



THINGS THAT WORK

How you can tackle two New Year's resolutions at once



GOODGYM

GoodGym, which operates in the UK, organizes sessions that have people exercise while simultaneously doing good deeds in their own community.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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Editor's note: This is part of a series exploring initiatives around Boston, the country, and the world that have succeeded or hold great promise, from government to business to culture. For more stories, [click here](#).

Two of the most common New Year's resolutions? Get in better shape and give back to the community.

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Now imagine you could do both of those at once.

A London-based charity known as GoodGym offers just that, organizing sessions that allow people to exercise while simultaneously doing good deeds in their community. It's a concept that's found broad success in the UK and one that could soon translate to other cities, including Boston.

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Participants typically run a few miles round trip, stopping halfway at a location to do some blood-pumping, calorie-burning volunteer work — assisting elderly neighbors with tasks around their homes (think: gardening, yard work, painting, and moving furniture), or helping clear litter from public parks or sort boxes at a local food bank.

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The idea came to Ivo Gormley in 2009, when he was 27.

“My friends started saying I should go to the gym, but the gym didn’t seem like a good use of time and energy, and I thought maybe you can do something better with that energy,” said Gormley, the organization’s founder and chief executive.

Gormley eschewed treadmills and dumbbells and began going on runs to the home of a man he knew through his friend’s parents to bring the newspaper inside for him. The man, named Terry, was in his 60s, had trouble getting around, and had no other way of getting the paper.

Gormley soon convinced friends and acquaintances to follow his lead of combining altruism with physical fitness. The idea grew from there, and later that year he started GoodGym.

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Today, the organization boasts about 5,000 members in 39 locations across the UK. Participants have completed more than 73,000 good deeds since the organization formed, Gormley said. It’s funded through a combination of corporate contributions, donations from participants, and local government grants.



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The physical activity from performing volunteer tasks can provide as valuable a workout as hitting the gym, according to fitness specialists.

The concept has produced measurable benefits, according to an [evaluation](#) completed last year by an outside consulting firm the organization commissioned.

Among the review's findings: The elderly people who were visited by the organization's members reported significant improvements in their overall happiness and reductions in feelings of isolation and loneliness.

And the physical activity from performing volunteer tasks can provide as valuable a workout as hitting the gym, according to fitness specialists, who said they were not familiar with, but were intrigued by, the GoodGym concept.

For example, "Rather than pulling sleds that have weights on them, you're pushing wheelbarrows filled with sod to improve a park," said Rick Richey, a faculty instructor for the National Academy of Sports Medicine who owns gyms in New York City.

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Experts say the volunteer aspect can help motivate people to get off the couch and stick with their routine.

“It makes working out have a purpose,” said Tammy Petersen, founder and managing partner of the American Academy of Health and Fitness.

Studies have also found that doing good deeds and volunteering can improve one’s overall health.

“Of course, you should help people because it’s a good thing to do” said Stephen Post, a professor at Stony Brook University School of Medicine. “But as a side effect, it happens to be the case that, in general — it’s not absolute for everyone — you’re likely to feel more fulfilled, more gratified, less anxious, less stressed.”



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GoodGym has received requests to expand to the United States, and Gormley said he hopes to do that soon.

One of the organization's biggest supporters could be vital in helping it establish its footing in the United States, including in the Boston area, he said. New Balance has been a key sponsor of GoodGym since June 2014.

The company declined to comment on the possibility of GoodGym expanding to the United States, but it praised the charity for its work overseas.

"GoodGym is an incredible organization that has achieved fantastic things for the communities they operate in," Samantha Matthews, marketing manager for New Balance UK and Ireland, said in a statement.

It's not just the New Balance connection that might make Boston a good fit for this program, or one like it. This city has a long tradition of charitable giving. Earlier this year, Fidelity Charitable [ranked](#) Greater Boston among the top five metro areas in terms of charitable giving to several types of major causes including the human services, society benefit, and health sectors.

Boston is also known as a health- and fitness-focused town. The American College of Sports Medicine's annual American Fitness Index [ranking](#) has, for years, routinely named Greater Boston among the top 10 fittest metro areas in the country.

In addition to sponsorships, the UK organization gets funding from donations that members are encouraged, but not required, to pay when they join. (A donation of about \$13 a month is recommended.) Local governments also help fund the organization because its volunteer work provides valuable public benefit.

There are group sessions, which are led by trainers, and tend to involve bigger public-facing volunteer projects and tasks, like planting a community garden, or helping out at a food bank.

There are also "coach runs," which pair up one member with an isolated elderly person. The member promises to run at least once a week to that same elderly person's home to have a conversation with them and keep them company, typically for about a half hour.

Gormley said the elderly people are called [coaches](#) "because they keep us motivated to keep running." It also partners with dozens of social service agencies, which send referrals of elderly people who might need help with tasks or who are lonely.

That combination of fitness and volunteering is both novel and appealing, outside experts said.

"I've never heard of anything like that at all, and I find it absolutely refreshing," said Richey, from the national sports medicine group, after being told about GoodGym. "It's a brilliant concept. I would love to see that expand."



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GoodGym's volunteering tasks can include helping clear litter from public parks.

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