Have you got exercise excusitis?

Dean Hodgkin looks at the common barriers to making exercise a permanent part of your lifestyle.

Despite there being an abundance of scientific research to confirm that regular exercise brings a whole range of health benefits, only around 35% of us engage in regular physical activity and a worrying 33% admit to doing none at all. To uncover the reasons we need to dig deep to appreciate the psychology of fitness, establishing some basic facts regarding attitudes to exercise and the thought process that leads to action.

Sedentary people tend to harbour negative perceptions of exercise, viewing it as difficult and unpleasant, probably influenced by wet Wednesday afternoons on the school games field. Sadly, when these people are asked to discuss exercise, they can easily identify the goals they'd like to achieve but they just as readily declare the difficulties they anticipate, effectively putting up barriers. Let's look more specifically at what these barriers are, in descending order of importance:

'Family and friends can give you support but the truth is that nobody else will do it for you...'

Time don't have the time, no time because of work, young children to look after

Emotional not the sporty type, too shy, might get injured

Motivational need to rest in my spare time, don't have the energy, won't keep it up, don't like exercise

Access nobody to do it with, too expensive, no suitable local facilities, haven't got the right clothes or equipment

Physical injury or disability prevents me, too fat, not healthy enough to participate, too old.

The above points don't tell the whole story, however, as men and women differ in their opinions. For example:

- Women are much less likely to participate in sport, considering themselves to not be the sporty type, so walking, cycling and group exercise classes might be better starting modes
- Women are twice as likely as men to cite the carer role, so home exercise equipment and workout DVDs are an ideal answer
- Work pressures were given as a reason by more men than women and so finding a way to build exercise into the daily routine is a solution
- Injury problems tend to affect men more than women and older men more than younger men. A tactic here is to move away from high intensity sports to more moderate options, so maintaining a competitive outlet but reducing the taxing effects of wear and tear on the body.

The shift towards changing behaviour and then making efforts to maintain those changes very rarely arises from a momentary decision but is a series of stages:

Pre-contemplation not considering starting an exercise programme during the next six months

Contemplation seriously considering starting exercise within six months

Preparation going to begin exercising within the next 60 days

Action the first six months of following an exercise programme

Maintenance sustained an exercise programme for longer than six months

Relapse the return to a previous stage

Termination the successful consolidation of the behaviour into lifestyle.

Moving through the early stages is very much in your mind whilst the latter stages rely on action. The thought process might be stimulated by a specific trigger, maybe reading an article in the newspaper about the risk of heart disease being associated with lack of exercise, or perhaps struggling to play with the kids without sitting

down, puffing and panting. This could lead to unhappiness at being unfit and imagining how things could be different. As the snowball begins to roll, it is possible these result in a conscious effort to seek out gyms and/or sports clubs in the local area. Moving into action, the next stage is commonly to make an appointment to join a gym and to inform family and friends of the new commitment. Planning to exercise with a friend or booking a personal trainer are examples of the next step and with confidence growing, independent efforts such as regularly walking the dog or doing a spot of gardening at weekends might follow. Make sure you reward yourself for your efforts as this has been shown to improve your chances of sticking at it. The final stage is reached when you are able to avoid problem situations, for example recording television programmes to enable you to go to Zumba.

As you move through the stages you repeatedly compare pros and cons or more laterally, the desire to move away from pain and closer to pleasure. Clearly then, if you're struggling to make the move to the next level, external encouragement could be all that is required to tip the scale, so be quite demanding of your family and friends, as their support could make all the difference. There are two crucial things to consider here, if you are at the point of thinking about beginning a new exercise regime, or indeed if you've taken the plunge and recently started.

Relapse

Since it is almost inevitable, it makes sense to plan for it so it doesn't grow from a simple relapse into a major collapse. Common sense

dictates that there's always the chance that illness, work deadlines, family commitments and holidays may both expectedly and sometimes unexpectedly throw your programme off the rails. Accept that they happen, don't beat yourself up about it, reflect upon the positive notion that you've already made changes and started some way down the road to a new you, and then move on.

