

Exercise? Again?

Sticking to It!

by Nancy Coughlan

Okay, so you're inspired! You've decided the time has definitely arrived and you're determined to start exercising regularly. Now what? You've made a decision that requires a change in your lifestyle. Let's look at what might help you stick to your newfound decision and how to avoid some of the typical pitfalls.

Schedule in your exercise time. If you're one of those busy people with a packed calendar (and who isn't these days?), finding time to exercise can be a real challenge. Plan ahead and make an appointment with yourself just the way you would schedule a doctor's appointment or lunch with a friend. Yes, write in your day planner – give it the importance it deserves! You're making a commitment to yourself, to your health and fitness. You can start conservatively with 3 appointments a week of 20 minutes to a ½ an hour. As your fitness level increases, lengthen the appointment time frame. After a couple of months it will be a habit and you won't want to miss!

Establish a support network of like-minded, active people. It can make a world of difference to have someone in your corner rooting for you and your new commitment to fitness. A good friend or spouse can be helpful but you may have to think outside the box and consider a hiking or biking group, taking a class, or joining a gym. Surround yourself with supportive, motivating people with healthy lifestyles, enthusiasm, and information and tips to share. Even reading health and fitness periodicals or Internet sites can be helpful. If some of your old friends want to meet and check out the new bakery in town or spend the day at the chocolate festival, you don't have to tempt yourself or give up the friendship, suggest a hike or a folk dance festival instead.

Avoid boredom by including variety. Once you've established an exercise routine, add other activities to keep it interesting and avoid hitting a plateau. Every time you ask your body to perform a new activity your muscles have to work harder to rise to the challenge. Variety in your workout program is a great way to stay motivated and prevent repetitive use injuries.

Be realistic. Most people who decide to exercise want to see some immediate results – some weight loss, toned muscles, improved fitness level. That’s understandable but unfortunately, not how it works. It takes time – most likely you’re not going to run a marathon your first year or have the body of an athlete in 3 months. You may not see a change reflected in the mirror or on the scale for weeks or more. Ouch, I know that’s not good news. But unrealistic expectations can lead to big disappointment and that’s not helpful at all. Your best option is to take the long view. See below!

Taking the long view. The decision to exercise is really a decision to change your lifestyle and behavior. As with any behavior change, success lies in making different choices moment by moment. Those choices lead to long-term change. Think of it as adding pennies to a penny jar. Every time you choose to get off the couch and take a walk or say no to a second helping, you are adding one more penny to the jar. The good news is that if you stay with it, the jar will fill up and you’ll enjoy the results!

Lastly, include some positive self-talk in your day. Encourage yourself, tell yourself you can succeed. Every time you make a positive, healthy choice notice and acknowledge it. You’ve chosen to make a commitment to your health and well being. New commitments aren’t easy – they require making new choices and forming new habits. You’ve made the right choice – good for you , you’re doing great!

Nancy Coughlan is the manager of the Parkpoint Health Club. She has a life-long background in dance: she taught group exercise classes for 15 years as a nationally certified International Dance Exercise Association instructor. Committed to staying fit and active she now hikes, swims and practices yoga.