

Physical activity - staying motivated

Making any change in behaviour, such as starting a physical activity program, is significant and can be challenging – the next thing is to make it a habit.

Motivation levels fluctuate in everyone; even exercise fanatics find it hard to get motivated from time to time. So before you start, accept that there will be brief setbacks or times when you do not feel like exercising. If this occurs, remind yourself that this is not failure – it's simply life getting in the way. Be ready for these 'slips'. Think about some strategies to overcome those hurdles and how you can pick up where you left off. Don't be discouraged. It happens to all of us.

Remember, always consult with your doctor before beginning any new exercise program, particularly if you are overweight, over 40 years of age, haven't exercised in a long time or have a chronic medical condition.

Start off right

Suggestions include:

- Pick an activity (or range of activities) that appeals to you. Also choose activities that you are confident you can manage physically, and that suit your lifestyle and your income. For example, if you don't like jogging or have previously failed at sustaining a jogging program, chances are you won't keep it up. Likewise, an expensive sport like golf or waterskiing may not be practicable.
- Choose an activity that is close to home or work. You may find yourself skipping sessions if it is not a convenient distance.
- Set realistic goals. For example rather than aiming for a set amount of weight loss, aim for four activity sessions per week.
- We all have different motivations to exercise. Think about your personal fitness goals to help you on those days when you don't feel like lacing up your sneakers.
- Remember also that research indicates you don't need to lose weight to gain significant health benefits.
- Start small. Aim to just include more general activity into your day, working toward a continuous bout of exercise for about 10 minutes per day at first, and gradually work your way up to 30 minutes or more.
- Find a friend or family member to be active with. Motivate and reward each other and enjoy the process together.
- This is obviously important to you or you would not have taken the steps to change your behaviour, so make exercise a priority in your life.
- Make the commitment. Put 'exercise appointments' in your diary, at least for the first few weeks until exercise becomes a habit.

Don't think about it too much

It's probably best not to think about it too much – just go ahead and do it! If you think too much about the pros and cons of exercising, you may well talk yourself out of it. Just do it. Book dates in your diary and stick to them.

Monitor your progress

It's easier to stick to an exercise routine if you can see the benefits. Suggestions include:

- Keep a training diary. Pay attention to the way you feel. Was yesterday's gardening session easier on your back? Are your jeans looser? Were you able to laugh off an irritating event today? Simply taking the time to recognise these little improvements to your daily quality of life can increase your motivation to exercise.
- Reward yourself whenever you reach a fitness goal – for example, your aim is to walk every night after work and you've achieved your goal. Rewards could range from a magazine membership to a manicure. The point is to celebrate your achievements in any way that is meaningful to you.

Avoid boredom

Suggestions include:

- Choose from a range of physical activities.
- If you feel bored by an exercise routine, try something new or challenge yourself. Try to walk a bit faster on your 30-minute walk. Or choose a different route.
- Set new fitness goals.
- Find a training partner or join a group activity. The enthusiasm of others and the sense of camaraderie can buoy you along.
- Purchase new equipment or a new workout outfit.

Common pitfalls

Most of us find it difficult to resume regular exercise following a significant break. Suggestions on how to overcome disruptions to your exercise routine include:

- **Illness** – once you feel a little better, opt for a gentle exercise routine. For example, take a 10-minute stroll around the neighbourhood instead of jogging for an hour.
- **Injury** – you will need to set new goals for the short term. Make recovery, not exercise, your first priority. Gentle exercise like walking, stretching or swimming may be possible. Be guided by your doctor or physiotherapist about how you can keep fit while recovering.
- **Holiday** – take advantage of local facilities. For example, some hotels have swimming pools, tennis courts or gyms. If you're holidaying at the beach, take a daily swim. Tour on foot – walking is one of the best ways to see the sights and is a great aerobic and weight-bearing exercise.
- **Business commitments** – exercise at your desk. Perform stretches. Take a break from your desk and walk the stairs every now and then.
- **Bad weather** – adapt your routine. Exercise indoors – head to your local swimming pool or gym.

Be flexible

Remember that unexpected events will arise from time to time and disrupt your exercise routine. Think about ways to cope with interruptions. Suggestions include:

- Don't let this interruption worry you, but make a date in your diary for your next available exercise session.
- If your day is packed with events, consider getting up 30 minutes earlier to exercise.
- Keep 'at home' exercise options accessible – for example, exercise videotapes or a stationary bike.
- Look for opportunities in your everyday routine – for example, walk instead of drive to the train station, take the stairs instead of the elevator or take a walk at lunchtime.
- Appreciate that a short break may be a good thing. Remember, even professional athletes schedule regular periods of 'down time'. This may be important if you participate in rigorous activities such as weight training.
- Not in the mood? Remember that activity improves people's moods. It not only relieves stress but also helps fight sadness and depression. Push yourself to get up and get moving, even if you're in a bad mood.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local council

- Neighbourhood gym

Things to remember

- Always consult with your doctor before starting any new exercise routine, particularly if you are overweight, over 40 years, haven't exercised in a long time or have a chronic medical condition.
- People who manage to maintain a regular exercise program don't intellectualise about it – they just go ahead and do it.
- Keep a training diary to help you spot every little improvement you make.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Physical Activity Australia

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