

HOW TO MAKE EXERCISE A DAILY HABIT

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How To Make Exercise A Daily Habit

– Dr. Sandip Roy

Most of us are bad at breaking an old habit, and particularly bad at building a new one like daily exercise.

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.

The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), and Center For Disease Control (CDC) [recommend](#):

All adults should set a long-term goal to accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, and preferably all, days of the week.

[Exercise is good for you](#), whatever your age, sex, or physical condition, 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 is it 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 is often this:

Information doesn't guarantee execution.

You might be the most informed person in your social circle. You could be 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.

Every so often, 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 us once.

But audacious goals often fail because we are not good at predicting our [future selves](#). We don't count it in how many parts of our lives we have to change to climb to the magnificent goal of losing 50 pounds (ca. 23 kg) within 50 days of exercise.

It's another one of our human flaws.

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

HOW LONG IT TAKES 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 had 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 of what they say about how long it takes to make exercise a regular habit:

• 21 DAYS •

Maxwell Maltz, a cosmetic surgeon from the 1950s, laid it out for generations of self-help experts that 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 that said it takes a little more than 2 months, or 66 days, for a new habit to take root.

That number is not exact but an average of 18 to 254 days.

• 49 DAYS •

Ryan Brooks, developer of the habit & goal tracker app 7 Weeks, says:

“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 book *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

The X Effect Method of Completing Goals says 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.

2. Watch Your Routine

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

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 scrolling your mobile, 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 exercise daily, as 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 conscious decision to 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 of Asian Efficiency, 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 would become a habit.

4. Find A Cue

According to [this 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 those who have established cues, the details aren't something to spend time on, such 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.

The sole factor that accurately indicates how regular you would be at exercising over the long term is how strong your instigation habit (cue) is. 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 Small 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 seems too long, do a 2-minute walk in the park. Begin there. And keep doing those 2-minute walks every day until you are convinced it wouldn't hurt too much to increase it to 3 minutes.

Make it a mini-workout (or even a micro-workout) that you can't skip it.

*Remember, building an exercise habit is **not** an all-or-nothing process.*

Martin Gibala, kinesiologist at McMaster University, devised [a micro-workout](#): three 20-second rounds of an exhausting exercise routine, with 3-minute in-between recoveries.

Surprisingly, Gibala found that this micro-workout produced similar results in improving heart function and blood-sugar levels as compared to the typical 50-minute exercise routine. "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.

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 10 tips 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 goal if you write it 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 every day 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 (ca. 52 kg) – not lose 20 pounds (ca. 9 kg), increase stamina – not decrease tiredness, look more youthful – not less haggard, or get fitter – not less sedentary. And, check out these [3 highly effective goal-setting techniques](#).
4. **Plan and decide Ahead-of-Time (AOT).** 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. Each Saturday, write down the time, duration, types, mix, and variety of activities you're going to do next week.
5. **Start small and slow.** Start with a walk, even if it's only for 5 minutes each day. 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, nudging you to continue your exercise routine. Anyone who can't find three 1-minute chunks a day to work out is the world's biggest excuse maker.

6. **Choose high-energy times.** For most people, this is morning. Some may find their peak energy times to be afternoons or evenings. Find your own chipper periods. *A word of advice:* pick a time to work out when you're in a neutral mood. As per science, your odds of working out are greatest when you're in a neutral mood, neither too happy nor in a low mood. So, don't fix exercise times when you are 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 have 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 watching 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 in your exercise schedules, such 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. freehand, vigorous vs. slow, and yoga vs. dance. Remember these lines in this King Prawn song called *Lick of the Flame*: "*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 a bigger mood boost during cardio routines.
10. **Log your achievements.** Write down your achievements, daily or weekly, in a paper or digital diary or notebook. Review them from time to time. Feedback keeps you on the path. So, as *William Arruda* says in three simple words: *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 best available way to increase your quality and quantity of life, as research shows. Exercise makes you [happier too](#).

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 tense than indoor activities.

[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.”

- Read: Why do I [need to be happy](#) when I am fine being normal?

