

It's called 'cozy cardio.' In a world seeking comfort, some see a happier mode of exercise

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Political polarization. Economic struggles. Inequity. Climate change. War. In an often-bruising world, you can hardly blame people for seeking out ways to cushion themselves. From weighted blankets to

"cozy" murder mystery novels to entire restaurants and cookbooks based on childhood comfort foods, the appetite for comfortable things just keeps growing.

Now some are seeking comfort even in their physical exertion. They are, it seems, entering the era of "cozy cardio," an activity that lies right at the crossroads of gym workout, self-pampering evening ... and nap time.

This method of (minimal) calorie burning has gained popularity on TikTok and Instagram ever since a woman named [Hope Zuckerbrow](#) began posting videos in late 2022. Let's describe it by what it doesn't do. It doesn't require you to:

- squeeze into spandex workout clothes;
- head out into the cold to drive to a fluorescently lit gym;
- lift heavy things;
- get winded to the beat of pulsating music.

Cozy cardio simply involves walking in place—in the comfort of your home—using a mini treadmill or "walking pad." No stress, no membership fees, no preening for other, buffer-than-thou gym rats. And you can even have a cup of hot tea by your side.

"I get so many messages from men and women—so many people—saying something along the lines of 'thank you so much for kind of flipping my mindset on what I thought exercise is supposed to be,'" Zuckerbrow says. "This feels so doable."

THE SELF-PAMPERING WORKOUT

The key is the setup.

Wearing soft sweatpants and your favorite comfy shirt, you light a few scented candles, make a healthy smoothie or pot of tea, dim the lights and put on a favorite TV show or movie. With your drink handy, you walk for an hour while getting lost in whatever you're watching, maybe walking just a bit more vigorously once you're warmed up.

Forget "no pain, no gain." Cozy cardio acknowledges that maybe you can't take much more pain at this particular moment, so just enjoy getting some steps in while [binge-watching](#) "The Bear" in your pajamas and call that your workout.

When Zuckerbrow posts on social media, "80% to 90% of the video itself is me romanticizing the exercise that I'm about to do," she says. "I am setting up my favorite beverage and I'm lighting those candles and my Scentsy and I'm getting my TV show."

No, walking won't give you six-pack abs. But could cozy cardio, which embraces the most appealing aspects of being a [couch potato](#) while keeping you off the couch, help even hardcore gym-avoiders stick with exercise long after New Year's resolution season ends?

For people battling the common barriers to exercise, the answer could be yes, says Alex Montoye, assistant professor of clinical exercise physiology at Alma College in Michigan.

Montoye cautions that if you're downshifting from vigorous daily workouts to something this mellow, the [health benefits](#) may plummet. But for someone who would otherwise watch TV from the couch, he says, it's progress to watch while walking—especially if it becomes a daily habit.

People struggle to make healthy habits stick, which makes cozy exercise "kind of a genius idea," says Catherine Sanderson, a professor of psychology at Amherst College in Massachusetts and author of "The Positive Shift: Mastering Mindset to Improve Happiness, Health, and Longevity."

"It fits in with a lot of what we know about how to get people to actually maintain behavior change," Sanderson says.

Along with removing the barriers to exercise, she says, "it very much relies on what psychologists would call positive reinforcement—the idea of, 'It's not just that I'm exercising. I'm getting to watch my favorite show. I'm tapping into something I want to be doing already.'"

ELIMINATE THE COMPETITION—BY STAYING HOME

The cozy approach also works for gymgoers who feel burned out at the idea of constant striving.

Ko Im, a mental health advocate who has taught yoga and meditation in New York and other U.S. cities, remembers a phase several years ago when "yoga challenges" were a trend.

"It was the yoga pose of the day—really, really hard yoga poses," Im says. More recently, she sees people pushing themselves to make the leaderboard in all their Peloton classes or to lose five more pounds.

"What I like," she says, "is the idea of enjoying the journey, not the goal. Does it feel good in my body today?"

As cozy cardio gains traction, Zuckerbrow hears from people who didn't

realize they could enjoy the journey.

Alyssa Royse, owner of Rocket Community Fitness in Seattle, has been alternating between full-on workouts at her gym and cozy exercise at home. Some days she switches off the sound on her Peloton ("I don't even want those cheery people talking to me") and just pedals while watching "the trashiest TV I can find, because it just takes my brain somewhere else."

The hashtag-friendly name "cozy cardio" could sound like an oxymoron. But perhaps, as 2024 takes root, it's the compromise our culture needs.

Driving across town in icy weather and pushing through an hour of Zumba or lifting 20-pound kettlebells just isn't possible some days. But lighting a candle in your living room and walking three miles in your pajamas while re-watching the final season of "Succession"? That's within reach.

And it might just serve up enough endorphins and bring enough oxygen into your lungs to cope with whatever global crisis tomorrow could bring.

"Too many people look at exercise as an all-or-nothing thing," Royse says. "It doesn't give people room to just be where they are today. And I think that's incredibly important."

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