

Barriers to Health & Fitness

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by Michael Gonzales, Ph.D.

The history of the exercise movement is very interesting because of what it has become and the impact it has had many on people. The health benefits attributed by the medical world to exercise, as well as the craze it has created for image-conscious society are just a couple reasons why people exercise. However, the issue is not why an individual exercises; many people exercise because they are aware of its benefits. The pertinent question is why does an individual not exercise or exercises inconsistently. These are great questions that shall be addressed.

There are some who suggest that Herodicus, who back in 400 B.C. instructed doctors that they had a duty to practice preventative medicine, not just attempt to cure the sick, was the creator of the exercise movement. His specialty was exercises for people of different ages and fitness levels. From there it has taken a rather strange route. It has been in the hands of exercise gurus, various scientists, and even sports enthusiasts, all having their own opinions on what, when, how, how long, how many times one should exercise.

Who is right? The reality is that no one seems to really know what is best for each person on an individual basis. Each person is different and requires different forms and levels of exercise. What most people do seem to agree on is that people need some sort of physical activity on a somewhat regular basis. Exactly what that is differs greatly between people. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the College of Sports Medicine and the Surgeon General of the United States state that people need moderate exercise most days of the week. What exactly this means is constantly under debate. What is important to remember is that ALL people, not just athletes, need some physical activity on a regular basis.

With all the data there is about why people should exercise, why do they still have a tendency not to? As there are many types of exercise an individual can choose, not exercising is also a choice. No one can write a book or a scientific paper that will fully explain why some people do not exercise or why they exercise erratically. For this answer one really need to look within. This paper is written to help people do just that — look within.

The quick answer to the question of why an individual does not exercise has to do with time, motivation and worthiness. These factors will be addressed in this paper: finding time, getting motivated, and believing that he or she is worth the time and effort necessary to get healthier and more fit. As you can tell, these factors are psychological in nature. If you find this boring or irrelevant to your life I suggest that you pass this on to someone else. If it strikes some interest in you — read on.

TIME

Time is a commodity that people cannot control, extend or manipulate. All we can control is our perception. How we use time, how we think about time, how we allow time to impact us — all of these things are under our control. The key here is how you think. I am not talking about intelligence, I am talking about those things that you allow to run through your mind and the impact that this has on you. You and only you are in control of these thoughts, and no one else. The difficulty lies in learning how to control them. This is hard, but not impossible.

One way of controlling our perception of time is being aware of what we do with it. Not having enough time to exercise is at the top of the list for reasons not to exercise. Why? Responsibilities. Everyone has responsibilities and people get so involved in their daily responsibilities that taking care of themselves takes a very distant last place on their to-do list.

They get so wrapped up in daily life that they do not believe that they have the time to take care of themselves. Taking care of their career, home, kids, and partners takes priority over taking care of themselves. So then when is it your time? The only answer to prioritize your time because you can never set your responsibilities aside. They are there because of choices that you made and they are not going away.

The importance of taking care of yourself is best illustrated in the following example. Before taking off in a commercial airplane, a flight attendant comes on the PA system and begins the talk about safety. The flight attendant says what to do if the plane should experience an unexpected drop in cabin pressure: the masks will drop from the cabinet above you, and you are instructed to PUT YOUR MASK ON FIRST, if you are traveling with a child or person needing assistance. Why in that order? In an emergency, the first thought is usually the child, not you. However, what is likely to happen if you put your child's mask on first and you lose consciousness or at least lucidness in your attempt? Both lives will then be in danger. Thus, it is essential to take care of yourself first because it enables you to take care of others more effectively.

In order for you to begin prioritizing time to take care of yourself, it takes willingness to change. You may have the desire to change the structure of your time, but if there is no willingness, no change will occur. What is the difference between willingness and desire? Willingness is best described by an example. If you have ever smoked and tried to stop, this will hit home. If you have never smoked and therefore never tried to stop, it will still make sense to you because we all know someone who has tried to stop smoking. When a person wants to stop, they will typically do a variety of things. They will go for hypnosis, take pills, cut back, or, nowadays, try patches. None of these will work, the person continues to smoke. At some point they say to themselves, "I am no longer willing to smoke." It is at that point that stopping is possible, but not until then. They have moved from wanting to willing, and change occurs.

