

Natureobics™

An energy investment with high returns
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By Dominique Larocque

Last January, on a cold sunny afternoon, I laced up my running shoes and stepped out for my usual run around Mud Lake in Britannia Village. The brisk fresh winter air, the aroma of pine trees, the sight of chickadees along the path, the challenge of the terrain, the agility of my body, my focused state of mind – all this combined, brought tears of joy and gratitude to my eyes. Tears for the incredible gifts I possess – the gift of health, the gift of awareness, the gift of being totally connected to the natural world. I would not trade these feelings for anything.

It is this state of consciousness which renowned author, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defined as ‘flow’. Everyone experiences flow from time to time and will recognize its characteristics: people typically feel strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities. The pleasurable state of flow can, in fact, be controlled, and not just left to chance, by setting ourselves challenges – tasks that are neither too difficult nor too simple for our abilities. With such goals, we learn to order the information that enters consciousness and thereby improve the quality of our lives.

As I stood on a rock contemplating the scenery, I thought to myself about how much outdoor sports and exercise are the key ingredient in my pain free, disease-free life – a life infused with flow experiences. How could I thank mother nature? How could I teach people the incredible health benefits of outdoor aerobic exercise like cycling, running, hiking, in-line skating, cross-country skiing, speed skating, snowshoeing? On that cold sunny afternoon, the natureobics concept was born.

So what exactly is natureobics? It is simply an aerobic exercise class practiced outdoors. During the aerobic component of the class, participants take part in an aerobic sport activity of their choice. Natureobic classes vary throughout the season. During the class, sport-specific technical instruction is given, mental training techniques are explored and training systems monitored (with the help of a heart rate monitor or simply listening to one’s breathing).

The natureobic concept is greatly influenced by a few pre-existing concepts – one of them being ecopsychology. Ecopsychology, as the name suggest, is a promising new discipline that seeks to synthesize psychology and ecology. Its theorizes that the violence we inflict on ourselves and on the natural world is a result of our psychological and spiritual separation from nature. Ecopsychologies Michael J. Cohen, founder of Project Nature Connect, states that by “going into the woods we can get out of the woods.” Having studied under Cohen, I feel a strong desire to join him in his quest to reconnect human beings to their natural world and their natural senses – 53 of them by Cohen’s reckoning.

A second concept that natureobics embraces is the transpersonal perspective – the study of consciousness in its numerous forms, including altered states, yoga, dreams, and contemplation. In this theory, it is believed that nature becomes the ultimate classroom for experiencing self-awareness and regaining a sense of ‘wholeness’ or ‘holiness’ in our crazed out-of-balance stress-filled lives. Here, sounds of nature replace the upbeat rhythm of a typical aerobic class. The body is moving, but the mind is quiet.

J. Krishnamurti wrote: *“To be in communion with yourself means complete silence, so that the mind can be silently in communion with itself about everything. And from there, there is a total action.”*

As a doctor’s daughter and after many years of working in the therapeutic recreation field, I have witnessed prescription writing replacing commitment to an exercise routine. No pharmaceutical company that I know of would sponsor a concept like natureobics, a program that replaces starvation diets, magic diet pills and anti-depressants with a totally new outlook on conditioning the mind, the body and the spirit. In a recent article entitled *Healing Power*, Leslie Kaufman wrote: *“If exercise were a pill, it would be a medical breakthrough on par with the invention of penicillin. You can’t swallow fitness gelatin capsules, though. To get the therapeutic benefits, you must find a regimen that’s proven to work against your specific illness and that supplies enough of a mental and physical lift to keep you coming back for more.”* (Health, October 1997).

We all know the negative effects of stress on our immune system. And study after study points to the positive effects of aerobic exercise, not only in decreasing stress, but in adding the immune systems’ fight against disease. Some studies have even proven the link between the exercise charged immune system and the cessation of the spread of cancer cells. These are pretty powerful reasons to exercise. And if that is not enough, there is also the ‘high’ that you get from a good workout. Research shows that the vigorous exercise can increase endorphin levels five-fold, creating a natural high in individuals, a euphoria-like state. We have all heard of ‘runner’s high,’ ‘swimmer’s joy,’ ‘hiker’s happiness’ and ‘biker’s bliss’. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to feel a bit of that?

By taking charge of your physical, emotional and spiritual health, you will feel confident and empowered to create the life you have always dreamt of for yourself. As much as it takes courage to create one’s life, it takes courage to choose to take charge of one’s health.

With spring around the corner, what better time to join a natureobic class – a chance to get you on track and ready for the summer season? Think of the incredible health benefits and environmental elements you will be enjoying when you see the sunrise as you ride, run or walk to work each morning. Who knows how many sunrises and sunsets (and cappuccinos) you will enjoy before departing from this earthly planet! Now is the time to wake up to embrace your present physical well being or to begin to strive towards a new fitness goal for your healthy future – it’s in your hands.