

Fitness programs: 7 tips for staying motivated

Fitness doesn't have to be drudgery. Stay motivated by setting goals and choosing activities you enjoy.

Have you ever started a fitness program and then quit? If you answered yes, you're not alone. Many people start fitness programs but stop when they get bored or results come too slowly—but it doesn't need to be that way. Here are seven tips to help you stay motivated.

1. Set goals

Start with simple goals and then progress to longer range goals. Remember to make your goals realistic and achievable. It's easy to get frustrated and give up if your goals are too ambitious. For example, if you haven't exercised in a while, a short-term goal might be to walk five minutes once or twice a day. An intermediate goal might be to walk 20 minutes three or four times a week. A long-term goal might be to complete a 5K walk.

2. Make it fun

Find sports or activities that you enjoy, then vary the routine to keep you on your toes. If you're not enjoying your workouts, try something different. Join a volleyball or softball league. Take a ballroom dancing class. Check out a health club or martial arts center. Discover your hidden athletic talent. Remember, exercise doesn't have to be drudgery—and you're more likely to stick with a fitness program if you're having fun.

3. Make physical activity part of your daily routine

If it's hard to find time for exercise, don't fall back on excuses. Schedule workouts as you would any other important activity. You can also slip in physical activity throughout the day. Be creative! Take a walk during your child's music lesson. Take the stairs instead of the elevator at work. Pedal a stationary bike or do strength training exercises with resistance tubing while you watch TV at night.

4. Put it on paper

Are you hoping to lose weight? Boost your energy? Sleep better? Manage a chronic condition? Write it down! Seeing the benefits of regular exercise on paper may help you stay motivated. It may also help to keep an exercise diary. Record what you did during each exercise session, how long you exercised and how you felt afterward. Recording your efforts can help you work toward your goals—and remind you that you're making progress.

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5. Join forces with friends, neighbors or others

You're not in this alone. Invite friends or co-workers to join you when you exercise. Work out with your partner or other loved ones. Play soccer with your kids. Organize a group of neighbors to take fitness classes at a local health club.

6. Reward yourself

After each exercise session, take a few minutes to savor the good feelings that exercise gives you. This type of internal reward can help you make a long-term commitment to regular exercise. External rewards can help, too. When you reach a longer range goal, treat yourself to a new pair of walking shoes or new tunes to enjoy while you exercise.

7. Be flexible

If you're too busy to work out or simply don't feel up to it, take a day or two off. Be gentle with yourself if you need a break. The important thing is to get back on track as soon as you can.

Now that you're enthusiastic again, get moving! Set your goals, make it fun and pat yourself on the back from time to time. Remember, physical activity is for life. Review these tips whenever you feel your motivation sliding.