The same holds for controlling your thoughts. It is only after you move yourself from “wanting” to “willing” that you begin to change. When you think, “I don’t have time to work out, but I want to,” it is clear that you are in the wanting place. You would like to be different. What is not obvious is the willingness to change. Only when you can truly answer “Yes” to the question, “Am I willing to consistently work out?” will a change occur. Both question and answer can only come from you.

How does one get to a willing place from a wanting place? I only wish that there was a simple answer to this question. What I have found in my therapy practice is that people can get to a willing place by asking themselves the question several times each day. In this case: “Am I willing to control my thoughts?” Once you can honestly answer “Yes” to this question from yourself, to yourself, change will occur.

Now that you are willing to control what is running through your mind, what comes next? The following formula can be used to help change your thoughts:

You will need to make conscious those statements that are presently running through your head. It is best if you take the time to write them out. You will need to refer to them as you begin to work on changing them. This stage is much easier said than done. A lot of things can get in the way of your ability to clearly articulate these statements.

Once you have articulated them you will need to clarify what is true and what is untrue about what is going through your head. Typically there is some part of this sentence that is true. What is it?

There is also some part of the sentence that is not true. What is that? Typically the “untrue part” is an exaggeration of the truth, or an all-encompassing type of statement. For example: I will never have the time to work out.

Then you will need to create a new healthier statement to replace the one that is causing you trouble.

To further delineate the formula, let's break down the statement "I will never have the time to workout," to understand the steps. First, we need to determine what is true or not true about never having time to workout. It is true that time management is difficult because the amount of time we have in a day is set to twenty-four hours. Now that we know that this part of this statement is true, the next step is to determine which part is untrue. What is not true is the absoluteness of the statement — "never." We need to dismiss the all-encompassing statement, then we can put the "true" statements in perspective. Thus, when a person says, "I will never have the time to workout," he is likely saying to himself that time management is impossible. But the truth is, time management is not impossible -- it is merely difficult. It is easier to deal with something being difficult than it is to attempt to deal with the impossible. When you run "impossible" through your mind you become overwhelmed and stop yourself from doing things that you would like to do, i.e. work out. Finally, the last step is to create the replacement sentence that will help you to move past unhelpful sentence. The replacement sentence for this example might be: Managing my time is difficult, and I can do it.

MOTIVATION

What exactly is motivation? Most of you know what is not motivating for you, and at the same time most of you have trouble articulating what in fact is motivating for you. The American Heritage Dictionary defines "motivate" as: To provide with an incentive or motive: impel.

Great, so we are looking for something that provides an incentive, that impels us to do something. You need to ask yourself, what impels me or pushes me to act, to do something?

The answer to this question is essential. You need to be aware of what this does for you. For most people, it is the thought or belief that they will gain something from the effort. But what is the gain, and what is the cost? These are also important questions that you will need to answer if you in fact will be different than you are now.

Your body is **not stupid**, and therefore
avoids that which is **not enjoyable**.

A present wisdom is that you need to do what is fun. The belief here is that if you do something that is fun, you will be more likely to continue to do it. This really sounds great. The problem is that most people do not like to exercise. There are certainly some who do. Typically, they are high-level athletes, some of whom get a “runners’ high” from strenuous exercise. To these folks I say, “I am jealous.” I only wish that I could find an exercise activity that I truly enjoyed. The reality is that I do not like to exercise and I never have. Yet I am very consistent and regular with my workout. Why? Because I have found what motivates me. It is the promise of improved health and fitness. It does not feel particularly good, except when I stop. It does not bring immediate results. Yet, I believe that exercising will improve my life and health. For me, that is motivating and the result is consistent exercise. The point here is that you do not have to like it, you just have to find that which motivates you and use it.

Thinking and negative “self-talk” are other activities that get in the way of consistent exercise, especially if you do not enjoy exercising. When your mind is given time to think about exercise, what typically happens? You talk yourself out of it, simply because you are asking yourself to do something you do not enjoy. Your body is not stupid, and therefore avoids that which is not enjoyable. The answer here is about forming a habit. Once you form a habit via repetitious

exercise your mind is no longer involved in the decision process of whether or not to work out. This greatly increases the likelihood that you will work out, and work out consistently.

