

HOW TO MAKE EXERCISE A DAILY HABIT

DR SANDIP ROY
HAPPINESS INDIA PROJECT



The Only Guide You Need To Make Exercise A Daily Habit

- Dr Sandip Roy

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.

At least three institutes — NHLBI, ACSM, and CDC — [recommend](#) we 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 should treat this “30 min x 5 days” guideline as their long-term exercise goal.

[Exercise is good for you](#), whatever your age, sex, or physical condition – there's no doubt about it. It boosts your mood and energy, fights back a horde of diseases, and even increases your life. Daily exercise is the best means available to us today for delaying and preventing the effects of aging.

In 2012, the National Cancer Consortium in America measured the effect of exercise on overall health. They found that if you walk at least 75 minutes a week, you can add up to one and a half years to your life.

And if you increase your walking to 7½ hours a week, you can expect to add 4½ years to your lifespan.

But, even after knowing that, you won't perhaps start a daily exercise regimen.
Why?

WHY IS IT HARD TO MAKE EXERCISE A HABIT



To be clear, by exercise we mean planned, structured, repetitive, and purposeful physical activity.

But why it is hard for you to make exercise a daily habit?

And, more importantly, how can you make exercise a habit, and a regular one at that?

• 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 a chronic smoker, and they'll tell you how simple it is to stop their smoking 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 REASON •

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. 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](#). 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.

It's really the follow-through which falls through.

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 that magic number of days. Many researchers have dived in deep to answer this once and for all. Unfortunately, they haven't reached a consensus yet.

Experts differ fantastically. You may be puzzled at how widely they differ on the optimum time frame. Take some examples on what they say on how long it takes to make exercise a regular habit:

• 21 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."

• 66 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.

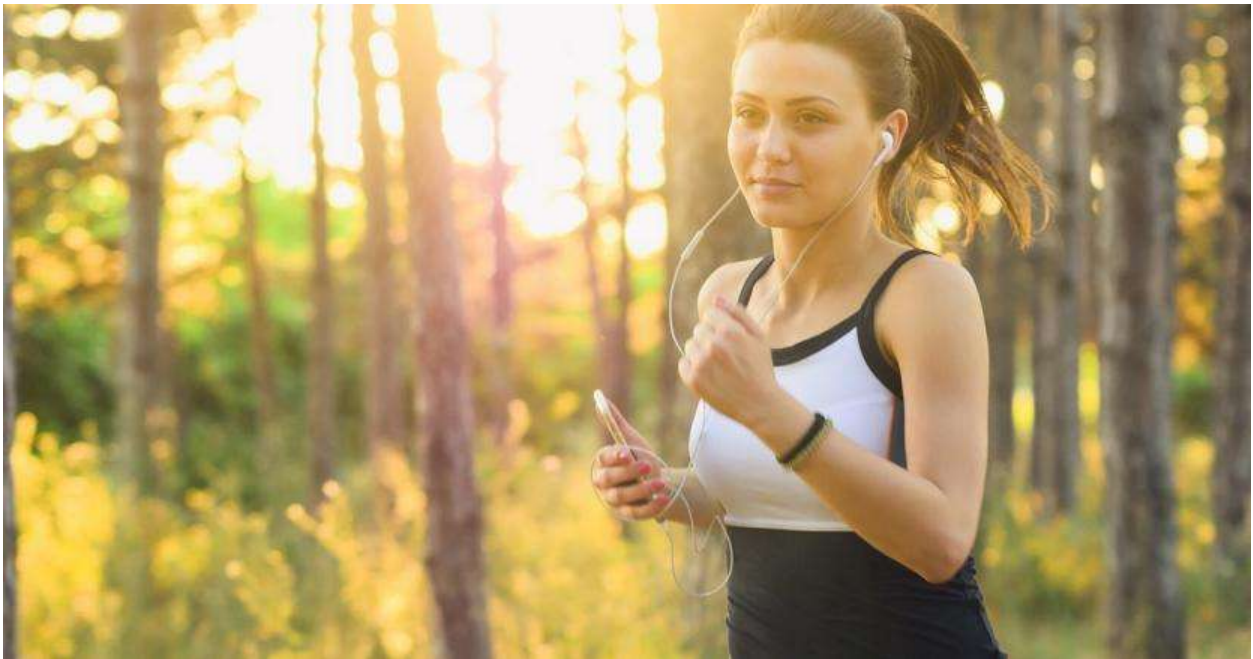
Did we mention this number is not an exact, but an average of 18 to 254 days?

