

Conquer Your Fitness Fears

Hate exercise? Here's how you can learn to love working out

By Barbara Russi Sarnataro, WebMD Feature

Wouldn't it be great if you could be allergic to working out?

Then you wouldn't have to admit to friends, loved ones, and co-workers that you simply hate to exercise. Saying your throat swells up or you break out in hives might be easier than enduring the disapproving looks that you fear might come with confessing the truth!

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But truth be told, there are plenty of exercise haters out there.

Never mind that study after study has shown that regular physical activity -- even at moderate levels -- reduces the risk of heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure and obesity and enhances physical and mental functioning. Many Americans still choose a sedentary lifestyle.

A CDC report showed that 55% of American adults didn't move enough to meet the minimum recommendation of 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week. And the Gallup Health and Healthcare Survey found that just 45% of Americans regularly engaged in vigorous exercise in 2002 -- down from 52% in 2001.

Experts say there are many reasons people hate to exercise. They include:

- **Intimidation.** "There's lots of fear and intimidation," says exercise physiologist Kelli Calabrese. "And rightfully so. The industry is so confusing. Everyone is making these claims and you don't know what works." You also may feel embarrassed that you don't know how to use the machines at the gym, have no rhythm in step class, or don't own the right exercise clothing.
- **Lack of time.** "People put themselves under pressure that they have to get an hour workout," says exercise physiologist Nicole Gunning, who manages the Unilever Cosmetics International corporate fitness center. "Especially single career moms will say they don't have enough time or they don't know how to manage their time to fit it in." If you have trouble managing your time, exercise is often the first thing to go. A not-so-important meeting or a grocery run can hinder your best-laid plans. Heck, a rerun of *Friends* often sounds better than a tip to the gym.
- **Negative image of exercise.** Does just saying the word "exercise" bring up unfortunate memories of dodgeball games during grade-school gym? "I hated gym class," says Calabrese. "For some people, that's their only experience with exercise, so they start out with a negative perspective."
- **Slow results.** Seeing and feeling the benefits of exercise does take time, and many people give up long before they get there. "Some people are still looking for the magic pill or the 'drink this and you'll lose weight,'" Calabrese says. "They are still thinking there's a better, faster, easier way, so why exercise?"
- **Money.** "People think they can't afford a health club or the equipment or gear they need to get involved in a particular activity," says Calabrese. "They also have a fear of wasting money on something they won't use or won't like."
- **Lack of support.** Without the encouragement of a spouse, friend, or family member, it's easy to give up.
- **Motivation.** Whatever the excuses are for hating to exercise, in the end, it's a lack of motivation that keeps us from moving our bodies. "As anyone who has tried -- and failed -- to adopt a regular fitness

routine realizes, knowing that exercise will benefit you in the distant future isn't the best motivation," says Jay Kimiecik, professor of exercise motivation at Miami University of Ohio.

But can an exercise-hater really change? Will you ever be able to face a daily workout without dread?

Yes, say Calabrese and Gunning, who offer these tips to help you turn "hate" into "tolerate" -- maybe even "love":

- **Find something you enjoy.** Bottom line, they say, if you don't like what you're doing, you won't stick with it. If you're not sure what you like, explore: Take a dance class, learn to Rollerblade or swim, or hike in some nearby mountains. Try them all. Keep experimenting until you find the thing that moves you, mentally and physically.
- **Set goals.** "Write down your goals and review them often," says Calabrese. But be realistic. If you've started out walking for 10 minutes, don't aim to run a marathon in three months. Your goals "can start really short term and lead to long term," she says. "Create specific, measurable, action-oriented goals -- and have a time frame for accomplishing them."
- **Be a morning exerciser.** Statistics show that people are more likely to stick with a fitness program if they exercise first thing in the morning, Calabrese says. There's less of a chance to make excuses, and you get it over with before your day begins.
- **Schedule your workout.** "Write it in your planner just like a meeting or appointment," says Calabrese. Schedule a whole month in advance, writing the day and time of your workout. "And if you have to cancel one, reschedule it immediately."
- **Have a partner.** "Exercise can be very social," says Calabrese. Whether or not you're involved in a team sport, she says, "having the commitment of a friend or spouse increases your commitment."
- **Reward yourself.** Gunning uses rewards to inspire people to set small goals along the way to the larger ones. When you can complete a 30-minute walk on the treadmill or do 10 push-ups, for example, reward yourself with a new CD or T-shirt. When you've stayed with the program for 12 weeks, get a new pair of sneakers. "Just make sure (the rewards aren't) food related," says Gunning.
- **Chart your progress.** Start by getting a fitness assessment when you first begin a program. (If you're not a gym member, do it on your own. Write down your weight, measurements, and BMI, then record how long you're able to exercise on the first day.) In three months, you'll see how much progress you made.
- **Try a mind-body approach.** Starting out with classes like yoga or Pilates, in which you focus on breathing and stretching, can give you a taste of exercise's feel-good benefits right off the bat, Calabrese says: "By breathing and oxygenating the muscles, you feel an immediate stress release, and you may feel the benefits sooner without feeling the soreness that comes with strength training or even cardio right away."
- **Abandon the all-or-nothing approach.** So you don't have an hour? How about 30 minutes? It's certainly better than nothing, and if you work smart you can really reap benefits from a 30-minute workout, says Gunning. And recognize you're fallible. You'll fall off the wagon a time or two. Don't beat yourself up. Just get back into your routine and stop procrastinating.

Falling in Love with Exercise

Just tolerating exercise isn't enough, Kimiecik believes. In his book, *The Intrinsic Exerciser: Discovering the Joy of Exercise*, he advocates learning to love exercise for its own sake. "Most people don't like (exercise)," he says, "because the information they're given doesn't do much to get them to like it."

People know exercise will help them live longer and be healthier, "but that doesn't do much in the way of motivation," he says. "It's external, or outside, in. Those reasons are not powerful enough to keep you motivated for the long term. Those people, on a daily basis, aren't paying attention to the feelings of exercise."

On the other hand, Kimiecik says, people who consistently exercise are motivated from the inside, out.

"The people who maintain exercise on a regular basis are those who really enjoy the movement," he says. "Regular exercisers almost always talk about how exercise makes them feel; they rarely talk about disease reduction."

So how do you get there?

"Find activities that make you feel alive and make you feel enjoyment," he says. To do that, he suggests: "Think about how you want your body to feel when you're exercising. Do you want it to feel fast, do you want it to feel strong, do you want it to feel pushed?"

In other words, be involved in the activity mentally and physically. Connect your mind and body.

Kimiecik admits it's not always easy, but without internal motivation, he says, it's next to impossible to keep up an exercise routine.

"To become a regular exerciser," says Kimiecik, "we all have obstacles. Like with most things in life, if you don't find a powerful inner motivation for doing something, obstacles are easier to find."

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