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Making exercise a habit: How to get into an exercise routine (that you love)

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5-6 minutes

As one of those annoying people who exercises 6-7 times a week I have a confession to make — I can no longer, in good conscience, accept the motivation related high-fives.

The truth is, while it took me a lot of motivation to get to this point, for the past decade I've really just been coasting along on the back of a well-formed habit. And the secret is that [once exercise becomes habitual](#), willpower is no longer necessary.

So for those of you wanting to take the “I don't wanna!!” out of exercising, I thought I'd reveal a few tricks that helped me get to this point and in the interests of throwing a bit of science into the mix I ran these tactics past Sydney-based exercise physiologist [Dr Bill Sukala](#).

Put One Foot In Front of The Other

This is often the hardest part especially at the beginning of the journey. For exercise to ever become a no-brainer you have to get to the point where it feels good. Positive outcomes like the rush of endorphins, the sense of accomplishment or the

inevitable changes in your body shape are powerful motivators but only if you've experienced them first hand.

One way I used to trick myself was by dividing bigger goals into smaller easily achievable ones. If I didn't feel like going to the gym I'd say "I'll just get changed and see how I feel," then once I was changed it was much easier to say "I'll just get in the car and start driving." Eventually after completing a few of these little goals you're sitting outside the gym and it's actually more effort NOT to go.

What the doc says:

"It's important to remember that a little bit of something is better than a lot of nothing. Even if you force or trick yourself into going, the next step is then focusing on how great you feel during or after exercise. Start associating exercise with pleasure and how good you feel/look as a result and you'll be more inclined to want to go."

Short-Term Goals Build Long-Term Commitment

Research at University College London discovered that building a habit takes an average of 66 days. If you actively commit to exercising regularly for just over two months instead of saying "I have to do this forever" it's a much less terrifying goal. Plus at the end of that time research suggests that behaviour will have either ticked over into a habit or you'll be well on your way.

What the doc says:

"It's important not to bite off more than you can chew in the beginning. It's a case of focusing on the here and now and

staying in the moment with the longer-term goal in the back of your mind.”

Find An Exercise You Like

This was a game changer for me. My regular weekly routine now consists of step class, pilates and yoga and all three classes I absolutely love. But to get to that perfect combination I tried it all — running, cross fit, group sports, swimming, dance classes, Zumba, you name it. Sometimes it takes a while to find the exercise that’s the perfect combination of enjoyment and results, so keep trying until you find the one that’s right for you because once you do turning up will be easy.

What the doc says:

“The best exercise in the world is the one you like and the one you’ll stick with over the long haul.”

Set Realistic Goals

Some people think a good training session means you have to vomit at the end of it. The reality is that just moving is exercising and it doesn’t need to be strenuous or painful to be beneficial, especially if you’re just starting out. I spend three-quarters of pilates horizontal on a reformer and often don’t break a sweat but I’ve seen more results in that class than any other.

A goal needs to be something achievable because if it’s too high you’ll end up falling short and disappointment can be a powerful demotivator. So remember that fitness isn’t about

doing an ultra marathon or climbing Mount Everest, it's about beating your own personal best.

What the doc says:

“The man who moves mountains begins by removing one small rock at a time. I think small goals are great for building a person's self efficacy. Get some runs on the board and then progressively build up to the bigger more lofty goals.”

Diarise Your Exercise

Quite often we miss out on exercise because we don't prioritise it like we would a work meeting or dinner with friends. By putting exercise into your diary you can plan around it.

What the doc says:

“The hard part is not viewing it as expendable if something better comes up. If you're sick and tired of being sick and tired, then you cannot solve today's problems using the same old thinking ie: blowing off the gym. Habit is three quarters of the battle. Once the mind is on board then the physical body follows.”

Phone a Friend

Dr Sukala suggests that locking in exercise with a partner can help you stick to your goals, even if the partner isn't human.

“If you have a dog, take him/her out for regular walks at a certain time of day. After a while, the dog's brain gets conditioned just the same and when it's time to go, Rover will be there at your bedside with his lead in his mouth waiting for you! Think of him as your own personal exercise machine with

fur!"