



Road to Change: Overcoming Barriers to Regular Physical Activity

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The health benefits of regular physical activity are impressive^{1,2} (Table 1). Everyone can benefit from being physically active, regardless of age, sex or physical ability. The challenge is how to fit regular physical activity into our busy lives.

Research shows about 50% of people who start a physical activity program will drop out during the first 6 months.³ The following reasons are often cited as being barriers preventing someone from being physically active: lack of time, lack of motivation, lack of specific goals, and feeling of being too tired.⁴⁻⁶ Understanding common barriers to regular physical activity and then creating strategies to overcome them may help you make physical activity become a part of your daily life. The following are evidence-based strategies and ideas for overcoming barriers that prevent regular physical activity.

Table 1. Health Benefits Associated with Regular Physical Activity in Adults and Older Adults²

Strong Evidence
Lower risk of early death
Lower risk of coronary heart disease
Lower risk of stroke
Lower risk of high blood pressure
Lower risk of adverse blood lipid profile
Lower risk of type 2 diabetes
Lower risk of metabolic syndrome
Lower risk of colon cancer
Lower risk of breast cancer
Prevention of weight gain
Weight Loss, when combined with reduced calorie intake
Greater muscle strength and endurance
Greater cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness (ability to perform moderate intensity exercise involving large-muscle group)
Prevention of falls
Reduced depression
Better cognitive function (for older adults)
Moderate to Strong Evidence
Better functional health (for older adults)
Reduced abdominal obesity
Moderate Evidence
Lower risk of hip fracture
Lower risk of lung cancer
Lower risk of endometrial cancer
Weight maintenance after weight loss
Increased bone density
Improved sleep quality

Lack of Time – “I don’t have time to exercise....”

Strategy: Plan and organize your day - Identify available physical activity time slots.

- Monitor your daily activities and find at least one 30-minute time slot that you can use for physical activity.
- If you do not have time for a 30-minute block at one time, find two 15-minute or three 10-minute blocks throughout a day.
- Go to bed earlier and wake up earlier to do physical activity.
- Be active while watching TV – by doing push-ups, walking around during commercials, sitting on a stability ball, or ride a stationary bicycle.
- Cut down on media time – surfing the internet, TV watching, etc.
- Use an office break for doing stretching exercise (with or without resistance bands), wall sit (alone or with co-workers), or do water bottle workout. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Use an office break for physical activity.

Strategy: Prioritize physical activity - Look at your priorities, responsibilities, and appointments.

- Add physical activity appointments in your calendar, just like doctor’s appointments that you cannot miss.
- Check with your local community recreation centers to find out where physical activity classes are offered.
- Sign up for classes and regularly attend the classes; consider it as a count part to yourself and recognize you are important.

Strategy: Be creative and have alternative ways to exercise.

- Take a mall walk, walk to a nearby store, take stairs, or go hiking.
- While you are cooking a meal for family or yourself, do some exercise, like jumping jacks, running or squatting in place.
- There are many daily activities that can be considered physical activities.⁷ For instance, sweeping floors or carpet, vacuuming, and mopping are considered moderate intensity of physical activities. Shoveling sand and heavy farming are classified as vigorous intensity of physical activities.
- Exercise in line – while you are waiting for a taxi or grocery store cash register, do exercise on the spot. Don’t be shy; be creative, have fun Others may join you! (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Exercise while you are waiting for a taxi – examples: lifting your luggage, one-leg standing, doing squat, etc.

Lack of Motivation – “I am too lazy to exercise. And exercise is boring...”

Strategy: Build social-support networks.

- Explain your interest in starting or maintaining physical activity to friends and family. Ask them to support your interest and efforts.
- Invite friends and family to exercise with you.
- Join a physical activity program that is offered in your neighborhood or start one yourself.
- Check with the YMCA, Parks and Recreation Office, a community hiking club, a martial arts school or a University Recreation Center. They may offer an exercise program you would like to try it for the first time. (Figure 3).



