

READING GROUP GUIDE

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1. Which protagonist (Natalie, Julia, Shelby, or Reese) did you most relate to and why?
2. After a lack of stability early in life, Natalie craved being in one place. What made Smitten special to her? Have you ever felt like that about a place?
3. Natalie believed her sister's report about Carson. Have you ever believed gossip and wished you hadn't?
4. When Julia returns to Smitten, long-lost feelings for her brother's best friend Zak resurface. Has coming back to a familiar place ever brought back unresolved feelings? Did you have to deal with them the second time? How did you resolve them?
5. Julia loves her friends and her hometown, but going back to New York City feels easier. Have you ever had to make the harder choice to do the right thing? How did you know it was the right decision for you?
6. Julia has a strong independent streak, but ultimately discovers that counting on others can make life easier and more fulfilling. Have you ever tried to do something alone only to discover the lesson was in submitting to others? What was the outcome?
7. When the girls support Reese in her outfitter's store dreams, they do things they wouldn't otherwise be interested in—such as roller blading. Do you have friends who expand your world that way? How has it made you a better person?
8. Shelby had some major issues with her dad. Before they could have healing in their relationship, she had to truly forgive him. In fact, he had to forgive himself. Have you ever had a relationship like that? Did you choose to forgive (with God's help) and receive

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- healing, or are you still holding on to the bitterness? What can you do to let it go?
9. Sometimes life isn't fair. Circumstances can change in an instant. Nick's circumstances changed when his ex-wife died and his daughter, Willow, came to live with him. Despite the challenges, they settled into their new life together and shared a relationship they wouldn't have had otherwise. When life hands you challenges, do you fight them or do you try to learn from them and make your life better?
10. Shelby gained strength and support from her friends. She also offered that same support back to them. Do you have someone like that in your life? Are you that someone to someone else? Reach out today.
11. The more Shelby and Nick got to know each other, the more they had to work through in their relationship, but difficulties can bring growth in a relationship and make it stronger. Think of the relationships in your life. What has truly made them grow?
12. It's clear from the beginning of "All Along" that Reese Mackenzie is a planner, but it doesn't take long for her plan to make Griffen love her go awry. Have you ever been so committed to your own plans that God's will got lost somewhere along the way? How did you come to that realization? What happened as a result?
13. In what ways did Griffen balance Reese? Who provides balance for you, and in what ways?
14. Reese's faith falters as they approach Sawyer's wedding and the finalization of their plans for Smitten. Why do you think having faith can be so difficult? When was the last time your faith faltered? What got you through that time?
15. How did the friendship between Natalie, Julia, Shelby, and Reese serve as a support system spiritually, emotionally, and physically? Who is your support system and how do you hold each other up?

SMITTEN WITH FRIENDSHIP

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How do four best-selling authors collaborate on a highly-interconnected novella collection? Very carefully. And it helps when you're best friends.

COLLEEN COBLE: The four of us are more than writing partners—we're soul mates. We are so close we can finish sentences for each other. Kristin and Di are the funny ones who have crazy things happen to them. Denise is the deep thinker who keeps us all organized. I'm the mom of the group and mother everyone within an inch of their lives. That first picture of us all together at the coffee shop is on my website: colleencoble.com. If you think we've aged, don't tell us, okay?

DIANN HUNT: I confess to pouting over the fact that the three of them had written a novella collection or two together before I came along. I mentioned it once—okay, maybe twice—I've never been good at math—that I wanted to do a collection with them. I never dreamed it would happen.

DENISE HUNTER: When we were approached about doing a collection, we were so excited. I mean, the chance to do what we love, with the people we love? What could be better?

COLLEEN: An editor we all knew asked us if we'd consider doing a historical collection. We had never worked together on a project before and Diann really wanted to try that. For Di's sake, I asked Ami McConnell, my editor at Thomas Nelson, if we could do it (Denise and I had an exclusive contract and needed permission), but Ami wondered if we'd want to do something very different for Thomas Nelson instead. She went to Allen Arnold, our publisher, and he was enthusiastic. I talked to the girls and we brainstormed several ideas that might make a novel in four parts, which is what this story really is.

