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Get Moving! — The ADHD Workout

How To Start And Maintain Your Exercise Program

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"I know I should, but..."

How To Design Your Individualized Exercise and Nutrition
Program To Reduce and Help Manage ADHD Symptoms

Get it started

By now you know the obvious: following a regular exercise program is one of the best things you can do for yourself. It strengthens your heart, wakes up your brain, perks up your mood, and revs up your immune system. On the ADHD front it makes you calmer, more focused, less restless, and less impulsive. What's not to like, right?

But wait, you say, I kinda already knew that! Maybe painful experience has already taught you that knowing the benefits of exercise is not enough to get you started or keep you going. The reality is that knowing is not, by itself, a strong enough motivator. It often doesn't get us beyond wishes and good intentions. Taking action requires going several steps beyond. It starts with setting clear and specific goals. Having a realistic plan. Making a strong personal commitment. Perhaps most important, it requires hope and lasting confidence in our ability to achieve those goals.

All of us talk to ourselves inside our heads, all the time. This self-talk can be primarily positive, or primarily negative. Much of it is shaped by our core personality, but also by lessons learned from life experiences and by current situations. Although most ADHD'ers I've met tend to be natural optimists, repeated frustrations and failures in life can turn the self-talk negative and pessimistic. We start to expect failure, and in so doing make failure a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Take a minute, sit back, and pay attention to your internal self-talk right now. You might already hear the negative, automatic message loops playing in the back of your mind:

- "Exercise program? (Deep sigh). Been there, done that, just can't do it."
- "I really want to exercise regularly, but I can't get started."
- "My schedule is too hectic right now. I simply don't have the time,"
- "I'm too old (unhealthy/tired/out of shape) for a workout program."
- "It would be nice, but I know myself too well. I'm too lazy to stick with it."
- "I'll get to it later."

If you are giving yourself these messages, it's time to tell your automatic negative thoughts loop to shut up. The litany of excuses is just that: excuses. Too busy to work out? At this very moment some of the busiest people in the world are making time in their daily schedules for a workout. Are you busier than Bill Gates, president of Microsoft? How about the president of the United States? The honest answer is no, you're probably not. If they can find time to schedule regular workouts, so can you and I. Too old to benefit from exercise? An exercise study with nursing home patients (average age: 80 years old) found that after just three months they improved their strength by 200%. People of any age benefit from exercise. Time, age, money, low fitness level? Excuses all -- but only if you allow them to be.

Overcome negativity

In order to get past the negativity and excuses, there are three useless words you must eliminate from your vocabulary forever. Lazy. Later. Never. These are common words that people throw around all the time, but usually they're just rationalizations for not taking action.

Lazy simply means: I just don't feel like it, so I'm not doing it. (Perhaps there's another voice in the background that adds: "And you can't make me! Ha!"). Lazy is one of the most common labels we apply to ourselves, and unfortunately one of the most destructive. It doesn't really explain anything. Saying "I'm lazy" doesn't tell you anything useful about yourself -- it's just name-calling. Even worse, it's a cop-out to explain away why you're not doing what you committed yourself to do.

Later simply means: I'm not going to do it right now, which is the same thing as saying I'm not doing it, period. Of course "later" never comes, because "later" does not exist -- it's just an abstract concept. All we have is now, this moment in time. Deciding to *not do it now* is the equivalent of deciding to *not do it*. If you believe the lie that "I'll do it later," you're just kidding yourself. You have a choice to make: either give up this lie, or remain its prisoner and allow it to keep stopping and frustrating you.

I'll *never* get it done simply means: I give up hope and faith in my ability to make decisions and act on them. I am helpless. I am a victim of my history, and I'm doomed to repeat the same pattern of behavior over and over. I am stuck in my misery. I am not capable of change. This sense of helplessness is nothing more than a belief, a feeling, but as long as you continue to buy into it you are indeed stuck. If you find yourself in this predicament, take responsibility for it. Be clear that you create your own prison and are your own jailer.

