

Lesson 5: Making Physical Activity a Habit

Introduction

In this lesson students learn how a habit (the *maintenance* phase of the Stages of Change model addressed in Module B, Lesson 2) is created and take steps to creating their own exercise habit. In order for behaviours to become a habit, repetition is required. Adopting a new habit can take from a few weeks to many months. Students also investigate ways of addressing some of the factors that prevent people from making physical activity a habit.



Specific Learning Outcomes

11.FM.2 Examine factors that have an impact on the development and implementation of and adherence to a personal physical activity plan.

Examples: motivation, barriers, changing lifestyle, values and attitudes, social benefits, finances, medical conditions, incentives, readiness for change

11.FM.3 Examine and evaluate factors that affect fitness and activity choices.

Examples: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, personal interests, personal health, family history, environment, finances, culture, level of risk

11.PA.1 Demonstrate appropriate critical thinking, planning, and decision-making skills in the development and implementation of a personal physical activity plan that is safe and ethical and contributes to health-related fitness goals.



Key Understandings

- Healthy lifestyle habits can be created.
 - There are factors that promote and detract from making physical activity and exercise a lifestyle habit.
 - Goal setting and personality awareness have an important influence on habit creation.
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Essential Questions

1. What are some ways to create a new habit?
 2. What are some factors that affect a person's adherence to a personal activity plan, including an activity or exercise routine?
 3. Identify a personal goal as part of your physical activity plan using the goal-setting steps.
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Background Information

Getting Beyond Just Getting Started

This course, and the physical activity practicum (see Module A) in particular, is intended to

- help students take greater ownership of their own physical fitness
- promote the discovery of physical activities suited to students' own interests
- encourage students to engage in active lifestyles that persist into their futures

To realize these goals, students need to form good habits so that they can adhere to their physical activity plan, meet the requirements for this course, and be active and healthy beyond graduation for a lifetime.

Forming a Habit

The formation of a habit (good or bad) typically depends on two things, time and repetition. We all tend to have some habits that we are not particularly fond of or perhaps not even aware of. Some of these habits may not be overt or may not have a major impact on our day-to-day living; however, the lack of “healthy” habits can and will have long-term effects. The good news is that while taking the first step to forming a new habit may be difficult, subsequent steps can be relatively easy. Many of us take that first step as a result of some external motivator, such as a personal encounter with an undesirable outcome (e.g., a heart attack, clothes don't fit) or a health warning from a doctor. While these examples tend not to catch the attention of adolescents, it is essential to begin the formation of good exercise habits as early in life as possible because these habits then become part of who we are and what we do, thereby eliminating the excuse, “I don't have time.”

“Those who think they have not time for bodily exercise will sooner or later have to find time for illness.”

— Edward Stanley, Earl of Derby, 1873

All good things in life, including exercise habits, take time to develop. Once we decide to begin regular physical activity, it is important to take things slowly. We need to be cautious about not taking on more than we can handle, making sure that our activity plan “fits” us and that we will be able to carry on beyond the first week, month, and so on.

Motivation is an underlying theme in the Stages of Change model, from contemplation to maintenance. It is generally accepted that intrinsic motivation is necessary for maintenance and that extrinsic motivators are useful to commence change and to reinforce it later on through the stages of change.

Being Physically Active Is a Habit

Our physical activity experiences should be founded on a desire to engage in activities we enjoy, while also providing the benefits of a formal exercise program. Our interests should

guide our activity experiences. If we don't have any obvious interests, we need to find someone who can expose us to new activities in a safe environment so that we can try them and find out what we like to do.

Once we find an activity to our liking, we need to make it a regular occurrence in our lives in a realistic manner (i.e., not approaching it too aggressively and not going overboard by doing it all at once). If we have not been physically active regularly for a while, we need to start gradually and ease into a small number of activities of differing intensities. Over time, as some features of boredom creep in, we can explore new activities, keeping in mind that variety will enhance adherence to exercise.

Generally, people tend to give up on activity programs because they don't see the desired results as quickly as they had wished for. When we begin exercising regularly, gradually increasing the demands of our exercise program, we need to be patient and trust that things are happening. We need to understand that our bodies are changing, making adjustments to circulation, respiration, the heart, lungs, liver, blood vessels, hormones, glands, and the immune system, even the blood supply itself. Changes are happening, even if we cannot see or measure them.

