



‘TRAINING *IS MY* THERAPY’

Radio and TV presenter, and mum-of-two, Zoe Hardman tells us why she prioritises fitness over everything else, and explains her reasons for taking up weight training in her 40s

Words: Joanna Ebsworth Photography: Karis Kennedy

Ever wonder how some women manage to juggle a hectic career with motherhood while also maintaining a consistent fitness regime? Us too! And who better to ask about bossing busy girl fitness than broadcaster, mum-of-two and fitness fanatic Zoe Hardman? Between the school run and bedtime, you'll find the 42-year-old presenter working hard to record twice-weekly episodes of her award-winning podcast *Made by Mamas* – launched five years ago with her co-founder and business partner, Georgia Dayton – or focusing on their new venture, Made by Mamas Careers, a new recruitment agency for parents looking to re-enter the workplace on flexible terms after raising children. If that wasn't enough, Zoe continues to host her Sunday morning radio show on Heart FM from 9am-12pm, and has recently been making short films on subjects such as early menopause, coercive control and missing people for the BBC's *Morning Live* TV show. Oh, and she also manages to squeeze in five workouts a week while balancing mummy duties on top. Which begs the question: how does she do it?

‘I juggle a lot, so I do get many people messaging to ask me how I find the time to train – and how they can find the time, too,’ says Hardman. ‘And while I know I'm very lucky to work on my business from home, I think it helps that I've made exercise a complete non-negotiable in my life. My workouts go in the diary and only come out if I have to film something for live TV. But I prioritise exercise over everything else because it ultimately helps me to be a

better mum, a better broadcaster and a better human. It makes me feel like I can handle things a lot better, and it's an hour for me where I don't have my phone so no one's trying to get me. I can just train and have fun’.

With her Saturdays full of kids' clubs and most of her Sundays dedicated to her radio show and more family time, Hardman maintains a strict weekday schedule to squeeze her workouts into the only gap she has in her day: after the school drop-off and before her working day starts at 10am.

‘My husband gets up at 5am every day to go out and train, and I get up with the kids at 6am because that's the time they like to wake up!’ she explains. ‘We love having a couple of hours together in the morning making sure we know which day of the week it is while I do the snacks, the water bottles and tick off the homework. Then I drop off my daughter Luna and meet my husband at the second school gate drop-off so he can run our son Kit in while I leg it up to the gym for my 9am training session at Instate Fitness in Cobham, Surrey. It does a range of classes, including small PT group sessions,

Hyrox classes, and Hybrid classes that mix cardio and strength training, and I train with a beautiful community of people. Even though we're all at different levels, we all love our fitness. And when we come together, we feel a sense of family, which gives me a real purpose to train’.

While Hardman tells us that she usually aims to complete three group PT sessions plus one Hybrid and one Hyrox session each week, she admits she doesn't mind skipping one if a job comes in or she's feeling tired. ‘I used to be

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fanatical about training, but I've really taken my foot off the pedal because my training is now about feeding my body rather than beating my body. I have a much more holistic view of my overall health and fitness. So, I love going to hot yoga or Pilates every couple of weeks, and I also like to walk either on my own or with a friend or the kids. There was a time when I would only be happy after a run if I'd done a 10K, but I've just got back from a 3K run where I stopped to look at the swans at the lock because it was a beautiful day. Now, my training is about feeling a sense of calm, doing things for fun and feeling alive – not feeling broken and unable to move off the floor after an hour of HIIT.'

ROAD TO RECOVERY

After alluding several times to the fact that her relationship with exercise hasn't always been a positive one, Hardman is happy to tell us more about the eating disorder she suffered for much of her 20s, and to explain how fitness went from being a part of the problem to becoming a form of 'therapy' on her road to recovery.

'I think it's really important for me to talk about my previous eating disorder because I'm one of the ones who've recovered, but I was in a very dark and frightening place for a long time,' she adds. 'My eating disorder started quite late at the age of 22, and it came down on me like the slam of a lid on a box. I restricted my diet and trained in a certain way that left me absolutely shattered, exhausted and empty. It was all about how many calories I could burn, how long I could stay in the gym for, and how long I could run for. I mean, I was running 10-15K at a time, six days a week, and it was excessive and scary and not good for me.'

