



FACT V FICTION: TONING SHOES

The buzz

The claims made about toning and wellness shoes are enticing: improve your leg and butt muscles simply by wearing them. On the Masai Barefoot Technology website, it says the Masai "sensor and balancing area" induces instability that your body instinctively tries to correct. "This correct action can help add more movement into everyday life and also lead to increased muscle activation and can help improve posture and balance."

Advertising for FitFlips features the slogan: "Firm up. Feel good."

A picture of Kim Kardashian advertises Skechers Shape-ups with the words: "The newest move in fitness ... is tying your shoelaces."

Toning-shoe sales in the US rose from \$US17 million in 2008 to almost \$US1 billion last year. But is firming up really as easy as putting on a pair of wobbly shoes?



What we know

In September, Reebok agreed to pay \$US25 million to settle false-advertising charges after US consumer watchdog the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) ruled that claims its EasyTone or RunTone shoes could strengthen hamstrings, calves and buttocks "just by walking" were unsubstantiated.

The ads claimed the shoes strengthened hamstrings and calves by up to 11 per cent more than regular trainers and toned the buttocks by up to 28 per cent more.

"There is no such thing as a no-work, no-sweat way to a fit and healthy body," FTC head of consumer protection David Vladek said.

Reebok pulled advertisements during the investigation and is barred from repeating the claims.

Meanwhile, American publication *Footwear News* recently reported that the FTC and agencies in other countries were investigating claims made by Skechers about its Shape-ups.

The experts' verdict

Sydney podiatrist Brenden Brown, a spokesman for the Australian Podiatry Association, says claims made about these shoes are exaggerated.

"I have had half-a-dozen patients who have gone on to have injuries because these shoes are based on being unstable.

"I think they are an expensive fad."

Physiotherapist Holly Brasher, a spokeswoman for the Australian Physiotherapy Association, says research shows these shoes do change muscle activation during walking but the clinical relevance of this has not been determined. **BRONWYN McNULTY**

You give, you learn

We all know volunteering helps others but there's growing evidence that the volunteer benefits as much as anyone, writes **Marty Wilson**.

A decade ago, after battling three years of drought, Brian Egan and his wife, Nerida, were forced to walk away from their farm on Queensland's Darling Downs with nothing. Losing his property was the final straw for Brian, who developed co-morbid depression after a long battle with post-traumatic stress following his experiences in the army in Vietnam and Indonesia. For a long time he was catatonic, unable to cope with life – he even had to learn to speak again.

The advice of a psychologist friend helped turn his life around. "The best thing you could do is find someone worse off than yourself and help them," he was told.

Brian and Nerida formed Aussie Helpers (aussiehelpers.org.au), a charity that assists rural farming families in need. The most valuable thing they give, Brian says, is "just someone to sit across the kitchen table and listen to them over a cuppa". "Time and time again we see a deep, genuine thankfulness that someone gives a bugger about them."

He estimates his group's volunteers and

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They do it gladly because they strongly believe in it. **Peter Cocks**

programs have helped 20 people avoid turning to suicide. He's one of those.

"I know I wouldn't be alive if I wasn't helping people," Egan says. "It's my medicine. All negativity is driven out of my head. Nothing in life makes you feel better than caring for someone else."

How helping makes us feel good

According to the 2008 report *What Makes Us Happy*, compiled by researchers at Deakin University, the "happiest" occupational group are those either semi or fully retired. But full-time volunteers are close behind. The report also found a "marked increase in well-being" in people when they engage in part-time voluntary work, regardless of whether they worked full time, are fully retired or even unemployed.

It's no wonder so many Australians are volunteering. The 2010 National Survey of Volunteering Issues, commissioned by



The volunteer brigade

Who is putting their hand up?

- ▶ 40 per cent of women and 37 per cent of men volunteer.
- ▶ The highest rate of volunteering is in people aged 45-54.
- ▶ People in a couple relationship with dependent children are most likely to volunteer.
- ▶ 593,700 people aged 18-24 had performed voluntary work in the previous 12 months.

What are they doing?

- ▶ Fund-raising: 48 per cent.
- ▶ Preparing and serving food: 31 per cent.
- ▶ Teaching/giving information: 28 per cent.
- ▶ Administration: 26 per cent.

Source: ABS General Social Survey 2010



Volunteering Australia, showed a remarkable 38 per cent of the Australian adult population did some volunteering in the previous 12 months. That's 6.4 million people helping others for free – and that number has doubled since 1995. The report estimated the number of annual hours of volunteer labour at 713 million, providing \$14.6 billion worth of unpaid labour.

When asked in the survey why they volunteered, most people mentioned "knowing my contribution makes a difference". Personal belief in a cause was also a big reason.

"Many of them incur out-of-pocket expenses ... but they do it gladly because they strongly believe in it," says a spokesman for Volunteering Australia, Peter Cocks.

So is volunteering a universal response? "I think it's culturally part of Australia," Cocks says. "It's part of our country's DNA to lend a hand." If you need further proof that we help because it makes us feel good, look no further than Generation Y, often accused of being

more selfish than their forebears. Last year, 593,700 people aged 18-24 performed voluntary work in the previous 12 months, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey.