It is essential to take on realistic performance goals in personal physical activity plans. Measuring or logging performance can be helpful. Even a change in the frequency of exercise per week is a success. For example, someone who has a plan for walking at every lunch hour (five times a week) can set a minimum successful level of two times in the first week. In this way, the individual will experience success, and then attempt to add more the next week. Unrealistic goals result in feelings of failure and decrease self-esteem, leading to avoidance of activity or relapse to inactivity.

While incorporating physical activity strategies into daily life (e.g., taking stairs instead of using elevators, parking farther out in the parking lot) should not be confused with exercise programs, these efforts may well be ways to ease into an exercise program or to begin building the basics of an exercise habit. Every little bit helps. Before long, these efforts are no longer seen as a chore. Taking the stairs instead of the elevator (or escalator) each day for as little as three weeks can make this activity a lifelong habit. (It is a general belief that it takes 20 to 30 days of repetition to form a new habit.) After a while, we will ask ourselves, "Why didn't I do that in the first place?"

It is said that variety is the spice of life. However, if we are just beginning a physical activity plan, we need to choose one activity that appeals to us, and get started. When we have incorporated this activity as part of our routine, we can try to do it more frequently. Once we are feeling comfortable with an activity, it is time to consider other activities that interest us. We might want to try different activities we had previously only thought about but now have the motivation to try, to explore what we really enjoy, and to find out what will fit into our lifestyle and schedule. Those who enjoy the company of others may choose to join a team or find an exercise partner (e.g., a person, pet, pedometer, training log). In fact, doing a number of activities is a great way of incorporating variety into a physical activity program. We don't have to do the same exercise every day to get the health and fitness benefits.

With a gradual beginning and small incremental increases in duration or intensity, we soon see and feel positive results from physical activities. Once our chosen activities become a habit, we will not want to miss our workouts. Then we are on a solid pathway to health.

REFERENCES



For additional information, refer to the following websites:

Baldwin, Donovan. "Health as Habit: Nutrition, Exercise, and Weight Loss." *Nutrition–Weight Loss–Alternative Medicine*. Dietneeds.com. <www.dietneeds.com/Health-As-Habit--Nutrition-Exercise-And-Weight-Loss.php>.

Quinn, Elizabeth. "Getting Started and Sticking with Exercise." *Sports Medicine*. About.com. 14 Jul. 2004. <<http://sportsmedicine.about.com/od/tipsandtricks/a/gettingstarted.htm>>.



Refer to RM 6-FM: New Habit Chart (available in Word and Excel formats).



Background Information

Commitment and Exercise Adherence

It is generally understood that exercise is good for us, yet a high percentage of the people who begin exercise programs drop out within the first six months. Even people who are active or seriously training for a sport can have difficulty adhering to their training programs. The most commonly cited reasons for dropping out of an exercise program include "lack of time, inconvenience, expense, physical discomfort, embarrassment, poor instruction, inadequate support, and loss of interest" (Doyle). Clearly, these reasons are closely linked to the barriers to exercise (addressed in Module B, Lesson 4). Encourage students to take ownership of their personal physical activity plan, as ownership instills commitment. This is their new life.

The factors that affect exercise adherence and motivation can be organized into two categories: situation factors and personal factors. These factors are examined in the discussion that follows.

REFERENCES



For additional information, refer to the following websites:

Doyle, J. Andrew. "Exercise Adherence." *The Exercise and Physical Fitness Page*. 1999. <<http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwfit/adherence.html>>.

Public Health Agency of Canada. "Activity Guidelines." *Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living*. 20 Sept. 2002. <www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/child_youth/youth/guidelines.html>.

Situation Factors Affecting Exercise Adherence*

The factors that affect our commitment or adherence to physical activity or exercise are similar to those that act as barriers to commencing physical activity for the first time.

By knowing the situations or environments in which we enjoy exercise, we can put ourselves into those situations as often as possible. The following factors must be considered to maximize exercise commitment:

- time
- money
- energy
- other commitments
- social support
- exercising with others
- facilities
- climate
- physical discomfort

A discussion of these situation factors follows.

* Source: Doyle, J. Andrew. "Exercise Adherence." *The Exercise and Physical Fitness Page*. <<http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwfit/adherence.html>>. © Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia by Georgia State University (1999). Adapted with permission.

Time

Finding time to exercise is of vital importance if we are to adhere to an exercise program. According to the "Activity Guidelines" set out in *Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living* (Public Health Agency of Canada), individuals should aim to exercise 60 minutes or more on most days of the week. This increase in time may be accumulated throughout the day and should include activities of moderate to vigorous intensity.