AMI MCCONNELL (EDITOR): I've worked with each of these authors on their individual, full-length novels, so I knew the wealth of talent they had for creating captivating, inspiring romances. That excited me. But I also knew firsthand about their dynamic as a friendship circle. I met Colleen, Kristin, Diann, and Denise at a writer's conference years ago in California. I wanted readers to experience the energy, the laughter, the intense feeling of knowing and being known that they share. If we could capture that feeling and let the reader feel it vicariously along with some terrific romances, I knew we'd have a hit.

KRISTIN BILLERBECK: Writing can be such a lonely sport, and I missed the connection we'd had when working on earlier projects. We already work so well together brainstorming each other's books, so to work together on one book, where the ideas are coming so fast and furious? It was simply pure joy.

You can see us brainstorming and giggling at the SmittenVermont.com site.

DIANN: Since we found one another, loneliness is no more! The first person I called when I found out I had lymphoma was Colleen, who then called the other girls. Did I mention that Colleen called me on my cell phone at the hospital—as I was being rolled down the hall on a gurney after a biopsy—to tell me one of my books had fained in the ACFW Book of the Year Contest? Through the years we had laughed a lot together and when it was time to cry, we did that together too, especially when I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. But laughter always follows us.

DENISE: Especially when we visited you in the hospital, Di! And Colleen punched your morphine button when she thought she was calling the nurse. I tried to stop her. Really I did. But it was like one of those slow motion things where you're shouting n-o-o and nothing is coming out.

COLLEEN: It was an honest mistake! You girls will never let me live it down.

DENISE: Well, what do you expect when you drug our friend?

DIANN: I went to sleep happy. 😊

KRISTIN: What would we do without one another? There are days when I don't know how I will make it through everything I have to do with four kids. The girls help me keep my sanity.

COLLEEN: And when Dave was diagnosed with prostate cancer this year, I cried on your shoulders. But you

know what? I wouldn't trade walking the valleys with my friends for anything. Anyone can have a friend who laughs over coffee. But how many of us are blessed with friends who stick "closer than a brother," as scripture says, when the going gets tough?

DENISE: I have to take Justin to college in a few weeks. My first little chick out of the nest. The girls know how I like to know exactly what's going to happen. And this is outside my comfort zone. So get the DeBrand truffles ready, okay? I like the raspberry.

DIANN: DeBrands? Did someone say DeBrands? You can do it, D. We'll pray you through it. And get you DeBrands.☺

AMI: And I'm the fifth wheel, always, but you've taken me in—and it's been a bonding year for sure. I've prayed for each of you and felt your prayers this year as I've navigated a hard road, a tough divorce. Trials for all of us—and so much grace! You all have such different personalities and they complement one another. How does that work in real life?

KRISTIN: You mean how we're each like a character from *Winnie the Pooh*? Colleen blogged about it here: girlswriteout.blogspot.com/2010/11/plotting-of-smitten.html. We all laughed but she might be a little right. Though I will say Colleen is totally Tigger. Her cheerfulness can be positively annoying.

DENISE: You said it; I didn't.

AMI: So you sent in your ideas for a novella collection. Several, if I recall correctly. I'm a sucker for a good romance, so that was a given. Key for me was the

setting. What setting would entice readers to settle in for four great romance stories? The notion of a small town—of knowing the names of the folks you pass on the street—that just makes me smile. When you all said “Vermont,” I was swooning!

DIANN: I remember when we heard from you that *Smitten* was your pick from the ideas list we’d sent in. There was a lot of *whoohooo!-ing* over email, and I’m certain a trip to DeBrand’s was mentioned.☺

DENISE: That might’ve been me because I was pulling for Smitten. You can just see the joy in all our faces in that photo we took when we signed the contract (DeniseHunterBooks.com). The whole concept of Smitten excited us all. It’s about a town whose survival is threatened when their logging company closes. Then four friends devise a plan to turn Smitten, Vermont, into the country’s premier honeymoon destination—and each finds a love of her own in the process.

