally, we view health benefits as a long-term reward. But it's immediate pay back that gives us the kick in the butt to get going and keep moving. And when a healthy diet and exercise become a "should" because the doctor said so or our family is gently chiding, forget sustainability. We don't "own" these external motivators; they undermine our own choices and self-determination. Dr. Segar's advice: discover your unique motivators. "This is a very subjective and very personal approach to feeling better and enhancing well being," Dr. Segar says.

If we change our thoughts about being active from the painful, sweaty work out routine to participating in activities that are enjoyable, easy, and convenient – and we are doing them because we *choose to*, not because we *should* ... we are more likely to carry through with our activity plan for the long term.

What motivates you to be active? For me, it's having the stamina to chase after the grandchildren, to hike without getting breathless on our next family vacation. Mostly, I just want to feel vibrant, energetic and joyful. I make activity fun – and an essential part of my day – with my exercise buddy, my dog Emme. Often Emme and I walk with friends, and we both enjoy the social aspects of the activity.

**Dr. Segar's top tips:**

- A sustainable exercise plan involves goals and desires as fuel for intrinsic, internal and personal motivation. If we have trouble sustaining an exercise and diet program, it may be time to re-fuel: develop new goals and desires that truly motivate us.
- Incorporate exercise and healthy eating in small steps. These behavioral changes are a life-long path rather than an episodic event.
- Focus on the sense of well being that results from being active, rather than on the scale.

Do this for yourself. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.



Sue Ann Thompson  
Founder & President  
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

**((sidebar))**

You'll find more tips on Dr. Segar's Web site, [www.essentialsteps.net](http://www.essentialsteps.net). She also recommends [www.healthyweight.net](http://www.healthyweight.net). The annual National Wellness Institute is held in Stevens Point every summer. In addition to the conference, their Web site offers archived webinars on a variety of health and wellness topics. Check out their programs at [www.nationalwellness.org](http://www.nationalwellness.org).