In scheduling workout time, allow for other factors before and after the workout (e.g., travelling, changing clothes, showering). Incorporate these considerations into the overall time set aside for exercise. If we are not relaxed or if we feel hurried when working out, we are less likely to enjoy a workout and so will be less likely to adhere to an exercise program in the future. The exercise program can't be squeezed in – it must be a well-placed, intentional part of our schedule. Getting support from friends and family to “keep this personal time” can be valuable. Working with an exercise partner can also increase commitment to an exercise schedule.

It is a good idea to plan for exercise time to avoid any possible time conflicts. Getting into a weekly exercise routine with which we feel comfortable will aid in exercise adherence. Keep in mind that “blips” in the routine can happen due to a variety of reasons (e.g., illness, special family occasions, examination stress). These are not failures.

Money

We all make decisions based on our current situation. This includes being able to do things in life based on our personal financial resources.

Many people feel that getting “fit” or becoming physically active requires joining a gym or a health club or enrolling in some type of exercise program. While these options may be possible for some, they are not possible for others due to their financial situation.

Lack of finances need not be a reason for inactivity, however. Many activities (e.g., walking, running) cost little or no money and can be done without having to purchase expensive equipment (e.g., consider borrowing equipment). Correct instruction for some activities can be obtained from a physical education teacher or from books, videos, or DVDs available at school or at a local library. Many affordable public sports facilities and community clubs have trained individuals who can assist people in designing an appropriate exercise program. In general, physical activity choices must align with one's personal income and budget, just like other choices in life. However, being active does not have to require money. There are many ways to be active at no cost or at minimal cost to the individual.

Energy

Lack of energy is a common excuse for not exercising. This excuse is ironic, given that we actually feel energized by working out. There will be occasions when we will not feel like exercising due to tiredness, lack of energy, illness, and so on. During these times it is important to try to do at least parts of our exercise program, or run through a workout at a lower intensity level. Doing something is always better than doing nothing.

We typically have more energy at certain times of the day than at others. Make a note of these “up” times and schedule workouts at these times.

Nutrition or healthy eating also plays an important part in exercise. A meal plan should include sufficient complex carbohydrates to make the proper fuel available to the body during exercise.

Finally, sleep is a key to energy for exercise. Many young people do not sleep enough, making it easy for them to yield to the temptation not to exercise due to tiredness. Rest, recovery, and sleep are as vital to a regular physical activity plan as the activity itself.

Other Commitments

Naturally, we all have responsibilities and commitments (e.g., homework, work, family) that may affect our adherence to a regular exercise plan. All these commitments require time and energy. Therefore, scheduling and prioritizing our commitments is essential, and this includes exercising. Incorporating exercise into other commitments may help us to meet our responsibilities to ourselves, as well as to others (e.g., walk, run, or cycle to and from school or work, include play time in babysitting).

If we are serious about adhering to an exercise program it may be necessary to forgo other activities to make time for exercise. We have to identify where our priorities lie and be prepared to make sacrifices (e.g., instead of spending money on conveniences and consumer-oriented purchases such as a new TV, car, or stereo, choose to spend the money on health). We need to ask ourselves, “What is our health worth?”

Social Support

Ongoing social support is important all along the Stages of Change continuum. Gaining and maintaining the support of family and friends is critical if we are going to remain faithful to our exercise program. We need to demonstrate to family and friends, and help them understand, how important our physical activity is to us. This will make it easier for all involved to support our efforts. Once our social supports are in place, others will try to avoid scheduling events that may interfere with our exercise time.

Exercising with Others

For some individuals, exercising with a group or a partner can greatly improve exercise adherence. By exercising with others, we are more likely to keep than to neglect our commitment to an exercise plan. Knowing that we will let others down, in addition to ourselves, by missing an exercise session, can sometimes be good motivation to continue exercising.

The same is true if we are part of a team or a group exercise class or program. If we miss a practice or class we generally have to explain the reason for our absence to others. The fear of this embarrassment is often enough to maintain high exercise adherence, which is the desired outcome. Managing this is important, as fear of missing an obligation itself is not a good motivator alone to continue with exercise. Once we miss one session, we may establish a sense of failure, and then it may be hard to get back to the group.

Facilities

Affordability and location are key considerations in choosing the right facilities or space in which to exercise. When deciding on the proper place for exercise (indoors or outdoors), consider an easily accessible location close to home, school, and/or the workplace. Giving strong consideration to these factors in choosing facilities increases the likelihood of adherence to exercise.

