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## Notes from a Working (Out) Mom

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## Notes from a Working (Out) Mom

When she pulled herself out of the '80s to pump up her exercise plan, she learned that her fitness is not about anyone else but her.

By Jenell Paris January 31, 2015

### Working Out Mom

I was that woman in your fitness class this morning. I couldn't hear the instructions over the music. I bumbled the steps. I jogged in place during the jumping jacks for fear I'd pee my pants. I came a few minutes early to get a spot in the back and then flushed with self-consciousness when, with a twist and a jump, the instructor reversed the entire class and I found myself at the front.

Same health club, a few weeks earlier. Across the gym, in a wall-sized mirror, I saw a woman who seemed to have stepped right out of 1989. This must have been the high-watermark of her fitness attire, and she was sticking with it. Blousy, elastic-waisted, sky blue shorts, a hot pink tank top with white flecks where the stretchiness used to be, and tennis shoes that were on clearance at the big box store several years ago.

Imagine my surprise when I realized that woman was me.

My appearance at the gym certainly isn't top priority anymore. It falls somewhere after my kids, work and the cat's weight-loss program. Nonetheless, I do have a lower limit, and I had to admit I had sunk below it.

Hence, my participation at the fitness class this morning. I wanted to be seen in my new yoga pants: black cropped leggings, designed and purchased in this century. I quickly realized that I looked magnificent. To put it more precisely, I looked just like everyone else; one in a throng of black-yoga-pant-clad women.

Sure, I was a little older than the athletic young women whose bellies don't display evidence of having been occupied by babies and who can do jumping jacks with abandon, but there were plenty of the rest of us. The new mother (the baby bottle falling out of her gym bag gave her away), concentrating intently, as if this was her only hour to herself this week. The older woman next to me, following my lead in lying on our backs and doing half-hearted crunches while, over nightclub music, the tattooed instructor barked orders for eight more push-ups. And the lone guy, hopelessly out of step but sweating earnestly, laughing out loud at himself.

I'm a working mom, always, and that's where I put most of my daily effort. I'm working-out mom, too, but only when I can be. I only have so much energy (and so much strength and so much time and so much ambition). And that's just got to be good enough. After all, fitness isn't about you in the eyes of others—other women or men. It's just about you, fitting into your own skin. It's a triumph to walk away from a workout feeling strong. Grateful that your heart can still pound and your body's range of motion isn't entirely constricted to workplace and domestic routines. Impressed that your brain can focus on your own well-being, and not only on what's for dinner and how many emails need to be answered ASAP.

My sky blue shorts will go the way of neon-colored leotards and legwarmers, but we shouldn't throw away everything from 1980s fitness. Back then, Richard Simmons often said, "I've always practiced this: Love yourself. Move your body. Watch your portions."

And, if need be, buy the yoga pants.

Jenell Paris is Professor of anthropology at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, PA, a mom of three young boys and a member of her local YMCA. She last wrote "It's About Work Life Survival" for Working Mother.