Figure 3. How about trying a new sport – Aikido?
(Photo courtesy of Aikido of Honolulu at Todaiji Temple, Honolulu, HI)

Strategy: Find role models who have your similar circumstances/characteristics.

- If you are concerned about your age, body size, experiences in physical activity, find role models who have similar circumstances but, have been involved in physical activity.
- If you have difficulties engaging in exercise due to health conditions such as arthritis, osteoporosis, or asthma, find people who overcome and stay active.

Lack of Specific Goal– “I don’t know where and how to start. I hate running...”

Strategy: Consult an exercise expert.

- If you want to learn a new skill (aikido, boxing, Tai-Kwon-Do, weight lifting, yoga, Zumba etc.), consider having personal fitness consultations to design your exercise plan.⁸ A University Recreation Center or YMCA near you may offer personal fitness consultations.

Strategy: Use the S.M.A.R.T. principle to establish your own goals that are challenging, but achievable.⁹

- **Specific:** Set a specific/focused goal, such as “I will accumulate at least 30 minutes of walking, 5 days this week, as opposed to the goal, such as “I will get in shape.”

- **Measurable:** Make your goal measurable. Examples of measurable goals are numbers of steps per day, distance of walking, running, or swimming, and the duration/minutes of your physical activity. In order to maintain your motivation for a longer-term, measure what you are trying to achieve and see your success at least every 3-4 weeks.
- **Attainable:** Goals should be challenging, but they must also be attainable. You may want to start small, so you have early success. An attainable goal enhances your adherence to keep you on track.
- **Realistic:** Realistic goals depend on an individual’s willingness and ability. You can decide how high your goal should be. Unrealistic goals result in disappointments and frustration.
- **R** can also stand for **Relevant**. Your goals should be important to you. Your goals are your motivators to continue to exercise.
- **Time-Bound:** Make sure each goal has a specific time frame for completion. Think about what you are able to accomplish in a given time frame. Adjust your goal with your schedule. A goal with a time frame encourages and inspires your commitment, and supports planning for a long-term goal.
- **T** can also stand for **Trackable**. You can log your workouts for a trackable goal on your notebook, calendar or wearable apps. Trackable goal helps you sustain motivations and may identify potential barriers while you are reaching a goal.
- Ask yourself, “I will start exercising, because I want to _____.” This statement reveals your *specific* motivation. Start planning your physical activity with *measurable* activity that is *achievable*, *realistic* and *time-sensitive*. For example: “I will walk with my friend, Mary, during my lunch break for 10 minutes 3 times a week for 8 weeks beginning next week.”

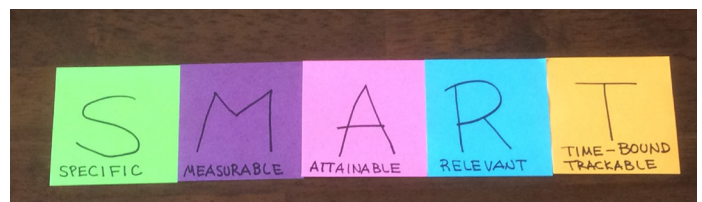


Figure 4. Goal Setting – S.M.A.R.T.

Lack of Energy – “I am too tired to exercise...”

Strategy: Schedule time of physical activity. (Also, see Strategies for Lack of Time)

- Physical activity is a great way to increase your energy level. There is direct link between a reduced risk of fatigue and regular physical activity.
- Schedule time for physical activity when you feel energetic.
- Choose a consistent time when you can exercise daily, and engage in even a little bit of physical activity, such as a 10-15-minute walk at lunch time or an office break.

Strategy: Examine your daily schedule and explore why you are feeling tired.

- If you are too tired to exercise, examine your daily schedule closely and check your hours of sleep. Seven to nine hours of sleep per night is recommended.
- If you are too tired to exercise (physically and/or mentally tired), just take a day off, and get back to activity the next day, and do a less strenuous activity such as walking instead of running; gradually accumulate more time per day, over time; you should become more engaged as you adapt.