Feeling comfortable with our surroundings during exercise is vital. We can increase our sense of ease and safety by understanding how to use the facilities, where everything is located, and where to get assistance if required. We benefit if we find the staff of the facilities friendly, approachable, and sensitive to our needs. Those who prefer to exercise when the facilities are less crowded could try to find out when the best time is and see whether it fits into their weekly schedule. When exercising outdoors, safety and access to a phone may be a consideration.

Climate

Climate is especially relevant to outdoor exercises, such as running and cycling, and outdoor team sports. Having an alternate exercise plan in the event of bad weather will help keep us on track.

The weather, be it too hot or too cold, too dry or too wet, can make some facilities unusable. Exercising in inclement weather may also compromise health. Individuals with allergies to pollen may not be able to exercise outdoors during some seasons. Those with asthma may be unable to exercise comfortably in cold, dry conditions. Exercising in cold, wet weather may cause the onset of common colds and respiratory infections.

Manitoba's climate provides opportunities for a tremendous variety of physical activities and sports in every season. Being able to maintain a regular exercise routine, regardless of the weather or season, can ensure high exercise adherence. Planning for a change in seasons is a critical component of a successful personal activity plan. Someone who begins a physical activity plan in fall or winter should also plan activities for the spring and summer, and vice versa. Putting all our effort into one type of activity is risky.

Physical Discomfort

Physical discomfort from exercise can be a deterring factor to our pattern of activity. Not everyone enjoys intense physical activity, or finds it easy. The belief that the “fat-burning zone” is the only right place to be for exercise intensity is a misconception. We are able to realize significant health and fitness benefits from activities of very low intensity. If we are capable of exercising at a higher intensity, however, then we should progress. We will burn more calories with vigorous activity.

Although we can expect to experience discomfort with vigorous exercise, we gain significant benefits from exercising at this level. It is important to be able to distinguish between pain and discomfort, as any pain experienced may indicate that something is wrong and may warrant a visit to a physician. Nonetheless, a little discomfort is normal, and it is up to each of us to do what we can to minimize it. Once exercise is part of a normal routine, the level of discomfort experienced from vigorous exercise will diminish. Keep in mind that exercise should still be fun.

The following are a few tips for minimizing discomfort with exercise:

- It is normal to experience “delayed onset muscle soreness” after starting a new exercise program, or even when changing exercises. This soreness (or stiffness) develops after 24 hours and will diminish over the next few days. The benefit is that the second time we do an exercise we won’t be nearly as sore. So, staying active is a key to minimizing discomfort.
- Always include warm-up and cool-down sessions in exercise. When beginning a new exercise program, start off slowly and gradually make increases in frequency, intensity, and time. The body needs time to adapt to new stresses.
- Expect to sweat and breathe harder when increasing work intensity. Learn to distinguish between normal breathing during exercise and shortness of breath or hyperventilation.

Personal Factors Affecting Exercise Adherence and Motivation*

By understanding more about ourselves, we can more successfully handle the inevitable difficult situations when they arise. Therefore, in addition to paying attention to the situation factors affecting our exercise program, we need to devote attention to personal factors and capabilities such as

- awareness of personality
- goal setting

A discussion of the personal factors affecting exercise adherence and motivation follows.

* Source: Doyle, J. Andrew. “Exercise Adherence.” *The Exercise and Physical Fitness Page*. <<http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwfit/adherence.html>>. © Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia by Georgia State University (1999). Adapted with permission.

Awareness of Personality

Personality is an interrelated combination of a person's body, thoughts, and behaviours. How individuals explain, or to what they attribute, their successes and failures may say something about their personalities.

To increase awareness of how personality affects exercise adherence and motivation, it is helpful to consider the following three questions:

- Do you tend to see your exercise habit, or lack thereof, as permanent or as changeable?
- Do you attribute your habit, or lack thereof, to things primarily within or outside your control?
- Do you attribute your habit, or lack thereof, to internal characteristics or external circumstances?

Explaining a lack of adherence or motivation to exercise as permanent and beyond our control diminishes our expectations, perhaps to the point of feeling helpless. Attributing failures to internal characteristics may result in feelings of guilt or shame; attributing failures to external circumstances may provide a way to avoid such feelings.

Alternatively, explaining a lack of adherence or motivation as changeable and within our control provides a sense of empowerment, increasing the expectation of success. Attributing successes to internal characteristics may lead to feelings of pride, self-worth, or a sense of accomplishment; attributing successes to external circumstances may bring a sense of luck or humility.

