

How To Make Exercise A Daily Habit

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You're bad at breaking an old habit, and particularly bad at making a new one. Of course, I'm as good as you on this one. We could both do a hundred challenging things in a day, as repeating from memory the year-wise holiday destinations of all our Facebook friends we [envy](#) to hell. And yet not start an exercise habit.

Three institutes — National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), and Center For Disease Control (CDC) — [recommend](#) us to aim for a moderate-intensity physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day on at least 5 days a week. They also say every adult among us should treat this “30×5” guideline as their long-term exercise goal. But you don't, perhaps won't, do it.

So, how can you make exercise a habit, and a regular one at that?

Why Is It Hard To Make Exercise A Habit

• The Problem

This is what scientists have been telling us for decades: regular physical activity, aerobic or anaerobic, can produce long-term health benefits. We believe their words. But we don't follow them. *Why can't we create a daily habit of exercise?*

Okay, all of us don't have this problem. Some find it ridiculously easy to take up a new habit or break a bad one. Ask any chronic smoker, and they'll tell you how simple it's for them to stop their smoking and start a nicotine-gum habit. In fact they have done it so many times they're an expert at it.

On a serious note, why do most of our new habits fail in time, *unfailingly*? And it's often sooner than later. After the first kick of motivation, discipline goes for a toss. In almost no time you end up where you started. *Why do you leave your good habit midway?*

• The Reasons

We usually have a fair knowledge of what's good for us, for most things in life. However, the problem seems to be this: *information doesn't guarantee execution*. You might be the most informed person in your social circle, and great at advising everyone

about the positive effects of exercise, but you still might not be doing it yourself.

Perhaps it's one of our human failings. You always find it hard to follow your own advice, though you freely hand out most of those to others. *We're great advisers, but poor doers.*

Information doesn't guarantee execution. So, we're great advisers, but poor doers.

Sometimes, our goals are too ambitious, but we won't admit it. Setting audacious [goals](#) makes us feel powerful. "You absolutely must not sell yourself short," as a famous life-coach told you in a hall full of thousand raving fans.

It's another one of our human flaws. We are not good at predicting our [future selves](#). *It's really the follow-through which falls through.* We don't tally it in how many parts of our lives we have to change to climb up to the magnificent goal of losing 50 pounds within 50 days of exercise.

How Long Does It Take To Make Exercise A Habit

We wish this had a straightforward answer. It could have helped us stick to a good habit *forever* once we have done the activity for those magic number of days. Experts differ fantastically. Many researchers have dived in deep to answer this once and for all. Unfortunately, they haven't reached a consensus yet.

You may find it flummoxing how wide this optimum time range seems. Take the following examples.

• Twenty-one Days

Maxwell Maltz, a cosmetic surgeon in the America of 1950s, laid it for generations of self-help experts 6 weeks or 21 days is the magic number for any new habit. In his bestseller [Psycho-Cybernetics](#), he wrote, "... many other commonly observed phenomena tend to show that it requires a minimum of about 21 days for an old mental image to dissolve and a new one to jell."

• Sixty-six Days

Phillippa Lally, a health psychology researcher at University College London, carried out a [study](#) in 2009 which said it takes a little more than 2 months or 66 days for a new habit to take root. *Did we mention, this number is not an exact, but an average of 18 to 254 days?*

• **Forty-nine Days**

Ryan Brooks, developer of the habit & goal tracker app [7 Weeks](#), has this to say: Scientists believe the sweet spot for developing a habit is right around 7 weeks. So, once you have completed 49 days straight with little slip-ups, you can be sure to have developed a positive habit, or broken a bad habit. Ryan reached his magic number by combining information from two sources — Charles Duhigg's [The Power of Habit](#) and the *X Effect Method of completing goals*.

How To Make Exercise A Permanent Habit

• **Draw The X Effect**

Since we managed to intrigue you with the X Effect Method of completing goals above, here's the [Reddit thread](#) to catch it in detail. What it essentially says is you draw a 7×7 grid of 49 squares on a card, label it for a new habit, and keep putting a red X on each square for each day you complete it. You could be targeting something as easy as a [7 minute workout routine](#).

And now, let's go deeper.

• **Watch Your Routine**

Do you have a morning routine? It begins from there.