'Things got bad and I couldn't see the light,' she continues. 'But being told by my doctor that I'd never have kids naturally was a lightbulb moment. I was 27 when I started my recovery, and probably 29 by the time I was out the other side of it. I had to have years of therapy to help me understand why I was so hell bent on punishing my body, but the happy ending is my health, fitness and nutrition are paramount to me now in a really healthy, balanced way.'

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Zoe is keen to stress to anyone suffering from an eating disorder that you can come out the other side of it and recover, like her, with help. 'When people are suffering from this kind of illness, they are ultimately in such a bad place they can't even see what honouring their body and fuelling it and really looking after it looks like. I look back on that period and think "gosh, I really was awful to my body," and I don't want that to be the case ever again. So,

I just eat the right things and have fun with exercise. If I don't want to train, I don't train. If I want to eat certain types of food I would never have dared to look at before, I will. Now, my training is my therapy because it helps me focus, and I enjoy it more because I use it in a different way. I go back to that feeling of being part of a community and having a purpose. It's just a completely different outlook.'

EARLY MENOPAUSE

Considering that fitness has always been a huge part of Hardman's life (she ran the 800m at national level as a teenager), it's fair to say her lack of motivation to train

after being diagnosed with early menopause at the age of 38 came as something of a surprise. Fortunately, it's a situation she has managed to turn around with the help of HRT and a newfound love of weight training.

'I knew early menopause was coming because it's hereditary in my family – my granny, mum and sister went through it, too – and I'd had tests that showed my anti-Müllerian hormone levels (measuring the number of eggs







a woman has left in her ovaries) were very low, which is why my husband and I were so quick to have our children,' she elaborates. 'I gave birth to our second child in 2018, but around the time we went into lockdown I also lost a very good friend. It was such a horrific time. I just knew I was going into early menopause. After three months of blood tests, including a DEXA scan to measure my bone strength and thickness, I was told my oestrogen levels were frighteningly low.

'For a very long time, I had no desire to train because I felt so exhausted,' continues Hardman. 'I also felt very low, cried a lot, had terrible headaches, brain fog, achy joints, and my libido was through the floor. With such bad symptoms and very young kids to look after, training just wasn't a priority, but going on HRT when I was 38 was revolutionary for giving me back some energy. Obviously, perimenopause is scary because you feel like you are losing yourself, but you also have the health worries on top, such as having a higher risk of developing osteoporosis. I had to just plug my body with oestrogen, and I also took up weight training which is something I'd always shied away from in the past.'

FINDING NEW STRENGTH

'At my worst, I was all about cardio and shredding and losing calories. Whereas now, it's about gaining muscle, strengthening my bones and being strong,' says Hardman. 'Once I hit 40, I had a good think about what I wanted my health to look like over the next 40 years, and one of the things I really wanted was to be strong – not for aesthetic reasons but because I want to protect my bones and my heart. I want to be able to pull myself up from a chair and go out for a walk when I'm in my 70s and 80s, and I want to stay strong for my kids. That's why weight training is a key part of my exercise regime now. I love seeing the progression I'm making, and I've signed up to do a Hyrox event in the Doubles category with a friend. Even though I've got a real mental block about the sledge push because it's so heavy and my legs go to jelly, I'm looking forward to it because I haven't competed for such a long time. I'm not going to take it too seriously; I'm just going to go and enjoy myself.'

Having fun while being active is key to making exercise a regular part of your lifestyle, says Hardman, especially

'I want to be able to pull myself up from a chair when I'm in my 80s'



if you're a busy mum who's looking to make fitness a priority. But she also acknowledges that finding the time to do it is the hardest challenge of all. 'As busy parents, we have so many things to do and, generally, nine times out of 10, we come bottom of that pile,' she admits. 'But if you are in a position where you want to prioritise more time for exercise, you have to know you are the only person who can make that happen. There will always be 50 other things you need to do, but you need to ask yourself if they're the things that are

going to feed your soul and make you a better parent and a better person.

'The fact is, if you want to live a happier, more fulfilled life, you have to schedule time in your diary for exercise, and you must just get moving. It doesn't have to involve going to the gym, which can be expensive and time consuming. It can be going for a walk with a friend, or doing a 20-minute YouTube workout after you've put the kids to bed. But getting moving, however that looks to you, can trigger a desire to move more and get fitter. And over time, you might just find that fitness becomes a priority rather than the last thing on your to-do list'. 🏋️