

How do I improve my motivation to exercise when I really hate it? Ten science-backed tips

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We've all heard those people who say "running gives you a high" or "exercise is addictive," but for many of us, it's hard to love exercise. Some might even say they hate it, dread it, or the thought of going to the gym gives them anxiety.

Why do some of us hate exercise? And how can we overcome this to reap the lifesaving benefits of getting the body moving?

Humans didn't evolve to 'exercise'

Throughout most of human history, food was scarce and being active wasn't a choice. For millennia, humans had to move to find food, and once they were fed, they rested to conserve energy, because they didn't know where their next meal was coming from.

So, if you have the urge to sit down and watch Netflix rather than going to the gym, you might take solace in the knowledge resting is a natural human tendency.

Having said that, our 21st-century lifestyles involve far too much sitting and resting. With technology, cars, and other labor-saving devices, moving is no longer necessary for daily survival.

Yet, being physically inactive is terrible for our health. A meta-analysis published in the medical journal [*The Lancet*](#) found [physical inactivity](#) is associated with a 30 to 40% increased risk of colon cancer, 30% increased risk of breast cancer, 20–60% increased risk of type 2 diabetes, and a 30–50% higher risk of premature death, compared with being physically active.

So how much physical activity do you actually need?

It's [recommended](#) Australian adults (aged 18–65) get at least 150 (though preferably 300) minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week. Moderate intensity exercise might be a brisk walk, light cycle or mowing the lawn.

If you are willing to do [vigorous physical activity](#), you only need half that (75–150 minutes per week). Vigorous activity is anything strenuous enough you would struggle to have a conversation: jogging, or running around playing a sport like footy or tennis.

A variety of activity types are encouraged since different physical activities entail different benefits. Muscle-strengthening exercises, like lifting weights or doing push ups, are encouraged twice a week, to keep bones and muscles strong.

If that is all starting to sound too complicated, rest assured ANY exercise is good for you. You don't have to achieve the physical activity guidelines to benefit from physical activity.

What are some science-backed tips for getting motivated?

According to psychologists there are two main types of motivation: extrinsic and [intrinsic motivation](#). Intrinsic motivation arises from within—doing something for the personal reward or challenge of it. Extrinsic motivation comes from external factors, like trying to earn a reward or avoid a punishment.

You can boost your *intrinsic* motivation by identifying why exercising is important to you.

- 1.** Identify your "why"—do you want to exercise for your health? Is it for your kids? Is it for how working out makes you feel? Exercise has long-term benefits for health and function, flow-on benefits for your children, and immediate effects on mood and vitality. Being clear in your mind about what you want to gain from exercising, can help prompt you into [action](#).

Extrinsic motivators can also help you get started with exercise.

2. Arrange to meet a friend to exercise together. You'll be more likely to follow through, as you won't want to let your friend down. Also, research suggests people exercise for [longer](#) when they exercise with family members and friends compared with those who exercise alone

3. Reward yourself with a new piece of clothing or shoes you'll enjoy exercising in. Be sure to make the reward [conditional](#) on doing a certain amount of exercise, so you have to earn it

4. Get an activity tracker. Fitness trackers have a host of [features](#) designed to boost motivation, such as prompts, self-monitoring and goal-setting. There is a plethora of research suggesting activity trackers [increase physical activity](#)

5. Exercise at the same time each day, so it becomes a habit. Research suggests exercising in the [morning](#) leads to faster habit formation compared with evening exercise

6. Do an activity you enjoy. Starting a new exercise habit is hard enough. Increase your chances of [sticking](#) with it by doing an activity you find enjoyable. Also, you may exercise at a higher intensity without even realizing it, if you are doing a form of exercise you enjoy. If you hate running, don't do it. Go for a long walk in nature

7. Start small. Leave yourself wanting more, rather than overdoing it. You're also less likely to feel sore or [injure](#) yourself

8. Listening to [up-beat music](#) improves mood during exercise, and reduces perceived exertion, leading to increased work output. These benefits are particularly effective for rhythmic, repetitive forms of exercise, such as walking and running

9. Take your dog for a walk. [Dog-walkers](#) walk more often and for longer than non-dog walkers, and they report feeling safer and more socially connected in their neighborhood

10. Make a financial commitment. Behavioral economic theory recognizes humans are motivated by loss aversion. Some commercial websites have harnessed this for health by getting people to make a "commitment contract" in which they pay a financial deposit that is forfeited if the health behavior commitment is not met. This approach has been shown to improve [physical activity](#), [medication adherence](#) and [weight loss](#).

Be patient with yourself, and keep the long game in mind—it takes around [three to four months](#) to form an exercise habit. After that, the intrinsic motivators take over to keep your exercise routine going. Who knows, maybe you'll be the one hooked on [exercise](#) and inspiring your friends and family a few months from now.

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