• 49 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 had 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 BUILD A HABIT THAT STICKS



How do you build a habit that sticks for a long time, as exercise?

There are 5 specific steps you can use to form any habit, not just exercise. Applying these, you'll find it easy to get into a daily exercise routine from right from today on.

We just need the following 5 keys to form any new habit that sticks:

1. The X Effect
2. Watch Your Routine
3. Begin A Ritual
4. Find A Cue
5. Take A Bite

1. 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.

2. 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?

Be 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 up close. Once you spot the bad habit, it will be easier to pull out the wiggly worm and put it away.

But really, it's more than breaking a bad habit.

The best way to break a bad habit is to replace the habit 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, you ask?

Because mornings are the best times to stay on track with an exercise regime for city-bred guys as us. Once our white-collared workday begins, it's mayhem.

It's like you train for the fight before the show begins. Your willpower is stronger in the morning.

Find out how you can increase your willpower with these [secret techniques](#).

3. 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. 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, 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 you've walked around the block for the day.

If you do this ritual for enough number of days, it becomes a habit.

4. 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 an "instigation habit."

An example of a great cue: Plugging into your workout-music the first thing in the morning. This would make you leave the house and go to the park or gym without any great deal of thought after getting up.

For them who have established cues, the details aren't something to spend time on, as deliberating on the upsides of exercising on a gloomy day. Rather, it's like a pre-programmed decision that sets off instantaneously because of the cue.

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.

5. Take A Bite

Focus on one small piece of the 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 an 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.

According to muscle physiology researcher Dr Keith Baar, HIIT should be done [early in the day](#), followed by a recovery period of at least 3 hours. If you’re further interested in interval training, check this out: [Really, Really Short Workouts](#).

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 weak, and gradually adapt into a faster and stronger form of yourself.

10 SCIENTIFIC TIPS TO MAKE EXERCISE A DAILY HABIT



These are 10 specific tips the scientists have unearthed out of years of research. These have been tested to work like magic, even if you were to follow around half of them.

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, share it with a friend, and hold yourself accountable by sending them weekly updates.
2. Get a workout buddy or join a fitness group. It makes the habit sticky. When you exercise with a partner or group, you can't devise a new excuse everyday to skip your exercise. 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 towards-goals. Good goals are 'towards' oriented, rather than 'away-from' oriented. Your goals could be in the lines of: reach 115 pounds – not lose 20 pounds, increase stamina – not decrease tiredness, look more youthful – not less haggard, get fitter – not less sedentary. And, check out these [3 highly effective 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 to match the weather and your mood that day, you're doing it before the minutes tick away.
5. Start small and slow, even if it's just 5 minutes a day of leisurely walk. If you can't find long chunks of time in your day to exercise, find 3-5 minute slabs several times during the day. These multiple small bouts add up without overburdening you, and you're more able to continue your exercise routine. Find me a guy who can't find 3 slices of one minute each to exercise on their packed day, and I'll find you the laziest bum on earth.
6. Choose high-energy times. For most, this is morning. However, this is more of an individual thing. So, find out your own chipper periods. A little caution: according to science, your odds of working out are 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 a 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 [conscientious](#) 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 or ten days.
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 a 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](#) or [Keep](#) for this. [William Arruda](#) says it in three simple words in his Forbes post *The One Thing Successful People Do Every Day: Document your wins.*



10 TIPS TO Exercise Habit

For Those Who Can't Stick To Daily Workout

1

Write

33% more likely to achieve your goals if you write them down, share it with a friend, and hold yourself accountable.

