

Why you shouldn't let guilt motivate you to exercise

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Credit: Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels

The hardest part of consistently exercising is finding the motivation to do it. But using the wrong type of motivation for your workouts could militate against you—and could even have consequences for your mental

health.

Our research, which [investigated the motivations](#) of 650 frequent exercisers, found that people who believed things like "I am a loser if I do not succeed in things that matter to me" and "I have to be viewed favorably by people that matter to me" were more likely to use self-pressure and wanting to avoid guilt as [motivation](#) to exercise.

Not only was this group more likely to not want to exercise at all, we also found that those who used guilt and self-pressure as motivation were at greater risk of experiencing poor [mental health](#).

The tendency to hold dogmatic beliefs like "I must" or "I have to," and harmful beliefs about yourself creates a negative and [unhealthy approach to exercise](#).

But the darker side of this mindset is that people who held these beliefs reported higher symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress compared with exercisers who didn't use self-pressure and guilt as motivation.

While it's possible that people already experiencing poor mental health would be more likely to have negative beliefs about themselves, there's a deeply reciprocal relationship between mental health and how we think and act.

Research shows that extreme, rigid, negative ways of thinking are [risk factors for mental health problems](#). Repeating [negative thoughts](#) many times, over many years, can lead to deep self-loathing which can corrode your [mental health](#) and leave you in a continuous state of [stress and depression](#). It can also make you even less likely to positively change your thinking and [exercise habits](#).

On the other hand, our study found that people who reported lower

symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress had significantly less extreme, rigid and negative ways of thinking. These participants were less likely to endorse ways of thinking that involved self-demands ("I must"), magnification ("things are awful"), and self-condemnation ("I am a failure").

These exercisers reported using more useful forms of motivation to workout, such as exercising because they loved the activity and recognized the value and importance of exercise as a part of their identity.

These findings show us just how important the thoughts you use to motivate your workouts can be, especially when it comes to your mental health.

One solution to these ways of thinking is a psychological approach called [rational emotive behavior therapy](#) (REBT). REBT aims to understand and challenge deeply held beliefs and develop helpful alternatives. This approach may help an exerciser go from "I have to exercise" and "I'd be worthless if I didn't exercise" to thinking "I really want to exercise, but if I didn't exercise, I would be disappointed, but I would not be worthless."

Improving a person's beliefs about exercise can change their motivation from being centered on self-pressure and guilt to seeing the value and potential enjoyment in working out.

There are many [ideas and tools](#) we can apply from REBT even without having to step foot inside a psychologist's office. So if you find yourself falling into this cycle of self-loathing and losing motivation to exercise, here's what you can do.

Think critically about your thinking

When you think about exercising, are your thoughts negative, unhelpful and self-pressuring? Be more critical of your thoughts about exercise, and ask yourself whether they make sense—and if they're helping you.

If the answer is no, try to work on adopting thoughts that do make sense and help you achieve your exercise goals, such as seeing exercise as something to enjoy, instead of something you have to do out of guilt. Being able to challenge your own unhelpful beliefs, and learning to harness more helpful ones, can help you [achieve your goals](#).

Realize you're not what you do

As human beings, we're imperfect. We mess up—but we also do great things. When things don't go to plan, it's important to try and accept this. And remember that failing doesn't mean you're a failure.

Realize that you aren't [defined by your shortcomings](#). Recognizing that failing does not make you a failure may help you better bounce back from times when you fall short of your goals and expectations and keep on track with reaching your goals and finding solutions.

Harness the power of want

You're far more likely to stick to your exercise goals if you [want to do them](#). Find an activity that offers you something more than just exercise. Perhaps join an exercise group where you can make new friends or rekindle your passion for something you used to do.

If you're only exercising because you believe you have to or to avoid guilt, then you probably won't stick with it. Nobody likes to be pressured into doing difficult things. Finding an activity you don't have to force yourself to do may help you move from seeing exercise as something

you have to do to something you love to do.

Exercise is, of course, important, but guiltting yourself into doing it will probably do more harm than good. The best way is by finding things you enjoy, accepting yourself unconditionally if your motivation does wane, and removing "have to" from your thoughts about [exercise](#).

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