



Exercise and self-motivation

We all know that regular physical activity is essential to maintaining good physical and mental health. Study after study has shown that a sedentary lifestyle increases our risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, depression and anxiety. Our immune system and cognitive functioning suffer as well.

So why do many of us find it so difficult to stay active? Probably because we create psychological barriers – “I don’t have the time,” “I hate gyms,” “My knee hurts,” or “I don’t like sports.” We become overwhelmed, frustrated and give up before we’ve started. But staying motivated – and healthy – doesn’t have to be hard.

Staying motivated

The one sure-fire way to stay motivated is to make exercise part of our everyday lives. Here are some tips to help you create an active lifestyle:

- **Incorporate exercise into your everyday routines** – take the stairs at work, do a few squats while waiting for the kettle to boil, use your lunch hour to take a brisk walk in the fresh air. If the weather is bad, walk around the nearest mall.

Health experts recommend 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a week. You can reach this target 10 minutes at a time. Anything that gets your heart rate up and muscles working counts, including washing the car, shoveling snow, vacuuming, gardening or walking the dog.

- **Readjust your attitude.** Instead of thinking you HAVE to exercise or how you HATE working out, think about having fun. Play more golf (ditch the cart), play tag with the kids, go dancing or organize a family skating event.

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- **Have an exercise buddy.** Knowing someone is expecting you at yoga class or joining you for a morning walk not only keeps you accountable but motivated as well.
- **Involve family and friends.** By encouraging your family and friends to be more active, you'll stay on track. You'll also have people cheering you on when things get tough.
- **Try new things.** It's hard to stay motivated when you're doing the same activities week after week. Try something new. Go bowling, learn how to curl, sign up for yoga classes or take dance lessons to keep things interesting and fun.
- **Set small, realistic goals.** Be kind to yourself and go at your own pace. Throwing yourself into a new, vigorous activity will only make you sore and miserable. Take things slowly. Instead of focusing on what you can't do, focus on walking a bit further every day, climbing one more flight of stairs a week or mastering a new yoga pose. Also realize that there will be times when you're simply too busy or too tired to be active. Don't get discouraged. Simply get back on track as soon as you can.

Finally, stay motivated by remembering why you're making physical activity a priority. Many people find it helpful to write down their goals: to remain healthy and energetic, to be a role model for their children, to lose weight or alleviate stress. Others keep an exercise diary in which they record what they did each day and for how long, how they felt before and after the activity and their progress. Seeing improvement and feeling great are the best ways to stay motivated and on track.

For more information on the role exercise plays in both your physical and mental health and how to stay healthy at any age, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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