How do you prevent the “self-talk” that can lead to not exercising? I have been successful at taking my mind out of the process by exercising first thing in the morning before I can talk myself out of it. I also do not tell myself that I have to enjoy exercising. I tell myself, “I will do this and it will be over soon. It is good for my health, my partner, and me.” Those sentences are replacement sentences that tend to work for me. These exact sentences are not likely to work for you. You have to come up with replacement sentences of your own that will work for you. Follow the process outlined above and you will get there. You will find your way of changing sentences that will increase your chances of working out and working out consistently.

WORTHINESS

Worthiness is an important yet not easily described concept. The American Heritage Dictionary defines worthy as:

1. Having worth; merit, or value: useful or valuable.
2. Honorable; admirable: *a worthy fellow*.
3. Having sufficient worth; deserving: *worthy to be revered; worthy of acclaim*.

This relates to people working out because if they feel unworthy, they are not likely to put forth the effort that it will take to be consistent with exercise. How then, does one become worthy when one has not felt worthy most, if not all, of his or her life?

Again, it has to do with the sentences that you are running through your head. If you are feeling unworthy, you are likely saying things like:

You are such a sh*t.

You cannot do anything right.

Everything that you try to do turns out bad.

With these negative sentences in your head it is very difficult to do anything positive in your life. These sentences or any like them need to be replaced with sentences that lead to different feelings on your part. Sentences like:

Though I am not perfect, I do the best that I can do at this time in my life.

This sentence is neither denial nor an exaggeration of what is not right. It is honest. It says, “I am not perfect,” and then it goes on to acknowledge that you do the best that you can do. How about a sentence like:

I deserve to take better care of my family and me.

Sentences like these will lead you to feel better about yourself, and therefore, increase the likelihood that you will make better decisions regarding your health and fitness.

All of this is predicated on the vision that you set for yourself. A vision is where or what you see for yourself in the future. For example, seeing yourself in the future in a happy, healthy and prosperous relationship is a vision. From that, we can establish shorter-term goals that will allow you to accomplish this vision.

I firmly believe that people tend to go to what they see. For example, if, when riding a dirt bike, you see a boulder on the path ahead of you, you tell yourself, “I will not hit that boulder.” Chances are, that is exactly what you will do — hit the boulder. In this case you set in

your mind the picture of hitting the boulder. You then go about achieving that which you have set in your mind – hitting the boulder, even though what you want to do is avoid the boulder. This example simply points out the importance of the goal. Setting a picture in your mind of what you will see is setting the stage for accomplishing exactly that. These goals should be **S-M-A-R-T**:

S – Specific, **M** – Measurable, **A** – Attainable, **R** – Relevant, and **T** – Time based.

For example, a **specific** short-term goal may be to start strength training; the long-term goal may be easing the symptoms of arthritis, improving balance, or controlling your weight. This goal is easily **measurable**: Have you or have you not begun the program? Indeed, this is an **attainable** goal, as long as your doctor approves, and this goal is certainly **relevant** to living a long, healthy life. Your goal needs to be **time-based**: you will read this book within five days, buy the equipment you need, and set your exercise schedule within the next five days. You will start the program within the following two to three days.

Words or sentences are similar to pictures you set in your mind. Both have an impact on our thought process and, consequently, to our sense of self-worth.

SUMMARY

The importance of consistent exercise is not up for debate. What is debatable is how to achieve consistent exercise while considering factors that prevent an individual from exercising. Although there is no agreed-upon rule to which we can all adapt, the leaders of the health and sports organizations mentioned above do concur that everyone needs to do physical activity most days of the week. What prevents the non-athlete from exercising is his or her sense of time, motivation and worthiness. However, these mental and/or emotional barriers can be addressed in ways that make consistent physical activity possible. Regardless

of one's level of fitness or ability, it is possible. What it takes is willingness. When one becomes willing, things in his or her life begin to change.

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Michael Gonzales has been a licensed clinical psychologist in California since 1983. He is a successful psychologist, community leader and is active in business. He is the president of Gonzales Properties, LLC and Zoom Workout, Inc.

Dr. Gonzales became interested in helping executives extend their success through fitness. Uniquely using his background in psychology and business leadership, Dr. Gonzales guides readers in assessing what gets in the way of consistent exercise.

Dr. Gonzales has presented internationally, in China on AIDS and in England on Family Therapy. Dr. Gonzales has published a book entitled *Contemporary Issues in Human Sexuality* and several articles in professional journals and is certified by the National Endurance and Sports Trainers Association.

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