Responsibility

Perhaps singularly the most vital concept to grasp is self-responsibility. A fitness instructor can design the perfect routine for you and family and friends can give you support but the truth is that nobody else will do it for you. This is why it's so valuable to have your goal clearly defined so that when motivation wanes, you can imagine just how you will feel when you achieve it and what those around you will say. These are what make the short term effort worthwhile.

Of course, having embarked upon a fitness programme it's still a tough job to maintain it, with research published in the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Physiology* showing that around 50% of people who begin exercise drop out within the first six months. So what actually motivates people to stay with it?

- Men are generally more likely to remain active than women
- There is a higher drop out in the overweight
- Workouts should be achievable to begin with; never attempt to do too much, too soon
- Feeling healthier and improvements in quality of life are significant factors but can take a while to manifest, so regular assessments of some form are valuable in providing confirmation that workout endeavours are bearing fruit
- An instructor or personal trainer who provides knowledge and who helps to set goals
- A social element can make a big difference so studio classes are advised. Believe it or not, even just watching others exercise has been shown to be of benefit
- Unsurprisingly, easy access to and feeling comfortable in suitable facilities is important, so shop around when choosing a gym
- Having direction has been shown to be very useful, so any attempt to embark upon an exercise regime should begin with devoting some time to setting meaningful goals.

In summary then, in the table on the right is a list of top tips to help you to overcome whatever it is that's holding you back.

Finally, what about outdoor exercise? Not something we, as a nation, are renowned for. There are great mood-uplifting gains to be made from exercising outdoors, primarily

TOP TIPS	
Lack of time	Keep a time log of your daily activities for one week then identify at least three 30 minute slots you could use for exercise.
	Try to add physical activity to your daily routine. For example, walk or ride your bike to work, organise your kids' activities around sport, walk the dog, exercise while you watch TV, etc.
	Select activities that can be done in short time windows, eg ten minutes, such as walking, jogging, or stair-climbing.
	Ask family and friends to exercise with you. Plan social activities that involve exercise.
Lack of energy	Develop new friendships with active people, perhaps by joining a group, such as the YMCA or a hiking club.
	Schedule workouts for times in the day when you generally feel more energetic. If you've never been a morning person, don't force the issue.
Lack of motivation	Remember, if you give it a chance, exercise will increase your energy levels.
	Plan ahead to ensure physical activity is a regular part of your weekly schedule and write it in your diary and on your calendar.
Fear of injury	Join an exercise class rather than go solo in the gym or pounding the pavement.
	Ensure you always allow time to warm up and cool down effectively.
	Investigate the appropriate exercise modes and intensity for your age, fitness, skill level, and medical status.
	Opt for low skill level activities to reduce risk.
Weather conditions	Take a class to develop new skills.
	Identify inexpensive, convenient resources available in your community (community education programmes, park and recreation programmes, worksite programmes, etc).
Travel	Develop a set of 'plan B' activities for days when you really don't want to venture out such as indoor cycling, dancing, skipping, Wii Fit, workout DVDs, etc.
	Carry a skipping rope and resistance band in your suitcase.
	Use the stairs in hotels for interval training.
Family commitments	Try to book a hotel with a gym or pool.
	Trade babysitting time with a friend, neighbour, or family member who also has small children.
	Exercise with the kids.
	Try to exercise when the kids are not around (during school hours or their nap time).
	Learn a new skill you've always been interested in, such as ballroom dancing or swimming.
	Treat yourself to an exercise bike and ride every day while reading.

linked to the experience stimulating the senses much more than the inert gym environment. An outdoor workout will leave both your body and your mind in better shape. In addition, battling against wind resistance and undulating terrain can lead to a greater calorie burn when comparing like-for-like exercises indoors. If you also consider that it is estimated over half of us

are deficient in Vitamin D, then taking your workout into the great outdoors promises to be a real win-win ... and what better time to put that theory to the test than in summer? So what are you waiting for?

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