



# Sam's Journey

with Magna Vitae 

A Magna Vitae customer experience - written in her own words by Sam.

“ January: the mist of festive cheer has dissipated in front of our eyes; the decorations are down (well, mine aren't actually but let us not linger on the subject of my domestic apathy), the inclement temperature no longer feels whimsically chilly, just plain cold, and all our devil-may-care life choices throughout the month of December, guided only by a shrug of the shoulders and a reckless cry of, "f\*\*\* it, it's Christmas!" have resulted in an anaemic bank balance and a body comprised of 75% mince pies and 25% regret. So what do we do to assuage the looming threat of the January Blues and the resounding cries of "New year; new me!" battering us from all sides? According to my intensive research (a quick Google search), a pretty substantial 12% of all new gym memberships are made in January. I like to think I'm not typically one to follow the crowd, but this year more than any before I've felt determined that a new year is the perfect opportunity to kickstart an overdue fresh start, so with that in mind, I ventured to the gym for my first workout in almost a year!

For background, I am not a total gym novice; I had a very brief gym career in my late teens that ended promptly and prematurely after a bruising (body and ego both) experience on a treadmill which was enough to put me off venturing into the gym again for YEARS. I next took the plunge in late 2021 when I signed up to Magna Vitae's absolutely brilliant employability scheme - more on that in another post! - which ignited a real love and appreciation for the benefits of exercise, especially in a gym environment. I stopped going to the gym when I gained employment last February, so tonight was my first time back after a really tough and life-changing year for me. Was I nervous? ABSOLUTELY!

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“ We might have an idea in our heads about what a typical gym goer looks like or what sort of lifestyle they lead. A lot of us might feel excluded because we feel we don't fit that trope; that we'd look and feel out of place; that we'd be judged; that we'd embarrass ourselves; that we wouldn't feel welcome; that we'd just find the whole experience torturous. Trust me, I felt the exact same way about gyms for most of my adult life. I'm the girl who begged off PE at school every single week with ever-more-outlandish fictitious health complaints (my long-suffering PE teacher would probably be amazed to discover I've lasted to the grand old age of 31 after an adolescence of hovering on the threshold of death's door); I refuse to run for any reason (going to miss the bus? I'll be late. Zombie apocalypse? Dine well on my entrails, my cadaverous friends!); I'm underweight; I'm bookish; and I have a pathological disinterest in any and all sports. And you know what else? I love going to the gym! And I bet you will too! So without further ado (I feel there may have been rather too much ado already), let's talk about my first gym trip of 2023...

In terms of preparation for a vigorous workout, the likes of which my slovenly body had long since ceased to expect, I spent the day glued to Disney+, eating McDonald's, and indulging in an afternoon nap, so not the best of starts, but the day was still young so I tried to make up for it by downing a bottle of Lucozade Sport (I initially assumed this meant there was some magical ingredient that would give me the mind and body of an athlete, but in hindsight it probably just means that the bottle has a sports cap but we live and we learn). My first source of anxiety was what on earth to wear. In my past gym sessions, I always favoured shorts but a) it's reeeeeally cold, and b) I'm quite the neglecter of my feminine beauty in winter and, frankly, it looked like I was wearing my shorts over a pair of furry trousers. Less Elle MacPherson and more Mr Tumnus. As it was, I had to make do with what I could clobber together in a pinch and the result was the violently pink monstrosity you see pictured. 'At least it will match my sweaty face by workout's end', I reasoned with a steely-faced glance in the mirror. And with that, I was off!

The first thing that hit me was the heady and comforting aroma of chlorine from the pool which always takes me back to childhood excursions to Center Parcs. It made me want to dive straight in, myself. But I wasn't there to swim tonight, so I headed instead to the gym. As soon as I walked through the door, it felt like no time had elapsed since my last visit and I immediately felt at home. There was a group of modestly-muscled youths crowded around the weights and kettlebells so I thought I'd keep a respectful distance and have a little warm-up on the exercise bike which is how I always started my sessions last time. The exercise bike is great because it's sort of tucked away in the corner so if you're feeling self-conscious, there's minimal risk of being observed!