When these toxic motivation killers ("lazy," "later," "never") pop into your head, you must dismiss them. Fight them! Don't accept them automatically as some kind of eternal truths, written in stone. The best way to fight them is to take some positive action and move forward. Stop thinking and start doing. Just start.

There is an ancient Korean saying: "the first step is half the journey." Truer words were never spoken. This principle applies to all people of course, but if that ancient Korean sage had known about ADHD he or she might have amended the saying a bit: "The first step is half the journey. Considering your struggles with what you call activation difficulties and procrastination, this saying goes double for all you folks with ADHD!"

Overcome procrastination

For many people with ADHD the main stumbling block to getting things done is not getting started in the first place. The fancy name for it is procrastination. The reasons

why things get put off are almost too numerous to mention. Something else comes up (when you're prone to being distracted, something else is practically *guaranteed* to come up). I don't feel like it right now. I'll do it later, no doubt about that. I'm too busy at the moment. This is not going to work, so why bother.

The first step in overcoming procrastination is not to threaten yourself with doom and gloom and dire consequences (although sometimes this might be necessary as a last resort). The first step is to expect success. Focus on benefits, benefits, benefits. In order to feel motivated it is essential to see yourself achieving your goal. Visualize the end result, the benefits, and yes the celebration.

Write a behavioral contract with yourself — or with someone close to you — detailing exactly what you're going to do and when you're going to do it. Break down the goal into manageable chunks that you know you can handle. Set a start time in your planner. When that time arrives, start.

Tell yourself that you're not going to wait until it's too late. Many people are finally motivated to exercise after, for example, they have a heart attack or stroke. Better late than never, yeah, but what a price to pay for "late."

Stop for a moment and picture yourself, as clearly as you can, on the sad and scary future day you come home from the hospital after (luckily) surviving a heart attack. Ask yourself, what could I have done differently? How much easier would it have been to get things going before you got sick? How much would you pay for the chance to go back in time to this moment, right now, when you're still healthy? The good news of course is that time travel is not necessary. You already are living in this moment, still healthy and kicking. Make the most of it. But do it now.

Settle in for the long haul

After you follow Jeff's guidelines in Chapter 4 and design your individualized workout program, you're ready to go. Get out your planner and schedule a start time for your first workout. To get consistent and stay consistent with a program requires a structured workout schedule. There is no getting around this simple fact. The choices are between being sufficiently structured to be consistent, or insufficiently structured and (inevitably and predictably) inconsistent.

Many people with ADHD have a love-hate relationship with structure. We know we need it, but hate feeling constrained by it. On some level it feels like giving up part of our freedom and spontaneity. To some degree that is true, but look past the apparent inconvenience and keep your eye on the bigger picture.

It is not possible to accept the planning and scheduling that is essential to a long-term workout program until you first overcome your aversion to structure. A structured

program might feel like a jail cell to some individuals, but it is no such thing. Rather, look at it as a roadmap. It shows you the way and keeps you on track to your destination. Who needs a map, you ask? While it's true that you might get to your destination without a map, at best it will take you a lot longer and involve a lot more work. At worst, you'll get sidetracked and lost and never get there. Take an honest look at your history and ask yourself: do I need a roadmap to get me to where I want to go?

ADHD related activation difficulties stop being as difficult after a behavior becomes routine; that is, once it feels more like second nature. Brushing your teeth in the morning is a good example. You don't have to think about it, you just do it because, well, that's what you do when you get up in the morning. It takes a minimum of several weeks before a behavior even starts feeling routine, however. It takes months (sometimes years) for a behavior to become a strong, ingrained habit. It's virtually impossible to reach that level of behavioral consistency by chance. Whether you accept structure or fight it, be clear about the consequences of your choice.

Use your reward pathway

As the saying goes, nothing succeeds like success. It is also very true that nothing motivates like success. By setting small doable goals, and achieving them, you energize yourself to move on to the next goal. And the next. And the next. This is a strategy for using the reward pathway in your brain to build and sustain motivation and positive energy.

