

Getting the Exercise Habit

Why is it so hard to get regular exercise when I know it's good for me?

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The Challenge

Everyone agrees that exercise is good for us both physically as well as mentally, so why is it so hard to make a habit of it? Most people struggle with regular exercise.

Some of the most common reasons for not “getting off the coach” are time, money, and motivation. Since we make choices about what to do with our extra time (outside of working, eating and sleeping), there is no such thing as true lack of time, there are just a series of choices. And exercise does not have to cost anything at all. So, a lack of lack of motivation keeps us from regular exercise. Motivation is something we are all born with since it is part of our survival “instinct”, but motivation needs to be continually cultivated – or exercised – to keep it going!

There are number of factors that affect our motivation to work-out and stay fit. Here a just a few:

1. *It's just too hard.* Most of us get overzealous when we embark on an exercise regime. We become overly enthusiastic, or inflexible, with ourselves by setting *impossible goals*. Setting goals that are unattainable leads to discouragement and we finally abandon the idea of working out altogether. For example, telling yourself that you are going to go to the gym at least 5 days a week, or will jog thirty minutes before work every day is just too hard for most people to start out with.
2. *It's too complicated.* Most of us bite off more than we can chew when it comes to exercise. On New Years Eve we resolved to start running again, to lift weights, to drink more water and to watch our caloric intake. It gets too complicated when we bombard ourselves with too many “shoulds.” With *multiple goals*, our ability to stay consistently focused on the same goal is significantly compromised. It is hard to establish an exercise habit when we have too many, or even competing goals.

The Solution

Most mental health professionals tell their patients about the many benefits of physical exercise such as a stronger, healthier heart and more effective weight control (which can help reduce many other risk factors). However, many of their patients find it difficult to start and stay with an exercise program. At RealPsychSolutions we know that the best way to make exercise a habit is to keep it simple.

Here are the 4 simple steps to start the exercise habit (and keep it going). These four steps can be used with any habit you are ready to start:

1. Set an easily attainable, specific and measurable goal. To get started on your goal your first need to:
 - *Write it down or visualize/draw it before you start:* Doing so will make this goal more important to you.
 - *Easy Does It:* Avoid setting complicated goals. Difficult goals trip you up and don't give you results. It is easier to attain a realistic goal of walking outside 5 minutes day than to spend 35 minutes on a treadmill to start. It is important to reach each goal, and then to progress to the next goal. By *gradually* building to a larger goal (e.g. of walking 15mins a day in 8-10 weeks) you will more likely reach your final goal.
 - *Be Specific:* You can't just say "I want to exercise" or "I'm going to the gym tomorrow". You need to have a specific time, place and activity in mind or you will just forget.
 - Have a Trigger: It is probably best to have a trigger or cue before you execute your habit. A signal or trigger is something that helps you be consistent. For instance, the trigger could be getting out of bed, or after breakfast or on the way to/from work.
 - Measurable: You will do your habit more often if you make it measureable. By that I mean, not just walk but walk $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile or do 30 minutes of the Stairmaster 3xs/week.
 - One goal: Stick to this one goal for at least a month. Two months if you can bear it. Don't start up a second goal during that 30-day period. If you do, you are scrapping this goal.
 - *Track it daily and immediately before/after the event:* This is the key habit to learn. If you can log your workout, you will start to see your progress, and the written record will motivate you to keep going at it. No exceptions. And don't make the log complicated — that will only make you resist doing the log. Just the date, time, and what you did.
2. Share it with others. You can share your goals and progress in many ways: on a blog or Twitter, with your spouse, friends or family, a workout partner, coach, a group, or a class. However you set it up, make it part of your process that you have to report your daily workout to other people. But be sure that they know

- your goal, that you are going to report to them, and that they should expect a report every day.
3. Add motivation as needed. Don't just give up. If you miss two consecutive workouts, you need to look at why, and add a new motivation. Rewards, more external pressure, new sources of inspiration, are all ways to get more energy and keep yourself motivated.