

Exercise Tips for the Non-Exerciser

If you like to exercise, don't read this article. This article is for the bored, the tired and the discouraged. This article is for people who feel that exercise is a near-impossible challenge, for those with hectic lives, and for those who think the effort is not worth the result.

Sharon Frost and Charlie Obert are two people who understand your struggle. Here, they share their experiences of how to overcome exercise barriers. Most changes in lifestyle take several tries. The following can help you understand what keeps you from exercising and how to overcome your personal barriers to fitness.



Get ready

Before making any change, it helps to lay a good foundation. If you do some groundwork before you start, you'll have a better chance of succeeding. First, try to understand what keeps you from exercising. According to Tracey Mernin, a fitness director in Massachusetts, most people face barriers when it comes to exercise. One common reason people don't exercise is a lack of time. Another obstacle is self-doubt. Once people see themselves as out of shape, they believe they can't ever get in shape. Such self-doubt is often reinforced by bad memories.

Sharon Frost, 30, can relate to the power of bad memories. An employment training instructor who now works out five times a week, Ms. Frost can still recall the humiliation she felt as a kid. "I have clear memories of how much I hated gym class," she says. "We had running races for the Presidential Fitness Test. I was overweight and I always came in last. It taught me to dread exercise."

If you're like Ms. Frost, and the thought of exercise brings up bad memories, try to replace your old images with more positive ones. Picture yourself as someone who is fast and strong. Build confidence by focusing on the future rather than the past. Remember that you're not that same kid in gym class -- you're a capable adult.

If time pressures are a problem, try this trick: Schedule exercise into your week like you would a standing appointment. Write it down in your weekly calendar, and treat it like a meeting you can't miss.

How to get ready

Make a list of the reasons you want to work out. Keep the list handy and add to it.

- Figure out which activities you enjoy. If you enjoy walking, map out enjoyable walking routes.
- Decide how to fit exercise into your schedule. Then set a date for when you'll start.
- Create an exercise log so that you can keep track of your success.
- Set goals that you know you can reach. For example, exercise twice a week and build from there.
- Reward yourself when you meet your goals. For example, if you exercise three times a week for a month, treat yourself to a CD.
- Write down positive things you can say to yourself when you don't feel like exercising, such as "I can do this."

Get set

You may have figured out how to get over the obstacles to exercise. Now you need to convince yourself that it's worth the effort. Focus on the good things about making exercise part of your life.

Charlie Obert, 48, a food safety manager, put away his bicycle when he moved to a busy city that had too much traffic. But years passed, and he saw a vision of his future that he didn't like. Mr. Obert noticed himself getting heavier and realized that he was slowing down. "I wasn't satisfied with where I was at age 40," he says. "I asked myself how I wanted to feel by the time I was 50."

Mr. Obert joined a local biking group. After a lot of hard work, he and the group persuaded the state's department of transportation to convert an old train rail into a biking path. The victory was a huge motivator for Mr. Obert. It just so happened that the bike path went in near his house. As he puts it, he didn't have an excuse not to exercise anymore.

Why don't you exercise?

Try the following antidotes to these common exercise excuses:

- "I don't have enough time." Take a 10-minute walk three days this week. Next week, aim for 15 minutes.
- "I don't enjoy it." You may be pushing too hard. Exercise doesn't need to hurt or be uncomfortable to be helpful.
- "I'm too lazy." You may be bored. Try a new exercise or vary your routine.

Go!

The big day arrives, and you start your exercise program. Now, how do you stick with it?

Wayne Westcott, Ph.D., a fitness research director and author of the book "Strength Training Past 50," works with people who are just starting to exercise. He has found that beginners can tolerate 20 minutes on a stationary bike better if it's broken into small intervals. He advises alternating two easy minutes with two minutes of moderate exertion until you reach 20 minutes. "Don't start out at too high a level," Dr. Westcott advises. "You can increase time and intensity later on."

Building up time and intensity too quickly is a common pitfall. Many people quit when their workouts become too demanding. "It's ironic," Dr. Westcott says. "People build up and then don't feel like they can go back. If they've increased their workouts from 30 minutes to 45 minutes, they aren't satisfied with a 30-minute workout. So they end up doing nothing again."

Ms. Frost learned this lesson the hard way. She joined a gym and quickly pushed herself to up to 20- to 30-minute daily workouts on four different machines. "I was spending two hours at the gym each day," she says. After three months, she had lost 15 pounds but she was miserable. "I started to hate going to the gym."

Her workouts came to an abrupt end, and she gained back the weight she had lost and more. When she took up exercise again a few years later, she limited herself to 45 minutes. It seems to have worked. Ms. Frost has been exercising regularly for the past two years.

Dr. Westcott stresses consistency with his clients. He tells them to pick an activity they can do day after day, week after week. The key to success is to make regular exercise a lifetime goal.

How much is enough?

Physical activity doesn't have to be difficult to be beneficial. If you're just starting to get active, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends beginning with five to 10 minutes of activity. Gradually stay active longer until you can handle 30 minutes or more of moderate activity at least three to four days a week. Examples of moderate activity include brisk walking, dancing and swimming.