Get back on track with exercise

Five ways to stay motivated and keep up with a fitness regimen.

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By Dana D. Sterner, RN

Adhering to an exercise program can be very stressful, time consuming, or just something we hate to do. Motivation can be a big challenge. Over the last several years, the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association has reported record sales of home fitness equipment along with increases in health club memberships. Nearly 20% of the equipment sold, however, goes unused, and annual health club memberships average a 45% turnover rate. It's not surprising when the Surgeon General reports that 60% of Americans don't exercise moderately (i.e., burning 1,000 calories/week or 150/day) and 25% don't exercise at all.

More than half of those who start an exercise program will drop out or not adhere to any permanent regimen. We start with good intentions—sweating it out on the treadmill or lifting weights in a gym—but somehow falter. As healthcare providers, we understand the benefits of regular exercise. So what hinders our motivation?

1. Do what you love, and fitness will follow

A top reason why people stop exercising is that they dislike their chosen activity. A 2001 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that exercise for enjoyment and social interaction were far stronger motivational factors than appearance and health in maintaining an exercise program. So if you don't enjoy an activity or program, don't sign up for it; you won't stick with it.

If you're unsure about a group exercise (e.g., kickboxing, Pilates) try a beginner's class and start slow, find a pay-as-you-go class, or rent a video. If continued enjoyment or adherence seem doubtful, then you haven't wasted a lot of money or time. Also, recognize and accept your skill level. Activities that require a lot of coordination can discourage beginners or individuals with existing health problems. Most people don't like exercise, but if you keep looking, you may find an activity you enjoy.

Once you've found an enjoyable routine, combat boredom by alternating activities (e.g., walking, biking, or a low-impact aerobics class). Statistically, people who exercise with a friend, their kids, or in a group stick with an exercise program or activity longer than others.
2. Unobtainable ideas, unrealistic goals

If exercise is new to you, start slow and set simple goals you can achieve within a week or month. Starting a fast and furious new program, only to be sidelined with sore muscles or an injury, can quickly dent your motivation. Weight loss via exercise can take one to three months to show results—and even then you may hit a plateau. One pound of fat equals 3,500 calories; you won't lose 10 real pounds after 10 days of exercise.

Endeavor to work out for 10 – 20 minutes three times a week for two weeks. Charting your activity can help you focus and measure your progress for future goal setting. Keep a personal diary: What did you like about the activity, how did you feel when you started, and did you want to do it again when you finished?

Be flexible. Fitting in 10 minutes here and there is better than doing nothing at all. For many, it's more realistic than trying to exercise 40 minutes at one time. Just don't give up!

3. Time to get moving

As a fitness instructor, I frequently hear variations on the comment, "I just don't have time to exercise," usually preceded by numerous excuses or followed by a round of obstacles. When I'm asked how I find time to exercise, I answer, "I don't! Finding the time and making the time are two different concepts. We all have the same amount of time in a given day. The difference is the choices we make and how we prioritize. There are 168 hours in a week. If your goal is to exercise for 30 minutes four times a week, that's two hours per week. It's your choice. We all have hectic schedules, families, and responsibilities, especially nurses. Ask yourself if adding some form of physical activity is important enough to set aside two hours each week. If so, check out practical ideas for making time for exercise on the last page of this article.

4. Avoiding the injured reserve list

The phrase, "Before starting any exercise program, consult your doctor," is good advice for all ages. Any injury can damage your motivation to exercise—even if you are in good health—and any new activity can stress your body. Make an appointment to see your health practitioner. If you have an existing health problem, let him or her know the activity you plan to undertake. Exercise has been shown to aid in the recovery from and prevention of many health problems. Collaborate to find out the safest activity for you.

Know your own limitations and listen to your body. Ignoring pain during a workout is the fastest way to develop a severe injury. Depending upon which form of exercise you choose, a personal trainer can get you started. A few initial sessions may be all you need to correct your form and maximize your time.

Warming up and cooling down are important parts of any physical activity, so be sure to include both at each workout. A warm muscle is less susceptible to injury. A good warmup can also clear the mind and increase focus. Cooling down allows your heart rate to return to its normal resting state. Dehydration can slow you
down and present a health risk—especially during the summer—so drink at least 16 oz. of water before and after workouts. You should also be able to speak without difficulty while exercising. If you can't, slow down or stop. And don't be afraid to rest or take a day off to prevent overuse and fatigue.

Wearing and using the appropriate gear while working out is essential in preventing injuries. Shoes that are worn out or fit improperly make you more prone to injuries. Clothing that wicks sweat will help keep you cool and dry.

5. Some gain for your pain

Numerous studies have proven that rewards increase the probability that behavior will be repeated. So treat yourself each time you exercise or reach a goal. Rewards can range from sharing accomplishments for inspiration to buying yourself something simple. Or put money in a piggy bank every time you exercise. At the end of the month, treat yourself with your reward money!

Start today, and enjoy your tomorrows

Nurses understand the importance of prioritizing, what with the patient loads we sometimes have. Rethink your lifestyle, and you may be surprised how much time you really have to spend. You can choose to exercise for 15 – 30 minutes, or you can watch an extra half hour of TV, talk on the phone, or read a magazine. You decide. If you adopt an exercise program, remember, the longer you stick with it, the more likely you will be to make it a permanent part of your lifestyle. Set up a regular schedule—and use these tips to stick to it—and you'll give yourself a valuable habit and the gift of fitness for years to come.

Find time to exercise with these tips

Log your time. Jorge Cruise, author of The Three Hour Diet, believes we all have "a loser zone" where we unconsciously spend time doing nothing. Chart all of your activities for one week to rescue your hidden time.

Morning reveille. Morning exercise forestalls excuses that accumulate throughout our day. It also makes you more energized, focused, and positive ahead of your work day. Not a morning person, or working the night shift? Schedule an exercise appointment—and don't cancel! It's harder to reschedule once you do.

Turn off the tube. We watch an average of 170 minutes of TV per day—30 hours per week. Cutting only 2 hours for exercise would still leave you with 28 hours. Or buy a piece of exercise equipment to place in front of the TV if you can't bear to miss your favorite shows.

Beef up your routine. Add physical activity to your workplace and daily tasks. Change a sitting meeting to a walking meeting. Take a fitness break instead of a coffee break and walk for 10 – 15 minutes. Organize or schedule an exercise program directly after work. Walk to errands instead of driving. While waiting to pick up your children at sport practice or an event, get out of your car and walk or jog.
Form a home team. Take a walk when everyone gets home or after dinner. Or pick an activity that you can share as a family (walking in the park, hiking, biking, and swimming at the local pool). Be a fitness role model for your kids!

Pace yourself. Break up your exercise throughout the day. Walk 15 minutes before work, and again 15 minutes after work. Later in the evening, add 10 minutes of weights, Pilates, or yoga. That's a 40 minute workout!

It's "you-time." Interruptions can disrupt motivation and impede progress toward goals. If you exercise at home, make sure your family understands this is your time—no interruptions until you are done. My family didn't immediately grasp this, so I posted my workout schedule and told them I would attend to their questions and needs before or after my workout—not during.

Dana D. Sterner, RN

Dana D. Sterner, RN, is an exercise instructor, personal trainer and correspondent for RN magazine