Cocks notes young adults like their volunteering "to be instant and quick", in line with their approach to technology.

Nadia Redelman, 22, volunteers regularly for five organisations but has helped out more than 20, doing everything from office administration to fund-raising, preparing food for the homeless, circus performing (which is also her paid job) and State Emergency Service (SES) work.

She remembers being inspired to get involved in voluntary work by an SES crew, which helped her family at their eastern suburbs home when she was a child.

"When I was about eight or nine, there was a huge storm and a tree came down at our house, cutting the power lines and landing on our garage," Redelman says.

"Seeing the SES volunteers come out in the



Feel-good factor ... volunteering teaches teamwork (above); happy helpers Brian Egan (above left, at left) and Nadia Redelman (left). Photo: Danielle Smith

middle of the night and work away with their chainsaws, I really appreciated what they did for us and it looked pretty cool, so it had a real effect on me."

While volunteering with her local SES, Redelman, too, clammers on roofs and chops down dangerous trees in storms.

"I think that's just an amazing thing to be able to do for someone," she says.

"When they are in such a stressful situation, to be trained to come in, be calm and fix it, it's such a great feeling.

"It makes you feel good about yourself, which brings up your self-esteem."

Volunteering also gives her a wider view of the world. "Sometimes you get so caught up in your job and all the dramas of life, you forget to sort of take a step back and look at the world and remember that it's bigger than just you."

Redelman says the personal benefits extend beyond the feel-good vibe. She has increased her skills by volunteering.

"Organisations like the SES are great to volunteer for because you get a lot of

training and experience that are very valuable in life. They train you in all sorts of things, like teamwork, safe lifting, organising other people."

Redelman's voluntary circus work is one of the most rewarding things she does. "We often do shows on a volunteer basis for underprivileged kids and children being treated for cancer and the like," she says.

"Not only are you teaching them a circus skill but you're getting them to work together as a group and express themselves.

"It's such a positive, creative outlet and can help them get through many difficult situations. To use what I do professionally in a such a positive way and to have it be voluntary, it's very heart-warming."

Brian Egan agrees. "There's nothing better in life than helping somebody. When you help people and change their life even for one day, the flow-on effect goes through the whole family and even the whole community. Mother Teresa said, 'Giving is receiving' and it's true. The more I give, the more I seem to get back."

FITNESS CHALLENGE: LAUGHTER YOGA

What is it?

In 1995, Mumbai-based physician Maran Kataria combined yogic breathing with simulated laughter, believing it lowered stress-hormone levels and delivered physiological health benefits, whether or not the laughter was spontaneous or forced (apparently, our bodies can't tell the difference). During the hour-long session, false laughter gives way to contagious mirth as well as providing a cardio workout.

The experience

It is not the prospect of a laughter fest that attracts me to the Lindfield Laughter Club; rather, it's the chance to try a different form of yoga. Our group of nine spans the ages, from seven years

to about 60 – there's no age or fitness limit for fun. A quick round-robin introduction and then we move into



a breathing and clapping exercise: "ha ha ha, ho ho ho." Some wacky routines follow: the runaway lawn mower, the roller-coaster and speaking in gobbledegook, which results in peals of laughter. The nuttier the routine, the funnier it is and our early sceptical chuckles give way to unabashed guffaws.

Before long, I start to feel what I was scared might be missing from this class: fatigue. Somehow, in all this fun, I get a decent workout, especially stretching myself through the different movements. I am breathing deeply – puffing even – and I find my abdominals alive and well.

By the time we've formed ourselves on the studio floor, resting our heads on each other's tummies, we've gone. My laughter develops into that uncontrollable, silent, tear-producing chortle that will not allow me to catch my breath. By this stage I am sweating – and it feels great. Our yogi finishes the class with a cool-down in savasana (rest) pose with pillows.

Worth it? ★★★

It won't give you an iron-man physique but you'll have a hoot and certainly benefit from a gentle to mid-range cardio workout, lots of deep breathing and a dose of the world's best medicine. It's also about relaxing. Brilliant for uptight, remote or locked-in adults and kids.

Try it

Energy & More yoga studio, Lindfield Arcade (upstairs), 27-31 Lindfield Avenue, Lindfield, phone 0411 087 363. Free.

ANNA ANDERSON

GET INVOLVED

Tomorrow is International Volunteer Day – so where can you start? Opportunities are probably closer to home than you realise – your local schools, sporting clubs, aged-care facilities, hospitals. "There are very few people who won't have organisations in need of help in their own community," says Volunteering Australia spokesman Peter Cocks.

If that doesn't appeal, Cocks suggests using his organisation's volunteer-matching website – govolunteer.com.au – which lists volunteering options free for non-profit groups.

But if you can't afford the time, Cocks says you can still do one thing: "Most people who volunteer do it because they just love what they do. And all they ever ask for, according to our research, is every now and then for someone to say thank you."