Strategy: Choose exercise you like and find relaxing.

- Walking: simplest, low impact and relaxing exercise
- Dog-walking: dog owners are motivated to walk their pets because it makes them happy (and their dogs happy) – positive influence on well-being.¹⁰
- Yoga: lower your stress level (Note: If you are new to yoga or you have an injury that may limit your movement, be sure to tell your instructor about it, before starting a class.)



Figure 5. Regular fun yoga activity makes you feel relaxed and happy

Important Note: Prior to beginning any exercise routine it is important to consult with your doctor. If you are just beginning an exercise routine, start with less than the recommended amount and gradually increase over time. Before doing any physical activity, it is important to include a warm-up. After completing an activity session, it is also important to do a cool-down. For questions about physical activity sessions or programs, contact health professionals at a University Recreation Center, local Gyms, or YMCA.

Sticking to a regular physical activity in our busy lives is not easy. This article provides evidence-based strategies to empower individuals to overcome the common obstacles that may get in the way of doing regular physical activity. Additionally, physical activity stage of change assessment tool (Figure 6) is included.

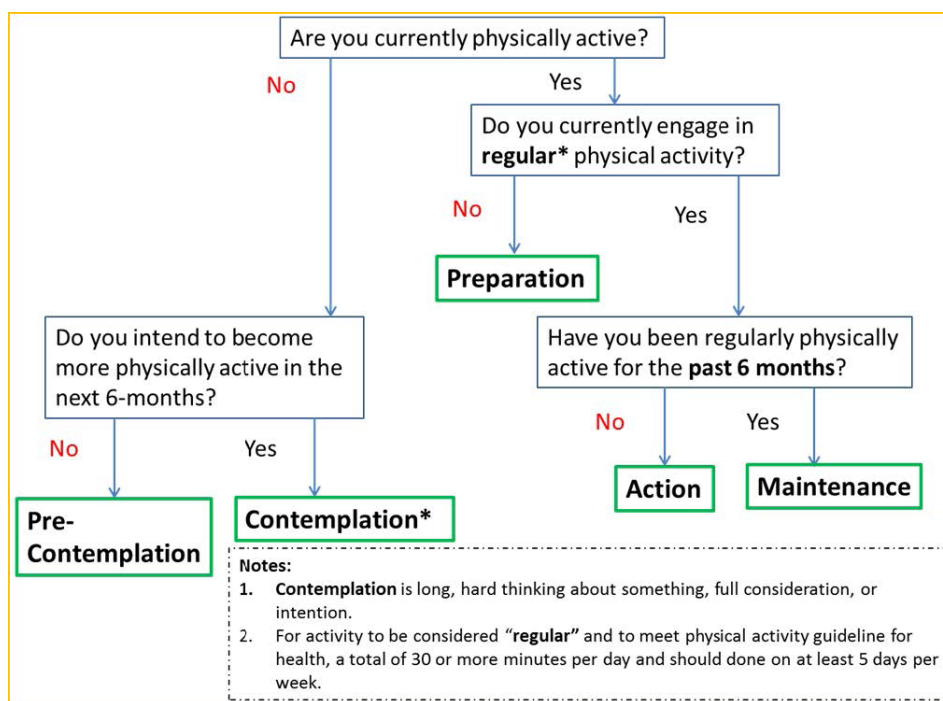


Figure 6: Physical activity stage of change: Assessment tool.

Physical Activity Stage of Change: Assessment Tool helps you determine your current level of motivational readiness to participate in a physical activity program.

- Check your level of motivational readiness to participate in a physical activity program using a stage of change assessment tool. (See Figure 6)
- After finding your stage of change, apply the stage-specific strategies for setting your realistic physical activity goals and finding a physical activity program that works for you.

