

Patience makes perfect

Having trouble sticking to a workout routine? Don't give up! Research suggests that it takes 66 days—not just a week or two—for exercise to feel automatic. Our fitness pros offer six simple strategies to keep you moving in the meantime.

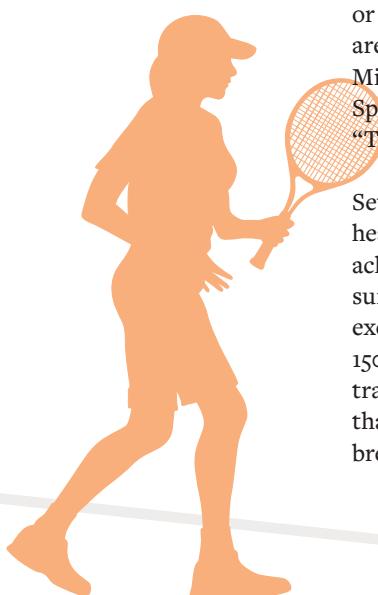
BY ALICE OGLETHORPE



We all have at least one mildly infuriating fitness junkie in our lives. The neighbor who sprints past and chirps, "Gotta do my 10 miles!" The perfectly toned friend who muses, "Weird, it's actually harder for me *not* to exercise!" Sure, some of these go-getters are natural-born athletes. But chances are they started out just like the rest of us: sluggish, easily winded, and quick to feel defeated. Their real accomplishment? Not giving up.

Surveys show that many people ditch their fitness program after a month or so, which creates a vicious cycle. "If you start an exercise program and are unable to maintain it, you can start to believe you'll never get fit," says Michelle Segar, Ph.D., associate director of the University of Michigan's Sport, Health, and Activity Research and Policy Center for Women and Girls. "That raises the odds you'll give up quickly next time."

Research suggests that patience is the secret to a successful regimen. Several years ago, British researchers had a small group of volunteers try healthy habits, including exercise. It took subjects 66 days on average to achieve "automaticity"—that effortless state in which they didn't have to summon every ounce of willpower just to slip on a sports bra. So while the exercise habit won't develop overnight (health experts recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity, plus two sessions of strength training, every week—not easy for a newbie), countless health studies show that perseverance pays off. Minimize the misery of your early weeks and break through to a healthier you with our simple six-step plan.



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Set smart goals

"When you begin a fitness program, establishing and reaching goals is a great way to stoke your motivation," says Christina Frederick-Recascino, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and human factors at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida. Set targets with these three qualities:

ATTAINABILITY

INSTEAD OF: I want to run a marathon.

TRY: I want to run a mile without stopping.

"Challenging yourself is one thing, but if you make the goal too difficult, you'll get frustrated and want to quit," Frederick-Recascino says. Strive for something *just* out of reach. For example, if you're using 3-pound kettlebells to build arm strength, see if you can work up to 4-pound weights in the next few weeks.

SPECIFICITY

INSTEAD OF: I will go to the gym regularly.

TRY: I will be physically active for 20 minutes five days a week.

The more detailed your goal, the less easily you can fudge it, Frederick-Recascino says. For example, "regularly" could morph from every day to once a week, whereas "five days a week" can mean only one thing.

MEASURABILITY

INSTEAD OF: I want to become stronger.

TRY: I want to be able to do 15 push-ups.

"If you don't make the goal something you can actually measure, you'll never know when you've reached it," Frederick-Recascino says. Once you get there, set a new challenge.



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Give yourself a nudge

The best exercise motivation comes from within—your burning desire to be healthy. But lazy days call for a little extra assistance. "Environmental cues can help by reminding you of the fitness promise you've made to yourself," says Michael Mantell, Ph.D., senior fitness consultant for behavioral sciences for the American Council on Exercise. "The key is finding something that resonates with you." Consider these persuasive prompts:

A MEMENTO OF YOU AT YOUR FITTEST Remember when you hit a walk-off home run during your college softball playoffs? See, your body *is* capable of amazing feats! Tacking your old team photo to the fridge or dusting off your trophy can inspire a return to form.

YOUR GEAR IN PLAIN VIEW It's easy (*too easy*) to skip a workout when your sneakers and track shorts are buried in your bedroom closet. Instead, leave them where you can see them. You won't be "forgetting" to exercise anytime soon.

A SWEET FAMILY PHOTO Getting fit will ensure you enjoy many healthy years with your loving brood. "Your well-being benefits you and everyone who cares about you," Mantell says. "Remembering those you have to live for is an incredibly powerful motivator."

Embrace the immediate perks

You've gotten the message that regular exercise can reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer. But those benefits—as amazing as they are—can feel a bit abstract.