2

Friend

When you exercise with a friend or group, you enjoy the exercise more, and stick to it longer, than those who did it by themselves.

3

Goal

Good goals are 'towards' oriented. Your goals could be in the lines of: reach 115 pounds, increase stamina, look more youthful, get fitter.

4

Plan

When you plan your workouts ahead of time, you are better motivated to go at it. You're already doing it before planning eats away your time.

5

Start

If you can't find long chunks of time in your day to exercise, find 3-5 minute slabs several times during the day. These multiple small bouts add up easily.

6

Energy

Your odds of working out is greatest when you're in a neutral mood. So, don't fix exercise times when you're bouncing with euphoria, or you're in the blues.

7

Easy

If you go through daily decisions of matching your workout gear to weather and mood, then you set yourself up for decision fatigue.

8

Breaks

After occasional breaks, do not link these up with shame and guilt. Don't feel you've failed yourself. Restart as usual.

9

Change

Try indoors vs outdoors, aerobics vs anaerobic, light vs strenuous, weights vs free hand, vigorous vs slow, yoga vs dance.

10

Record

Record your achievements into a diary or store them digitally for review from time to time. You'll know how far you've come.

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 2700+ words finds success in helping you start and stick to a daily exercise habit.

We close this with three little takeaways:

1. Some exercise is better than no exercise.
2. A moderate intensity workout has the best benefits, better than high or low intensity.
3. Outdoor exercises make you feel more refreshed and less tensed than indoor activities

*NHLBI = National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; ACSM = American College of Sports Medicine; CDC = Center For Disease Control

The author, **Dr Sandip Roy**, is Founder of [Happiness India Project](#).

At Happiness India Project (HIP), we believe everyone has the potential to be happier and make other important people in their lives happier.

When we launched in 2014, we knew quite a number of people around us who were immensely successful, but were also unhappy. Most of them fervently pursued happiness, but could not find it in a lasting way. They wanted to be happy in their lives and in their relationships, but somehow could not get a firm grip on it.

We had been asking and engaging them on specifically these questions for almost a year before our launch. And they had no clue why it was so. Two of their most thought-provoking questions were:

- *Why can't I [hold on to my happiness](#), when I find it?*
- *Why do I [need to be happy](#), when I am fine without it?*

As we sat down to look at the answers, we found invariably that most of them were, so to say, looking for happiness at the wrong places.

- One, they weren't happy themselves, but were looking to find joy for their loved ones.
- Two, they always thought that they'll finally be happy when they had their next success.
- Three, they held that happiness is under complete control of heredity and circumstances.

These were some of the most common myths of happiness, which they were mired in too deep. You see, often the wisdom that we get passed on through generations are unproved and untrue.

So, we felt the need to create a community of people that could attain sustainable happiness. And also, could increase the happiness levels of their loved ones and their tribes. We wanted to reach out to people who could ask us their happiness and fulfillment questions.

We want to explain it to you what [happiness means](#).

For starters, happiness means more than a smile and a laugh. Here, at HIP, we want to go farther. We want to let you in on the ways to happiness that are backed by science - *the science of positive psychology*.

[Positive psychology](#) is the scientific effort to understand the nature of happiness and well-being of human beings. It focuses on the positive human qualities that make "the good life."

Since then, we have been steadily growing as a collective of authentic happiness-seekers from around the world. Our big goal is to help you to find happy moments in each day, share them with friends and family, do more of what makes you happier, and use this knowledge to help humanity.

[Join us](#), if you feel we match your bandwidth and what we're doing is worthwhile. You could write to us to tell us what you feel at these emails: HappinessProjectIndia [at] gmail [dot] com or Contact [at] HappyProject [dot] in