

FFWPU UK: TogetherAll: Exercise is a great energy and mood booster

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Exercise is a great energy and mood booster. But it's tempting to find reasons for not exercising, especially when you're anxious or down. Here are some ways to strengthen your willpower.

How much and how often?

Learn about the psychological benefits of exercise, plus how much we should be exercising and how often, in our summary of the latest research. OK, we all know we should take more exercise. But even if we manage to get started on an exercise plan, it can be hard to stick with it. What's more the

lower we feel, the harder it is to stay active. Which is why many of us are liable to give up on exercise just when we need it most. Exercise isn't just good for our physical health, it's great for boosting our energy and mood. There's also emerging evidence that it can help with depression and other emotional and psychological health problems. Here are some ways to overcome the barriers.

1. Make it meaningful

Think beyond the obvious health benefits. What other reasons can you find to exercise? What really gets you going? How about walking or cycling to save money, using it to create some 'me time', or as an excuse for a regular get together with friends? The more reasons you can find to exercise, the more you'll stick with it. It's helpful to get into a routine. But remember if exercise gets boring you won't keep it up. Vary it occasionally, even it's just a change of walking route or workout routine.

What gets you going?

The company of others. Make a regular date with friends to walk or jog together. Or join a group activity and make some new friends. Having some 'me time'. Buckling under the pressures of work or other people's demands? Use exercise to carve out some time for yourself - whether it's going for walk or run, working on your garden or going to the gym. Saving money. Feeling broke? Try walking or cycling to save on travel costs; or reducing your food bills by growing your own vegetables or joining a community scheme. The big outdoors. Plan your exercise around green spaces and enjoy the restorative power of fresh air and nature. Take up running or walking, or maybe think about getting a dog. Working for a good cause. Volunteer in your community to do something active - say conservation work, walking an elderly neighbour's dog or a sponsored activity for charity. Trying something different. If you enjoy a challenge or feel stuck in a rut, use exercise as a chance to do something new. Take up a new activity or learn a new sport. Having fun. If you're in need of light relief, choose something fun that you enjoy, such as dancing or a recreational sport with friends or family. Achieving something worthwhile. If your self-esteem is low, find an activity you're good at or that gives you a sense of achievement.

2. Be realistic

Be realistic about what you can take on. If you lead a busy life, choose an activity that fits into your daily schedule or something you enjoy you know you'll make time for. And don't set the mental and physical bar too high. With strenuous exercise it can take 30 minutes for the 'feel-good' factor to kick in - long enough to get discouraged and give up. Plus if you're unfit, you run a higher risk of injuring yourself. So go at a sensible pace, giving yourself time to build up energy, fitness and stamina. Remember any increase in activity is an achievement, particularly if your starting point is low. Consider walking, particularly if you're not very fit. Some studies suggest that walking may be as helpful for depression as more vigorous exercise.

3. Tune into the benefits

Unlike physical fitness, which takes time to build up, the emotional lift you get from moderate exercise kicks in almost immediately. Ask yourself whether you:

- Feel more energetic, less stressed, and more able to concentrate.
- Spend your day more productively.
- Feel better about yourself or have a sense of achievement.
- Sleep better.

Each time you're tempted to give exercise a miss, remind yourself how much better you'll feel if you do it. Feel the instant lift that exercise brings and use it to motivate you to do more. Studies show you need to exercise regularly to maintain the benefits. So make exercise a part of your daily routine.



4. Plan ahead

It's easy to kid ourselves that we're too busy to exercise. But with a little planning, exercise can be slotted into the busiest of lives. Decide how best to fit exercise into your week. Choose a time when you're most likely to do it; say, first thing in the morning, straight after dropping the kids at school, on your way to work, or at the end of a working day. Find what works for you and plan it in. Schedule exercise in as you would for any important appointment. Write it in your diary and you're more likely to stick with it.

5. Get social

Even if you're not feeling particularly sociable, consider exercising with others. Studies suggest that the companionship and sense of shared endeavour can raise some people's spirits as much as the physical activity. If you work out with an exercise buddy or as part of a group, you can encourage and support each other. Exercising together can also feel more of a commitment, which gives you an extra incentive to stick with it. For some people there's also an element of healthy competition, which can spur them on to achieve more. Group exercise isn't for everyone. You may worry how others view you, or find it too much of a pressure. Everyone is different, so do what works for you.

6. Have something to aim for

Some of us are more goal-orientated than others. But it helps to be clear about what you want to achieve, and have a realistic plan for achieving it.

Physical barriers

If you have a physical condition or disability that makes it hard to exercise, even gentle exercises such as stretching or flexing can help. Start gently, and try to build up. Don't be over ambitious. Deciding to run a marathon when last year you could barely break into a run, is probably one step too far. Even if you finish in one piece, the ordeal could put you off running for life. You want to create something lasting, not a one-hit wonder. Once you've decided on your overall goal, set smaller goals for yourself - say, gradually increasing the number of times you exercise, or walking a bit further each week. Keep reviewing and amending your plan as you go. If your energy is very low, make a deal with yourself to do at least ten minutes - and you'll probably do more. Or make a pact with a friend or exercise buddy to do a certain amount each week. Don't let minor setbacks throw you off course ('I can't keep it up. What's the point'). Guard against this 'all or nothing thinking' by reminding yourself that the occasional lapse is OK. It's your overall progress that counts.

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