KRISTIN: Why Vermont? We were looking for a setting that was highly romantic, but also remote enough where the idea of it being a “new” romantic destination spot worked. We also wanted to do a story for each season, so we needed a locale that had winter sports and summer recreation. Vermont just felt cozy and a fellow writer, Rick Acker, helped us brainstorm. His family owns a stand of trees in another state. So we liked the idea of a logging mill being abandoned and the townspeople rallying together to find new hope in their town. Community is so important to our book and to our friendship. Our image of an idyllic

community naturally includes us together, something we can't be with life going on around us. But when we are together, it's like the image of community.

DENISE: We knew these stories would be highly interconnected, with story threads running through the whole collection and with each of our heroines appearing in all four stories. I think it was Colleen who suggested we give our heroines our own basic personalities. We know each other well, so putting words in each others' mouths would be a piece of cake.

COLLEEN: I knew I wanted to get to write about Kristin's character, Julia, giving Natalie, my character, a pair of shoes. And how Diann's character, Shelby, loves her small dog and dresses it up. And how Denise's character, Reese, organizes her spices by alphabet. And okay, I admit I might have sprinkled a few other friends in there. Like Natalie was named for a certain editor friend at Thomas Nelson. And there is a certain Mrs. Deshler mentioned . . .

DENISE: We're not exactly like our characters though. My heroine Reese, for example, is an exercise nut. Now don't get me wrong, I'm a walker and all, but I don't jog, and I sure don't jog up mountains or play one-on-one basketball in the middle of winter.

DIANN: Well, since we're being honest here, I'm not exactly as elegant as my heroine, Shelby. I know that comes as a shock to you all. But I DO have a creampuff dog. Take a peek at Latte on my website at diannhunt.com. Isn't she adorable?

COLLEEN: In real life I hate conflict, so if I were really my character, I'd have asked Kristin's character to confront my hero, Carson. But for the sake of the story, my "Natalie" had to do that hard work! It worked well for her in the end . . .

KRISTIN: This book was so easy to write because we know each other so well. In fact, we even had Colleen's character saying the same thing in two of the stories. We simply know how the others will react. Colleen is comfortable being bossy (or the mother, depending on if you agree with her at that moment). She's also incredible with setting, so her taking the first story allowed the rest of us to follow that lead. Denise is the organizer, so she cleaned up all the loose ends by taking the last story in winter. Diann seems to find it appropriate to listen to Christmas carols in July and I do believe she starts decorating her tree around October, so she got to do that in the story. I got spring—because I've lived in California all my life and have no idea what a real winter looks like.

One way I'm significantly different from my character, Julia, though, is that I can only take nature in small doses, and the idea of small-town living gives me hives. So I'm glad to live in Smitten with my girls, but ultimately, I love being able to walk to Korean, Indian, or Japanese restaurants any time I feel like it.

AMI: We should've had you take winter so you would have to do some research!

DENISE: Like a trip to Indiana in February!

DIANN: I loved how the community came together to save the town, and the faith of a little girl led the way. Our Heavenly Father is so creative that way. He surprises us with answers to our prayers in ways we hadn't considered.

DENISE: That is so true. I was praying hard when we finished our stories, and it was time to send them to the other girls. Yikes. Was I the only one who was nervous? I mean, they knew what they were getting when they signed me up, but we were in this together, and I didn't want to let my pals down, you know?

COLLEEN: I think we were all a little nervous! Would this idea even work? But when I read through the entire story, I was struck by how our unique voices brought a distinct flavor to the whole. *Smitten* is just plain fun to read!

DENISE: Colleen, our fearless leader, compiled the stories into one document and hit Send. Then we waited patiently to hear from Ami. We did not email each other seeking reassurance. We did not bite our nails to the quick. And we never, not even once, turned to chocolate for comfort.

AMI: The manuscript was everything I'd hoped for: four individually compelling novellas that read together as if it were a cohesive experience. And the vicarious experience of friendship in a small town was just so lovely and so real! I never wanted to leave *Smitten*.