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“ Also, it's a pretty unintimidating starter activity because, well, it's like a riding a bike as the saying goes - literally in this case! I popped my earphones in and selected a "high energy workout" playlist which was apparently "made for me" which was a bit of a shock, Mr Spotify being the only person who would ever associate that combination of words with me, and away I went! I soon picked up a steady rhythm, eyes glued to the little TV screen in front of me which was showing an episode of Pointless. I did have to take a very short break to recover myself from the shock of Shaun of the Dead proving to be a pointless answer (it's a cinematic masterpiece, for crying out loud!) but other than that, I had a very pleasant 10 minutes and felt up to the challenge of facing my old nemesis...the treadmill.

Now, in a true enemies-to-lovers, rags-to-riches story, I grew to LOVE the treadmill much to my own surprise! If you're worried about falling off, which was a HUGE anxiety of mine, just remember to clip the little clip onto your top, hold on to the handles and keep that reassuring big red emergency stop button in your line of vision! As I've said, I am deeply opposed to running but I love a good brisk walk. I also grew used to mountaineering up Lincoln's Steep Hill in my uni days so I like to have the speed set at a just-under-a-jog pace and the incline at a moderate challenge. But what is a fastish pace and a moderate challenge to me may not be true of everyone, and everyone will have different preferences so go wild! To my delight, House of Games was just starting so I watched the whole episode while gradually working up a sweat.

There was one slight mishap when I got a little overenthusiastic when Run Boy Run by Woodkid started playing in my ears. For some reason, that song always makes me imagine I'm Katniss in The Hunger Games when she's running away from those mutant dogs (highly unrealistic because I'd have just stopped to pet them myself). Anyway, in a fit of madness, I increased the speed to a steady jog which was fine except that it made me drop my phone - still unwisely in my grasp - and it clattered onto the speeding track and shot halfway across the room. A very kind member of staff handed it back to me unscathed and I tried to play it cool (not easy when you're dressed solely in varying shades of aggressive pink and sweating buckets). By the end of House of Games, my heart rate was a dizzying 160bpm, but that could have just been from prolonged exposure to Richard Osman (guilty crush). I was going to finish then, but I thought I'd give it one last hurrah to the dulcet tones of Britney Spears's Work B\*\*\*\*. 'What's one more song?' I thought to myself arrogantly. Turns out one more song can feel like a lifetime when your legs are like gelatinous tentacles and sweat's dripping into your eyes - Work Bitch felt longer than some nightmarish mashup of Purple Rain and American Pie might be... (longest songs in history).

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I'd promised myself to stay for the full hour, so I decided to finish off with a 15 minute play on the rowing machine, another old favourite. It took me an embarrassingly long time to figure out how to attach the straps to my feet but we got there in the end. I kept myself going by imagining myself as a long-lost daughter of Steve Redgrave winning Olympic glory for Team GB, but I accidentally caught sight of myself in a mirror and I looked more like a sweaty toddler trying to start a chainsaw which rather shattered the illusion. As the clock chimed (not literally, but that would be great) 7pm, I wobbled, exhausted but victorious, to the exit, treating myself to a Snickers from the very-well-stocked vending machine as a little 'well done' from me to me!

Already, after just one session, my anxiety feels a lit bit more controlled and I feel like I've achieved something today which is such a peaceful thought for me. People go to the gym for a whole host of reasons (and I can't wait to be nosy and find them all out!) but for me, it is absolutely a relaxing break for my mind at the same time as being a challenge for my body. The benefits of exercise to our mental health are enormous and, as a mentally unwell person who's not sporty/fit/particularly active, I KNOW that that's not necessarily what you want to hear; I spent years rolling my eyes at doctors/therapists/friends who told me the same thing but the reason everyone says it is because it's true! I could probably talk about this subject for way longer but I think that may be a post for another day.



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