

HOW TO GET THE POTATO OFF THE COUCH

By Dr. Rosalyn M Laudati

Newport Beach, CA

For more than 20 years I have helped couples and families to achieve a healthier, happier lifetime together. One of the most frequent complaints I hear is “He/she won’t get off the couch.” Whether this is referring to a spouse, child, or roommate the complaint is the same. It refers not just to an energy level difference, which has an impact on a relationship, but also to some behavior that may be a symptom of deeper problems.

Take the case of Mo and Allison* who were 2 roommates. Mo was a very energetic, caring, kind person who wanted to include Allison in lots of activities. All Allison wanted to do upon arriving at home, was to plop herself on the couch and zone out on TV. Mo tried begging, and trying to tempt Allison to join in but nothing worked. Finally, Mo came to counseling to revivify a dying relationship. It appears that Mo was subtly rewarding Allison’s sedentary behavior by bringing her food and drinks while she sat there zoning out. This behavior on Mo’s part needed to cease immediately. He was unknowingly reinforcing her couch potato status .He needed to stop bringing her things and he needed to discourage her behavior by not talking to her or interacting in any way. He was to stop all attempts to fulfill her needs. At least Allison would have to get up to get snacks, and when she did, Mo was to smile and converse. This way she got rewarded with his attention when she moved off the couch. It worked and in a few weeks she was spending more time off the couch and interacting with her roommate.

In another instance of Couch Potato Syndrome, Carol came to counseling stating that her husband of many years had become the world’s worst couch potato since he’d gained some weight. She wanted him to exercise, to go to the gym, to get back into an active life but he showed only irritation when she would urge him to do these things. Finally Carol sought psychological treatment. Her husband appeared to have lost interest in everything but the TV. He was moody, irritable, overweight, and thoroughly NOT a joy to live with. I asked Carol to get her husband to their family doctor for a workup and weight analysis. The doctor may also see fit to prescribe antidepressant medication, depending on how severe her husband’s mood swings were. Secondly, I asked Carol to ask her husband to accompany her only for a small walk a day,

say around the block or only around part of the block. Her interest in him plus the minuteness of the request might help him to get out of his doldrums. She was to be animated, cheerful and very attentive to him on these walks. A small step toward a goal is better than nothing. Carol was able to get her husband to start small, as he had always shunned bigger goals like gyms and exercise classes. Carol's behavior was the crucial factor in getting her husband off the couch. She projected understanding, compassion, patience, and a pleasantly rewarding demeanor when he made those crucial first attempts. He continued to improve and though it was a long road ahead, with her support, he was able to get the weight off and the accompanying depression lifted.

Everyone is motivated by something. Most couch potato situations need to be analyzed in terms of what is keeping the behavior going, what is rewarding the behavior, and what is the root cause of it. Often, an undiagnosed depression may be at the root and psychological treatment may produce results in a very brief time period. When the behavior problem is more superficial, use of habit breaking techniques which are tailored to a specific situation are advisable. A clinical psychologist is capable of creating a treatment plan for any of these instances.

Dr. Laudati is a licensed psychologist. She has practiced in Newport Beach, California (ph: 949-721-9339) and has helped many couples, families, and friends find a way off the couch.

*All names herein are fictitious and do not refer to actual individuals.

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