

q advice: BOUNCING BACK

5 tips to get back into physical activity after a time out

So, you're keen to get 'back into it'? You've been livin' busy for a while now and you're moving less than you'd like. You know physical activity is important but those healthy movement patterns of your youth seem like a lifetime ago. This is the paradox of exercise: we know physical activity and exercise is good for us, but we don't do as much as we should. We fail to act in our own best interests.

Twenty years of teaching, researching, and facilitating behaviour change has convinced me people do best with health goals the more ownership they feel over them or, to put it differently, the less pressured and freely chosen they seem. Goals that are taken on because they line up with a person's core values and/or developing interests. Consider these 5 tips for owning your physical activity goals...

Tip #1 - Choose something you're going to enjoy

What better way of motivating a physical pursuit than choosing something that interests or excites you? Whilst that might be the gym, it might not be! Perhaps the gym just seems most convenient and doable for you?

Given we've a life to live, that's not nothing. But is it the option that'll help keep you moving?

How much does it excite you? Is there something else that might excite you more? Try brainstorming this with others and look around. Our communities are jam packed with interesting physical activity options. You might discover dragon boating, or fencing, or something else you'd never ever considered before. Then you just need to be brave and give something a go.



Tip #2 - Help someone else 'own' their goals

It's a truism to say that in helping others, we often help ourselves. As an educator, I'm constantly delighted by how much I learn from my students. It's never a one-way street. So, if you know someone who's looking to become more active, and you feel you could help, reach out! Maybe you paddle for a Dragon Boat club and you think a workmate might enjoy it too. Tell them about it...but remember that your passion might not be their passion. So, provide some information and encouragement, but don't push too hard. If they make their own decision, they'll own it more. And you might gain too. In helping you'll have reminded yourself why you love your physical pursuit and what it means to you.

Tip #3 – Attach what you do to something bigger than the activity itself

People often come unstuck with physical activity goals because they quickly get bored. Let me be clear...running around the park, going to the gym, or doing laps at the pool DO NOT have to be connected to bigger things - it can just help if they are. And by 'bigger things' I mean something like a running festival if you like to run, a 30km charity walk if you enjoy regular walks with your bestie, or an ocean swim if doing laps at the local pool is your thing. Obviously, this tip is about goal setting and sharpening your focus. Things that add a pinch of spice to what you're doing, a sprinkle of interest, and a dollop of social connection if you're doing it with others.

Tip #4 – Create rituals that enhance interest and fun

Being creative can really dial up the ownership factor. Take parkrun for instance. There are over 400 parkrun events across Australia and every Saturday morning – for free – thousands of parkrunners walk, jog or run a set 5km course. Some like to dress up, run with dogs, or be volunteers, and many (if not most) then gather for coffee and a debrief afterwards. These are all rituals that enhance interest and fun. So are the actions of the 7,700+ active 'parkrun tourists' who visit as many parkrun events as they can or try to do an A-to-Z of parkrun events. Their rituals involve travelling, parkrunning, and staying for the weekend to explore the local area. All good examples of creativity creating interest.

Tip #5 – Know why you're doing it

The other key to sustaining physical activity is knowing WHY you want to do it. Sure, you can lower your risk factors and improve the quality of your life, but so what? If you're going to age in a healthier way – and I hope you do – what makes that important? How would you make the most of it? What would it allow you to do that seems important? Also, who in your life would benefit from your healthy ageing? These are important questions. Our health status is never just about us, it also affects others. Being clear about that helps to build commitment, and can also help us share our plans with others who might want to encourage and support us.

'Owning' your return to physical activity is all about self-motivation. If you can put some or all of these 5 tips into action, you'll be well on your way to making physical activity and exercise seem less like hard work and drudgery, and more like something worth investing your valuable time in.

Dr Gordon Spence, author of Get Moving. Keep Moving, is a highly sought-after speaker, coach, educator and author who helps clients to live well and perform well. A psychologist and exercise scientist, Gordon's areas of expertise are sustainable performance and healthy ageing, with a particular interest in people returning to exercise in mid-life. For more information visit www.healthyageingproject.com

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