Simply start by tracking your morning routine. Are there any bad or time-wasting habits built into your mornings? You have been warned. Once you realize you've been spending 25 minutes of your mornings wading knee-deep through the freshwater stream of a [click-bait site](#), you might end up feeling it may not be quite as life-changing as you thought. *Why the heck have you been doing this useless thing for so many years?*

See the pattern, and it will be easier to break. *But really, it's more than breaking a bad habit.*

The best way to break a bad habit is to replace the it with a good one. [Charles Duhigg](#) suggested in order for change to happen, people must replace their bad habits with good ones through repetitive actions leading to rewards. Trying to break a bad habit without finding a replacement is ultimately self-defeating labor. It gets you circling back to the same negative habit.

Why morning? Because mornings are the best times to stay on track with an exercise

regime for city-living, white-collar guys as us. Once our workday begins, it's mayhem. It's like you train for the fight before the fight begins. Also, your [willpower](#) is stronger in the morning.

• **Begin A Ritual**

Begin a ritual, and try not to focus on forming a habit. *Habits don't work; rituals do.*

Habits are spontaneous behaviors. All habits begin with a decision, and ultimately become an automatic behavior. A ritual is just the opposite of a habit. A ritual requires intention, attention, and engagement. It's never automatic. Thanh Pham, Founder and Managing Director of Asian Efficiency, explains [here](#) why rituals fare better than habits.

Thann Pham has an elegant definition of a ritual: *ultra-specific step-by-step instructions that are easily repeatable and help you get a specific outcome.* Charles Duhigg writes on [Quora](#), "Rituals, by contrast, are almost always patterns developed by an external source, and adopted for reasons that might have nothing to do with decision making."

Simplified, when you do an activity with awareness and mindfulness, you're carrying out a ritual. As you approach your exercise with a ritualistic intent, it starts to become a habit in time. So, you set your mind to start with a ritual. Let's explore this with an example.

You wake up, get out of your bed and consciously put on your running shoes instead of slippers. That's the first step. Now, tell yourself you can't take those shoes off until they have served their purpose for the day. This ritual will prod you to go for a walk or a run. If you do this for enough number of days, it becomes a habit.

To make exercise a habit, begin with a ritual instead of focusing to form a habit.

• **Find A Cue**

According to a recent [research](#), most of the regular exercisers have a built-in specific mechanism. *Their exercise habit gets triggered by a particular cue.* Dr Alison Phillips, professor of psychology at Iowa State University, and her team call this cue an "instigation habit."

As plugging into their workout music the first thing on getting up in the morning; this makes them leave the house to go to the park or the gym without any great deal of thought. For them it isn't something to spend time on, say, deliberating the upsides and downsides of exercising on that day. Rather, it's like a pre-programmed decision setting off instantaneously because of a cue.

The researchers found the sole factor that accurately hinted how good you are going to be at exercising regularly over long-term was how strong your instigation habit was. The stronger the instigation or cue, the greater the chances you will get back to your workout day after day. *So, it's all about finding a strong cue that works for you.*

“This study shows that you don’t have to be afraid of trying new things. You can have an instigation habit and try new types of exercise without worrying about losing the habit,” says Alison Phillips.

• Take A Bite

Focus on one small piece of whole act. Take one bite of the whole pie.

Start with a shrunken goal. It works like this. If you have the ultimate goal of half-hour sprints a day, you begin with going to the park and spending all of 5 minutes taking a walk. That’s all.

Now, if 5 minutes seem too long, make it a 2-minute walk in the park. Begin there. And keep doing those 2-minute walks everyday till you are convinced it wouldn’t hurt too much to increase it to 3 minutes. Make it so much of a mini-workout (or even a micro-workout), so you can’t wimp out. Remember, building the exercise habit is *never* an all-or-nothing process.

Martin Gibala, a kinesiologist at McMaster University, devised [a micro-workout](#) with three 20-second rounds of exhausting exercise routine, with intermittent 3-minute recoveries (called high-intensity interval training, or HIIT), against the typical 50-minutes-at-a-time approach, to compare the health benefits.

Surprisingly, both the workout routines produced similar results in improving heart function and blood-sugar levels. “If you’re willing and able to push hard, you can get away with surprisingly little exercise,” Gibala said.

There’s another way of looking at it. Let’s call it *adaptation*. Adaptation is the evolutionary process by which a living thing becomes better able to live in its habitat. So, you start slow and small, and gradually adapt into a faster and stronger form of yourself.