Analyzing expectations can reveal something about personalities. An individual with expectations of success is often referred to as having a high degree of self-confidence or self-efficacy; an individual with expectations of failure is often referred to as having a low degree of self-confidence or self-efficacy.

It is important to establish our expectations regarding the exercise program we are considering starting or have just started. At least four things can help improve our self-confidence with regard to an exercise program:

- prior successes and achievements
- role models and success stories
- verbal encouragement and persuasion
- awareness and control of emotional responses to exercise

Goal Setting

Setting goals is an effective way to enhance motivation for physical activity and to improve the likelihood of developing the habit of exercise. To be most effective, our physical activity goals should be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time framed.

Common reasons to start exercising include losing weight or body fat or getting into better condition. To improve the chances of success, goals need to be more specific (e.g., If you want to lose weight or body fat, how much do you want to lose and by when? Are there clothes you'd like to fit into by a certain date?). In any case, specific goals are measurable. Having specific goals will enable us, at a certain time in the future, to determine clearly and easily whether or not we have met our goals.

In addition to being specific and measurable, goals should be challenging, as well as attainable and realistic. If our goals require dramatic changes to well-established habits, we will be much less likely to succeed. Setting extreme goals may say something about an individual's personality. We increase our chances of success by attempting to make gradual changes. Those who have been relatively inactive for a while may wish to introduce exercise on three or four days a week. They could focus first on getting exercise on those days, and then gradually increase the duration and/or the intensity of exercise. Those who don't have the time or the inclination for an exercise program could set specific goals about incorporating greater physical activity into their daily routine.

Whether or not individuals reach a specific and realistic goal within an allotted period of time may, to some degree, be affected by circumstances beyond their control. To increase the chances of ultimate success, goals should state both the desired outcomes and the tasks. Tasks are the behaviours that an individual commits to doing to achieve goals. For example, a person's goal might involve losing a certain amount of weight in 12 weeks. The task goals might then include specific behaviours such as lifting weights or jogging for 30 minutes three or four times a week, taking the stairs instead of elevators, and maintaining an appropriate balanced diet.

Once we've set specific and realistic goals that include both outcomes and tasks, we might consider writing them down in an exercise contract. By writing them down, we promise to perform our tasks in order to achieve specific and realistic goals by a certain date. Alternatively, we might consider memorizing our goals and reminding ourselves of them daily. We can also promise ourselves that if we meet such goals we will give ourselves a specific reward.



Background Information

Time to Get Moving

In this module, students have learned about themselves and the ways in which they can take charge of their lifestyle. They have learned about their own motivation regarding physical activity, examined their perceived barriers and the ways to get past them, and explored techniques to “stick with” an exercise plan. It is now time for students to make a commitment to a personal physical activity plan.



Refer to RM 7-FM: Physical Activity Contract.

Ask students to include their personal goals as part of their physical activity plan, for periodic review and amendment. Amending the contract is tantamount to success, as this means that students are constantly assessing their performance goals and outcomes. It is better to revise the contract than to use it as a means to identify failure.

The goal is to have students achieve and maintain a physically active lifestyle. So, in the next few weeks they will need to find the methods to succeed in their new physical activity plan, as opposed to assuming it will work. It might take two to five activity sessions to get physically active.

REFERENCES



For more information on goal setting, refer to the following documents provided by the Manitoba Physical Education Teachers Association:

- Goal Setting PowerPoint
- Goal Setting Worksheet
- Goal Setting: Personal Plan

These documents can be found on the following website:

Manitoba Physical Education Teachers Association (MPETA). *MPETA Resources to Support the Grades 11 and 12 Curriculum*. <www.mpeta.ca/resources.html>.

RM 7–FM: Physical Activity Contract

I believe that routine physical activity and exercise may benefit me physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally.

I, _____, DO HEREBY PLEDGE TO THE FOLLOWING GOALS:

Specific and Realistic Goal #1 _____ By When? _____

Tasks to Accomplish Goal #1 _____

Specific and Realistic Goal #2 _____ By When? _____

Tasks to Accomplish Goal #2 _____

Specific and Realistic Goal #3 _____ By When? _____

Tasks to Accomplish Goal #3 _____

PLEGGED BY _____ THIS _____ DAY OF _____, _____
(student) (day) (month) (year)

* Source: Doyle, J. Andrew. "Exercise Adherence." *The Exercise and Physical Fitness Page*. <<http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwfit/adherence.html>>. © Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia by Georgia State University (1999). Adapted with permission.