KRISTIN: The editorial process, which I thought would

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be a nightmare, was incredibly easy. Ami and LB each gave us feedback and we simply made sure all our facts were straight and the characters/setting consistent.

DENISE: In many ways, *Smitten* is a celebration of our friendship, a celebration of enduring love, and a celebration of God's unexpected blessings, all wrapped up in one book. We hope our readers will feel part of that as they join us on a journey to a very special place called Smitten.

RECIPES FROM NATALIE

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Mug Cake

2 tablespoons almond flour
1 1/2 teaspoons xylitol
1 tablespoon cocoa powder, heaping
1 egg
1 1/2 tablespoons half and half or cream
1 tablespoon butter or coconut oil
Splash of vanilla extract
1 large coffee mug

Mix all dry ingredients in mug, add egg and blend thoroughly. Add milk, oil, and vanilla and mix. Place in 1000-watt microwave for 90 seconds. Do not cover mug. Cake will rise. Let cool and place on a plate. Add a little whipped cream to the top.

Cranberry Bars

1 1/2 cups raw pecans
10 dates, pitted
2 tablespoons coconut oil
1/4 teaspoon Celtic sea salt
6 cups fresh cranberries
1 cup agave nectar
1 tablespoon orange zest

Grind dates and pecans in food processor.
Add in oil and salt until mixture begins to form a ball.
Press crust into an 8x8-inch, greased baking dish.
Bake at 350° for 10–12 minutes until lightly browned.

Cranberry Topping

Stir together 4 cups cranberries, agave, and orange zest then bring mixture to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until cranberries start to dissolve, about 10–15 minutes.

Add remaining 2 cups cranberries and cook for 5 more minutes with lid still on.

Remove mixture from heat and cool for 10 minutes before pouring over pecan crust.

Let set at least an hour.

Cauliflower Pizza Crust

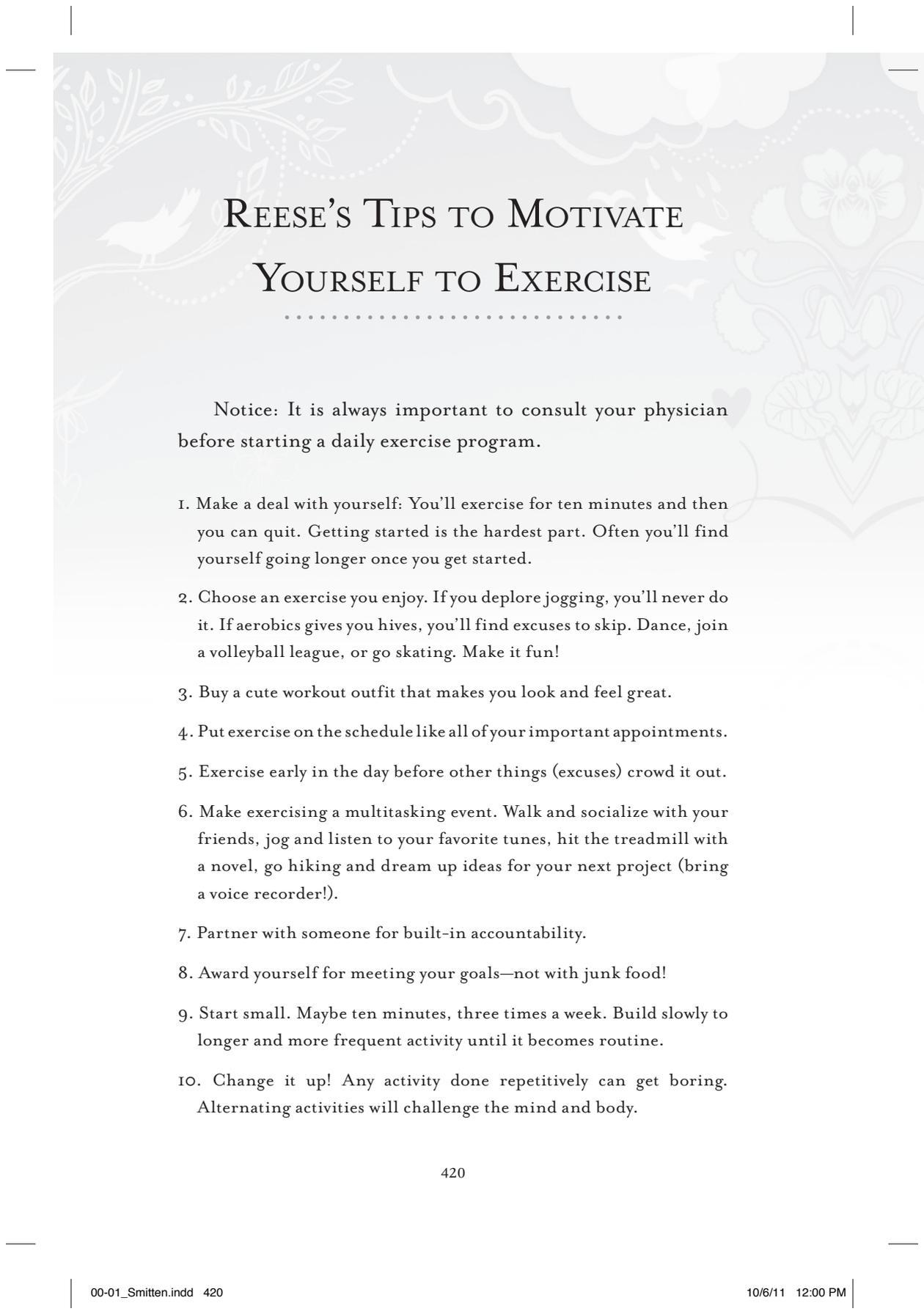
2 cups cooked, mashed cauliflower (I also use RAW
cabbage run through the food processor)

