

7 Tips for Mastering the Mental Side of Getting Fit

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Even world-class athletes sometimes need to remind themselves: Whatever big game or event they're training for isn't some remote one-off in the distant future. It's a thing they need to train for *every single day*. Point being, competing at the highest level on earth isn't a *project* with a neatly defined end date and goal. Instead, it's an ongoing *process*, part of a long-term lifestyle.

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It's a useful piece of wisdom even if — maybe especially if — you're not an elite athlete. All of us struggle with the mental side of being active, whether we're neophytes looking to get in shape or seasoned trainers struggling with our latest challenge. It helps to remember that being fit isn't some magical, permanent state of being. It's an act of constant becoming, and it requires a certain discipline to make it a [habit](#).

To better understand the mental side of getting (and staying) fit, we spoke with John Bartholomew, the director of the Exercise and Sport Psychology Laboratory at the University of Texas. He mentioned his daughter, who plays club soccer, as an example. “There’s always this sense with adolescents that now I’m gonna be done, that now I’m gonna be good,” he says. “One thing I talk to her about is that you’re not gonna be done getting better at soccer until you’re done playing soccer.” In other words, being active is about the journey, not the destination — and it’s a journey that, when done right, never truly ends.

Here is what else we learned, and how it might serve you as you go about setting — and keeping — your fitness goals. Which reminds us: Tip 1 is don’t set goals. We can explain ...

1. GOALS ARE OVERRATED

“One of the concerns with the goals that people set for themselves is that if they don’t have a history of being active, they don’t set goals that are reasonable,” Bartholomew says. “One of the challenges people have when they begin a fitness program is that most of the feedback they receive is negative. It hurts. They’re sore. They’re hungrier, so they eat more and may even gain weight. There’s expense, they’re buying shoes.”

There’s more bad news: “The rewards, the positive aspects — these are all delayed. Improved mood. Weight loss. Health benefits. Those are things you don’t notice for two months, right? There is a large period of time where you need to be able to navigate these negative experiences.”

Bartholomew suggests focusing on the process and recognizing *everyone* struggles to adapt to a new routine. “You need to understand that the first six weeks are more uncomfortable than they are comfortable. The general response is to think that it’s about us. It’s helpful to know this is a common experience, this is normal.” Remembering that won’t make those six weeks *easier*, but it will help you stay focused on the good things on the other side of those painful days.

2. DON’T EXERCISE — TRAIN

What’s the difference? Exercise is disparate, untethered from an overall project or way of life. Training has, yes, a goal, but is also rewarding in and of itself. If you have a destination — running a 10K, for example — there’s an innate challenge there. “Therefore you’re gonna train and naturally [follow through], you can modify your

training as you follow along,” Bartholomew says. “It’s not [typically] a huge expense [to sign up for such an event], but you’ve made a commitment that will help you find the drive to do those workouts.”

3. GET SOCIAL

Another way to ensure you stay motivated is to find other people to motivate you. It could be a running club or your friends and followers on [MapMyRun](#), it could be a personal trainer, it could just be a buddy you work out with once or twice a week. But this person will help you hold yourself accountable — and potentially serve as an IRL role model for all your questions and concerns. “It gives you a resource, a support group,” Bartholomew says. “And I think it is helpful to have a living, breathing model for what you want to do. It’s one thing to read about it, it’s different when you’re part of a community — and this can even be a virtual community. There’s a real benefit to having that live group to give you that information and validation.”

4. CHANGE YOUR HABITS

The reality is this: Going from no workout routine to having one is a lifestyle change. (So is going from your existing program to another, potentially more challenging one.) To ease the transition, you’ll want to remove as much friction as possible between you and working out. Bartholomew recommends working out in the morning, rather than at night — “and set out your workout clothes the night before.” (Some people we know even sleep in their workout gear.) “Setting aside time at the end of the day: That’s the easiest thing to put off,” Bartholomew says. “You can drive to the gym or drive home. Most people are gonna drive home.” He adds that any way you can structure your environment so that physical activity is the default choice is helpful. Some ideas we’ve tried: Keeping running shoes in your car. Finding a coffee shop or juice place near your gym for an post-workout treat. Running at a park or on a track near playground equipment you can use for pullups. (You know, assuming there aren’t kids already using it.)

5. DEFINE YOURSELF AS AN ACTIVE PERSON — EVEN IF IT’S MISERABLE OUTSIDE

“It’s not enough to like to be active and enjoy it,” Bartholomew says. “Because there are gonna be days where you don’t enjoy it. Everybody can go for a run on a beautiful spring day when it’s 75 and the sun is shining. You need to have some other form of motivation.” He recommends defining yourself as an active person, rain or shine. “It’s not like you skip work because it’s a cloudy day. And not just because you get paid — it’s because you have a view of who you are as a responsible person. Being active is a

constant process, and that should be part of the fun. If that's not part of the fun, that's gonna be hard."

6. RECOVERY IS A MENTAL GAME, TOO

While you might sometimes struggle with motivating yourself to get off the couch, you might also struggle with motivating yourself to stay out of the gym (or, perhaps more precisely, with forgiving yourself for taking a rest day). The important thing is to incorporate them into your overall plan, rather than make those decisions in the moment. "You need to pay attention to your body, but you need to structure how you recover," Bartholomew says. "Off days are important. Slow runs are important. And that's OK."

You also need to be deliberate with how you get your rest each day. "Instead of thinking of it as powering down, think about it as what am I gonna shift my attention to," Bartholomew says. "Doing mindful meditation would be an example. It's an active pursuit as opposed to a passive one."

7. CHANGE YOUR ROUTINE AS YOU CHANGE

We're all aging, whether we like it or not. That might mean changing how you train, and calibrating your expectations accordingly. (This is true for pros or amateurs — for example, a starting pitcher might focus on throwing with finesse after losing some ticks on his or her fastball.) Bartholomew cites the example of a marathon runner who can't beat the times of yesteryear — he or she might switch to triathlons instead, rather than lose motivation due to feelings of failure. The important thing is to keep at it, remembering that fitness isn't a goal, it's a lifelong process.