Instead, try relishing the smaller health improvements you feel right away, suggests I-Min Lee, M.D., a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. Here are just a few you'll notice:

A SUNNIER OUTLOOK

"Exercise has an almost immediate effect on neurotransmitters associated with positive moods," Lee says. Research shows that 20–30 minutes of moderate exercise can trigger a happy high that lasts for hours.

LESS STRESS

Nothing eases tension like a good sweat session. But did you know that exercise can *prevent* stress, too? In a study at the University of Maryland, volunteers who were exposed to anxiety-inducing images after working out felt calmer than people who had simply rested quietly.

MORE ENERGY

Not a great sleeper? Regular exercise can help you fall asleep more quickly and snooze more soundly, reducing daytime grogginess. Plus, "every time you work out, you become fitter and stronger," Lee says. "Daily activities take less effort, putting more pep in your step."

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Get inspired by others

These four women once dreaded lacing up their sneakers. Now they're preaching the fitness gospel. As they discovered, making the leap doesn't have to be difficult.

"In the past, I'd start exercising with big ambitions only to get discouraged and give up. Then at the gym one night, I overheard a trainer tell her client to alternate running for 30 seconds with walking for 2 minutes. I thought, *Even I can do that!* I followed that simple pattern and it stuck. I've since lost 115 pounds."

—LISA HAUPERT, 55

"I was one of those people who claimed to be too tired and busy for exercise. That changed when my office held an eco-friendly commuting challenge. I started riding a bike to work and was surprised by how much I loved it. For me, the secret was making my workouts part of my existing daily routine."

—DINA HANNAH, 49

"I used to drag myself onto the elliptical machine and stare at the clock until my time was up. Then a year ago I tried CrossFit, a workout regimen in which you do something different every session—it's impossible to get bored! I got into a groove of going four or five times a week, and now I can't imagine stopping."

—MEGAN KENNEDY, 34

"I used to think of exercise as tedious, and I would make any excuse not to do it. Finally, I discovered a simple approach: I promised myself that I would do at least one physical thing every day, whether a walk with friends, tai chi, or water aerobics. I take it one day—and one activity—at a time."

—PAIGE ARNOF-FENN, 47

Put something at stake

The threat of a mild penalty might do the trick, says Michael Sachs, Ph.D., a professor specializing in sport psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia. What are you willing to put on the line?

YOUR MONEY Write a check to a political group you dislike and give it to a pal who will monitor your workouts. If you skip a certain number, that donation gets mailed. Prefer to track yourself? The website Stickk allows you to set goals and will ding you with a fine if you fall short.

YOUR FRIENDSHIPS Set a standing date to exercise with a friend. If you back out more than once ("I overslept" or "I lost my left sneaker"), believe us: She won't be pleased.

YOUR DIGNITY Sign up for a 5K or a local tennis tourney—any athletic event where spectators can see your every move. If you don't put in the time to train, you'll be huffing and puffing to a last-place finish.

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Know when you need a break

If you constantly make excuses for skipping workouts, you'll never hit your stride. But in some cases, exercising can do a disservice. Here's how to tell when rest is best.

PROBLEM: You're feeling under the weather.

ASK YOURSELF: Do you have a fever?

IF SO: Stay in bed. "Body-wide symptoms such as a fever and chills indicate that your system is fighting a serious illness," says Barbara J. Doty, M.D., of the American Academy of Family Physicians. Lie low until the worst blows over.

IF NOT: Keep moving. "Mild upper-respiratory symptoms, such as a runny nose, mean you're probably OK to work out," Doty says. Be sure to drink lots of fluids, she adds, and keep your distance from others so you don't get them sick.

PROBLEM: A workout earlier this week left you sore.

ASK YOURSELF: Did the pain strike suddenly?

IF SO: Sit this one out. "Sharp pain can be a sign that you sprained or twisted something," says W. Ben Kibler, M.D., medical director of the Lexington Clinic Orthopedics-Sports Medicine Center in Kentucky. Ask your doctor about treatment.

IF NOT: Stay active. "A little discomfort a day or two after a workout is normal. In most cases, it's just an overworked muscle and poses no danger," Kibler says. Warm up the area with gentle movement before your next session.

PROBLEM: You're dead tired.

ASK YOURSELF: Were you on your feet most of the day?

IF SO: Relax. "When you've been unusually active—say, you've spent hours doing yard work—you don't necessarily need a trip to the gym, too," Kibler says.

IF NOT: Up and at 'em. "Hours of sitting can make you feel sluggish," Kibler says. "Exercising is the perfect antidote." ■