Short-term goals tend to work better than long-term goals. A good rule of thumb is to set a goal that can be achieved in three months or less. For someone with ADHD, even shorter-term goals (six weeks or less) are often a good idea. Shooting for long term goals that are too large makes it more likely that you will lose focus and interest, which leads to giving up. Setting unreachable goals is a sure-fire way to fail.

Another way to use your brain's reward pathway is to make your workouts as enjoyable as possible. Plan activities (biking, swimming, etc.) that you like, and avoid those that don't interest you (even if someone else thinks it's a good idea). Since the ADHD brain is stimulated by variety and bored silly by too much repetition, incorporate different types of activities into your workout routine. Make the workouts a social activity whenever possible, for example by working with a workout buddy, joining an exercise class, or working out with a personal trainer.

Get SMART

Setting realistic goals is easier by following the SMART principle. No, we don't mean hiring Maxwell as your personal trainer or asking Agent 99 to be your workout buddy! SMART is an acronym that stands for Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic, and Timed.

Setting *specific* goals means that you have a very clear picture of what you're going after. Avoid making general or unclear goals. "I want to get in better shape" is an admirable goal, but it's too vague to have any meaning. "I want to run 5 miles" is a specific goal. Similarly, "I want to lose weight" is much less clear than "I want to lose 15 pounds," or simply "I want my clothes to fit better."

Measurable goals are tangible. You want to know exactly how much progress you're making towards your goal, and exactly when it has been achieved. "I want to be in good shape" is too general. "I want my body fat index to be below 20%" and "I want to run a mile under six minutes" are goals that are both specific and measurable.

Action-oriented goals specify the details of the plan you're going to follow. Making a promise to yourself to work out regularly is a vague wish, not a goal. What will be your training frequency? When are the workouts going to be scheduled during the week? What will be the intensity and duration of your workouts? What changes are you making in your eating habits? Sleeping habits? Define very clearly, in behavioral terms, exactly what you're going to do.

Realistic goals are goals that are reachable. If your goals are not realistic, please do yourself a favor and don't set them! The common mistake of "too much, too soon" has sent many workout programs crashing down in flames. The trick is to find a balance where your goals are demanding enough to make the achievement rewarding, but not unreachable to the point that you're setting yourself up to fail.

Timed goals have a specific target date for each goal. I will be able to run five miles — by the end of October. When necessary, break long-term goals into smaller short-term goals. I will be able to jog a mile comfortably by the end of the month. I will be able to run three miles by the end of September. I will be able to run five miles by the end of October.

Why routines fail

The major reason most routines fail is surprisingly simple — people give up too soon. That's not as silly as it may sound. Generally speaking, it takes a minimum of six to eight weeks to establish any type of behavioral routine. It takes months or years to build strong habits. These principles apply to everyone, but even more so to people with ADHD. We tend to get bored more quickly, frustrated more easily, and feel overwhelmed and discouraged too soon. Feeling anxious about failing to achieve a goal leads to avoidance behavior, which leads to inconsistent effort, which leads to finally giving up.

Part of being resilient is believing in your ability to persevere when times get tough. It also means expecting setbacks, and being prepared to get back on track to overcome them. Poor resilience is largely a matter of poor attitude. Henry Ford said it perfectly

almost a century ago: "whether you think that you can do something, or you think that you can't -- you're right."

Exercise is a lifestyle component

The only exercise program that has a chance of lasting is one that becomes integrated into your lifestyle. It must become a part of who you are and what you do. If you treat it as a bitter but necessary medicine, it will be dead in the water within weeks. It must become a natural, integral part of your lifestyle, not an addition or addendum to it. Human nature is such that any voluntary behavior that is considered aversive or unpleasant soon becomes avoided and abandoned.

To make your workout program a part of your lifestyle, you must embrace it as part of your identity. Make time for it. Provide resources for it, not just in allocating time but also in terms of finances (usually small) and energy. You will find the means if you dedicate yourself to the goal. It has often been said that "necessity is the mother of invention." What is less often asked is, who is the father? His name is priority. Combine necessity with priority and watch the birth of something quite amazing: results.

About The Authors

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.

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