3 eggs

1 cup mozzarella cheese

Spray a cookie sheet with non-stick spray. In a medium bowl, combine cauliflower, egg, and mozzarella. Press evenly on the pan. Sprinkle Italian seasonings across the top.

Bake at 450° for 15–20 minutes. Remove the pan from the oven. Spread tomato paste on the crust, more Italian seasonings, then toppings like cooked meats, mushrooms, and cheese. Place under a broiler at high heat just until the cheese is melted.

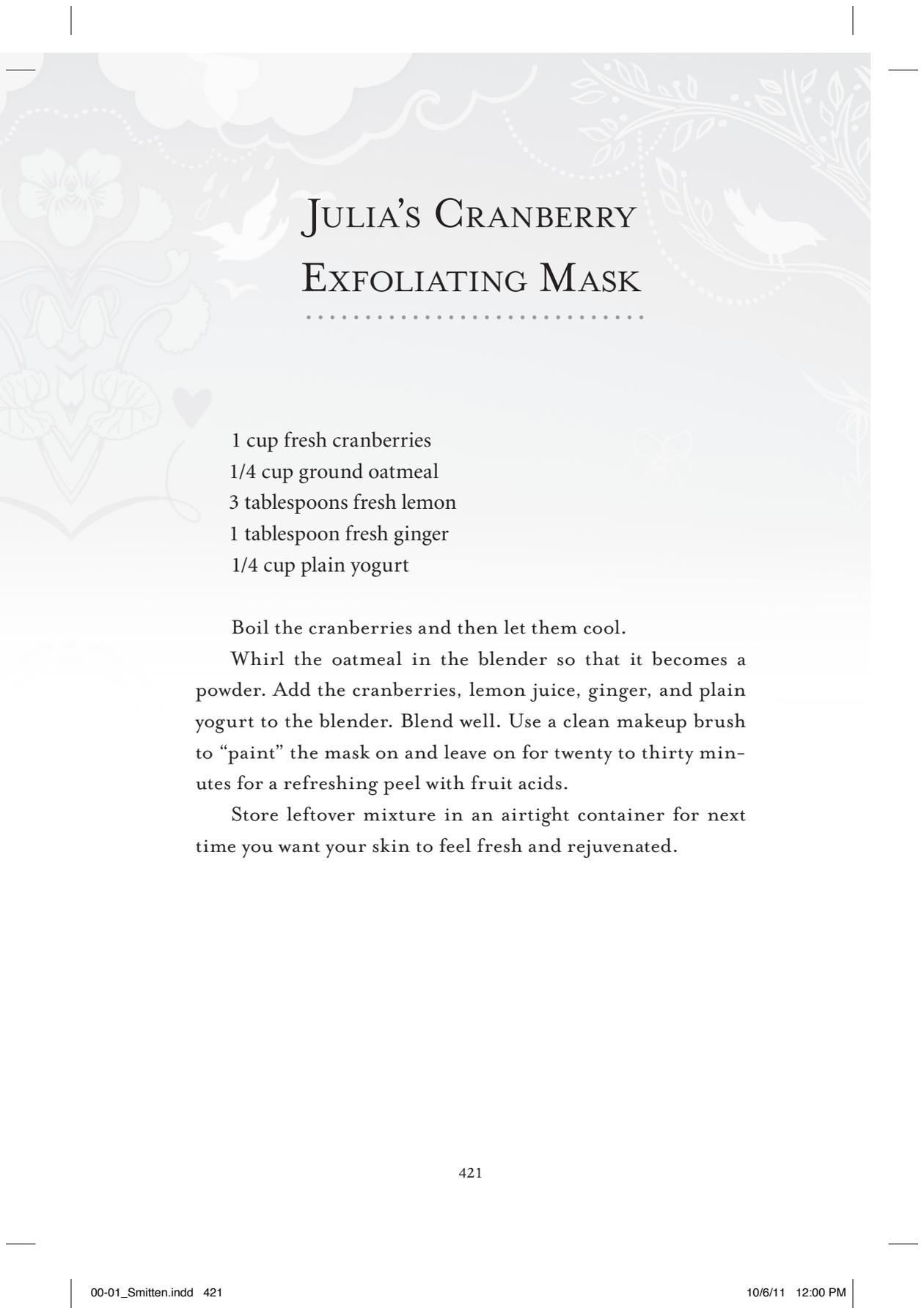


REESE'S TIPS TO MOTIVATE YOURSELF TO EXERCISE

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Notice: It is always important to consult your physician before starting a daily exercise program.

1. Make a deal with yourself: You'll exercise for ten minutes and then you can quit. Getting started is the hardest part. Often you'll find yourself going longer once you get started.
2. Choose an exercise you enjoy. If you deplore jogging, you'll never do it. If aerobics gives you hives, you'll find excuses to skip. Dance, join a volleyball league, or go skating. Make it fun!
3. Buy a cute workout outfit that makes you look and feel great.
4. Put exercise on the schedule like all of your important appointments.
5. Exercise early in the day before other things (excuses) crowd it out.
6. Make exercising a multitasking event. Walk and socialize with your friends, jog and listen to your favorite tunes, hit the treadmill with a novel, go hiking and dream up ideas for your next project (bring a voice recorder!).
7. Partner with someone for built-in accountability.
8. Award yourself for meeting your goals—not with junk food!
9. Start small. Maybe ten minutes, three times a week. Build slowly to longer and more frequent activity until it becomes routine.
10. Change it up! Any activity done repetitively can get boring. Alternating activities will challenge the mind and body.



JULIA'S CRANBERRY EXFOLIATING MASK

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- 1 cup fresh cranberries
- 1/4 cup ground oatmeal
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon
- 1 tablespoon fresh ginger
- 1/4 cup plain yogurt

Boil the cranberries and then let them cool.

Whirl the oatmeal in the blender so that it becomes a powder. Add the cranberries, lemon juice, ginger, and plain yogurt to the blender. Blend well. Use a clean makeup brush to “paint” the mask on and leave on for twenty to thirty minutes for a refreshing peel with fruit acids.

Store leftover mixture in an airtight container for next time you want your skin to feel fresh and rejuvenated.