


A photograph of a man in a white tank top, looking thoughtful with his hand on his chin. The background is a soft, warm glow, possibly from a sunset or sunrise. A red banner is overlaid on the left side of the image.

FITNESS & YOUR BRAIN

How to Start and Stick with Exercise



BY CHRIS MARINO

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF DR. JOHN RATEY'S *SPARK* IN 2008, recognition has grown of the value of regular exercise for adults and children with ADHD. As an adjunct treatment, exercise improves cognitive functions, better sleep quality, and boosts self-esteem.

So how do we help people with ADHD start or sustain their motivation to exercise? Unfortunately, ADHD challenges often present significant obstacles. Current statistics suggest that less than fifteen percent of the U.S. population exercises regularly enough to achieve optimal benefits. If people who don't have ADHD have trouble with this, what happens when you have a tendency toward procrastination, poor follow-through, and getting bored easily?

The solution lies in developing a better understanding of the relationship between motivation and exercise behaviors. There are two basic types of motivation. The first is *intrinsic*, which can be described as being motivated because you enjoy or want to participate in a particular activity. The second is *extrinsic* motivation, in which rewards and punishments are associated with participation or completion of a task. The most current research on exercise adherence suggests that we need to get ourselves to gradually move from a purpose- or rewards-driven relationship to an autonomous relationship with exercise.

Most people begin to exercise because they perceive the "need to." To develop a lifelong habit, you have begun to "want to" exercise. It's believed that the majority of exercise drop-outs never make this happen. Why? All too often people start an exercise program for the wrong reasons. Most people approach exercise as a New Year's resolution or when they pull out last year's jeans and realize they don't fit.

For someone to eventually want to do something, that activity must:

- be perceived as having high value.
- be realistic and promote confidence
- inspire interest.

Personalizing exercise

We all lead busy lives. Your exercise program must have an equal if not greater perceived return on investment than the demands on your time with which it competes.

If you want to get motivated to do anything, you must first perceive that activity as having a high value. As someone who manages ADHD symptoms every day, getting in a workout means that I can focus better on work. I can stay on task, finish projects, be better organized, manage my business and staff with more efficiency, have a better relationship with my wife and kids, sustain my energy throughout the day, feel productive, know that I did something good for my wellbeing, and organize my thoughts well enough to write this article.

These are all important things to me, and yet it's often not enough to sustain my motivation. I've learned that you need to personalize your exercise goals. What areas of your life do you struggle with? Exercise can probably help with that!

What's more personal than a goal?

Staying on task requires that you have a map that provides direction to an endpoint. It's no different with regular exercise. The most effective goals are specific, offer objectivity, follow a specific timeline, and are within reasonable reach.

The best goals for someone with ADHD are those that facilitate the acquisition of an exercise habit. Try to avoid goals oriented toward body image or weight loss. Instead, commit to something that challenges you to get out of your comfort zone. Sign up for a 5K, a 25-mile bike ride, an obstacle course race, or even a triathlon. The sense of accomplishment you get from overcoming physical obstacles helps you to internalize the value associated with exercise.


Fit the person to the exercise

Choose your activity wisely. It must be realistic and promote confidence. The best exercise matches best with an individual's physical ability (that is, their level of athleticism, age, and injury or health history), personality, and accessibility.

For example, if you have bad knees you might want to select something that is low-impact, like biking or swimming. If you have great eye-hand coordination, racquet sports may be a great option. If you enjoy the energy of other people training alongside you, then group exercise classes may be the best fit.

Choose fun, stimulating activities

Base your choice of activity on your individual interests. Ask yourself questions such as: What am I physically good



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at? Am I competitive? Can I be successful with just one activity at a time, or do I get bored easily?

If you hope to inspire your child with ADHD to be more active, consider the following questions. Does my child respond to a more structured environment, or would he be better with organized chaos and free play? Does it require developing a new skill, which can have additional benefits on brain function? Does it offer an adrenaline rush? The best exercise is often one that offers the opportunity to exert a consistent effort while learning or developing a skill.

Change it up

If you get bored easily, don't settle on one thing. Have a plan that includes alternatives. There are hundreds of forms of exercise. The most beneficial include anything that gets the heart rate and respiration moderately to vigorously elevated for at least twenty minutes. You can run, bike, swim, lift weights, climb, ride horses, skateboard, ski, and so forth.

You may also look at variety within a particular activity. For example, if you like to run, you can run at different locations or follow different routes; you can run off-road on trails; you can run sprints at the local high school track. Variety doesn't have to get too complicated or detract from your ability to get better at something, which can support goal acquisition.

Find support or be accountable

Most people benefit from being accountable to someone or something other than themselves. Accountability can be enhanced by enlisting the support of family and friends, joining a group that meets regularly for exercise (such as running or cycling clubs), or hiring a coach with whom you can schedule appointments. Recognize, however, that being accountable to someone is only effective if that person is able to facilitate a passion for exercise by helping you with the above variables.

Clubs can be more than organized activity for someone with ADHD. They create an environment that helps one move from "have to" to "want to." Becoming part of an active culture can provide the impetus to change one's mindset about regular exercise. Most people who are part of a group tend to participate in races (such as setting training goals), meet regularly for training activities (accountability), socialize during or after events (fun). Even as someone who is fairly introverted, I look forward to weekly bike rides where there is a great opportunity for alone time, while I train alongside and compete with others.

If you have ADHD, starting an exercise program may be challenging at first. However, once you start to experience some

of the benefits, find something that inspires you to train, and recognize that you feel better, are more focused, and can manage your ADHD symptoms more effectively, you will become addicted to exercise.


Get yourself in the right mindset for planning your active life. Go for a walk—right now! 🚶

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FURTHER READING

John Ratey, MD, with Eric Hagerman, Spark: *The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (Little Brown, 2008).

Pedro J Teixeira, Eliana V Carraça, David Markland, Marlene N Silva, and Richard M Ryan, "Exercise, physical activity, and self-determination theory: A systematic review," *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2012) 9:78. <http://www.ijbnpa.org/content/9/1/78>



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