How To Make Exercise A Habit: 10 Scientific Tips

1. **Commit** yourself in writing. It helps. Psychology professor Gail Matthews studied successful goal-setting in 267 people. She found you are [33% more likely](#) to achieve your goals if you write them down, shared it with a friend, and

held yourself accountable by sending them weekly updates.

2. **Get a workout buddy** or join a fitness group. It helps make the habit sticky. When you exercise with a partner or a group, you have the best chances of sticking with it. In a [study](#) of 117 adults, those who worked out with friends enjoyed the exercise more than those who did it by themselves. [Group walks in nature](#) can reduce depression, as well as be an excellent stress-busting routine.
3. **Set goals.** Good goals are ‘towards’ oriented, rather than ‘away-from’ oriented. Set goals imagining your *best-possible future self* (what you’d ideally want to become in future). Your goals could be in the lines of: attain a certain weight, increase stamina, get fitter, look more youthful, feel more energetic. Here’s a great guide to practice your best possible future self: [Best Possible Self](#). Also, learn these [goal-setting techniques](#).
4. **Plan** and decide ahead of time (AOT, borrowing the phrase from computer science) — time, duration, types, mix, and variety of activity. When you plan your workouts ahead of time, you are better focused and motivated to go at it, since you don’t spend time thinking up the best activities for that day while the minutes slip away.
5. **Start small and slow**, even if it’s just 5 minutes a day of leisurely walk. If you aren’t finding chunks of long periods available in your day to exercise, find 3-5 minute slices of time several times during the day. These multiple bouts add up without overburdening you, and you’re more able to continue your exercise routine.
6. **Choose your high-energy times.** For most, this is morning. However, this is more of an individual thing. So, find your own chipper periods. A little caution: according to science, your odds of working out is greatest when you’re in a neutral — neither happy, nor sad — mood. So, don’t fix exercise times when you’ll probably be bouncing with euphoria. Nor try to exercise yourself out of your blues.
7. **Choose the path of least resistance.** Try to find your way into your daily exercise routine through the path of least effort. If you’ve to go through the decisions of how to match your workout gear to the weather and mood of the day, then you’re likely setting yourself up for decision fatigue and watch the minutes tick away. Instead, for example, go to bed dressed in your jogging or gym wear.
8. **Fill in breaks**, intended or unintended, as part of your ritual. There will be days when even the most regular exercisers among us will find a reason to skip a day or two. Now, the important thing is do not link up these occasional breaks with shame and guilt. Don’t feel you’ve failed yourself. Restart as usual. Better still, fill in a few gaps into your exercise schedules, as a day off in a week.

9. **Change patterns** if exercise makes you feel bad. Try indoors vs outdoors, aerobics vs anaerobic, light vs strenuous, weights vs free hand, vigorous vs slow, yoga vs dance. There's song by King Prawn called [Lick of the Flame](#) which has these lines: "Mundane monotony is all you have to offer me." Don't let your exercise routine sing you that. A handy tip: music can give you bigger mood boost during cardio routines.
10. **Log your achievements**; write them into a diary or store them digitally for review from time to time. You could use [Evernote](#) for this. William Arruda, author of [Ditch, Dare, Do](#) says it in three simple words in his Forbes post [The One Thing Successful People Do Every Day](#): *Document your wins.*

Quick Review: 10 Tips On How To Make Exercise A Habit

1. Commit in writing, and be accountable
2. Get a workout buddy, or join a fitness group
3. Set goals imagining your best positive future self
4. Plan and decide the workouts ahead of time
5. Start small and slow, in many short bouts
6. Choose your high-energy, neutral mood times
7. Choose the path of least resistance
8. Keep scope for misses and breaks
9. Change and mix various patterns
10. Log your achievements

Final Words

Exercise is the most powerful way of increasing the quality and quantity of life, as research after research has shown. Exercise makes you not only healthier, but [happier too](#). We would be incredibly happy if this painstakingly written post of 2500+ words finds success in helping you start and stick to a daily exercise habit.

We close this with three little takeaways:

1. One, some exercise is better than no exercise.
2. Two, a moderate intensity workout has the best benefits, better than high or low intensity.
3. Three, outdoor exercises make you feel more refreshed and less tensed than indoor activities.