Stage-Specific Strategy: There are five stages of change for increasing the amount of physical activity in your life: 1) pre-contemplation, 2) contemplation, 3) preparation, 4) action, and 5) maintenance. (Figure 6) Apply stage-specific strategies for promoting your physical activity.^{11, 12}

Stage 1. Pre-contemplation* *"I'm in good shape. I don't need to be physically active."*

***Contemplation** – long, hard thinking about something, the state of being considered or planned

People at this stage have no plan or desire to be physically active.

- A goal for people at stage 1 is to think about physical activity.
- It is helpful to think about how physical activity may be beneficial, for example, it may help to lose weight, feel better, sleep better, reduce stress, etc.
- Ask friends or family members why they exercise. Their answer may show some real-life benefits.

Stage 2. Contemplation *"My sister asked me to join an 8-week walking program. I think I will join the program, but do I have time to walk?"*

People at this stage are interested in becoming more active, but have not yet taken any steps.

- A goal for people at stage 2 is to take the first step becoming physically active and make a commitment.
- To get started, take a tour of a gym to learn of the many forms of physical activity to select from.
- Write down things that make physical activity difficult (example – lack of time) and strategies for overcoming the difficulty.
- Develop a plan for getting started (when, where, what activity, with whom?)
- Create a simple and short physical activity plan and commit to it.

Stage 3. Preparation *"I joined an 8-week walking program, but I am not exercising for the last few weeks..."*

People at this stage have started being physically active, but they are not exercising regularly.

- A goal for people at stage 3 is to become more consistent and gradually increase physical activity to the most days of a week.

- To gradually increase activity, track progress using a pedometer, wearable devices, or an exercise app, and set goals.
- Consider joining a physical activity program – such as a community walking program or an exercise class.
- Use rewards for meeting goals – buy new walking shoes, or clothing for exercise.
- Set reminders of physical activity days and times on calendar.
- Leave walking shoes, exercise mat, resistance band, etc. in your office to remind you to do physical activity.
- Write a backup plan for rainy days and travel days.
- Consult a physician or exercise expert, if supervision is required.

Stage 4. Action *"I finished the 8-week walking program! Now what should I do next?"*

People at this stage are exercising regularly, but it is not yet a long-term (more than 6-months) habit.

- A goal for people at stage 4 is to maintain the physical activity habit over time.
- To maintain the physical activity habit for a longer term, applaud your commitment – reward yourself in a way that is meaningful to you.
- List obstacles that may interfere with regular physical activity in the future (example: vacation, change in work, a move, etc.) and develop potential solutions for overcoming them.
- Train for an event, such as 5K run or walk.
- Find friends to exercise with and commit to exercising with them.
- Consult an exercise expert for supervised exercise or new exercises.

Stage 5. Maintenance *"I am walking with my dog for more than 6-months now!!"*

People at this stage have been exercising regularly for at least 6-months or longer

- A goal for people at stage 5 is to prevent relapse, and increase enjoyment of physical activity.
- To keep physical activity fun – listen to your favorite music while exercising, walk with friends, or develop other strategies for keeping exercise fun.
- List what is the most enjoyable about being physically active – working to a challenge, networking, or a stress buster.
- After a break in physical activity, list ideas how to get back on track – exercise at different times of the day, try new activities or sports or a new venue.
- Renew your commitment – plan a hiking trip or a trip requiring walking.
- Consult an exercise expert for supervised exercises or new idea for activities.

Remember that people do not necessarily proceed directly from one stage to another. They may move from stage 1 (Pre-contemplation) to 2 (Contemplation) or stage 1 (Pre-contemplation) to 3 (Preparation) and then back to stage 2 (Contemplation) again. Use the stage specific strategies to gain momentum towards adopting and maintaining regular physical activity.

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Abstract: Regular moderate to vigorous physical activity is recommended for achieving and maintaining good health and fitness in all age groups. This article provides evidence-based strategies to empower individuals to overcome the common obstacles that may get in the way of doing regular physical activity. Additionally, physical activity stage of change assessment tool is included in this article. After finding the stage of change, each can apply the stage-specific strategies for setting realistic physical activity goals and finding a physical activity program that works to stay active.



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