

do you exercise from time to time but find it difficult to stick with a program for very long? According to Jay Kimiecik, PhD, associate professor of exercise physiology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a common reason people avoid or discontinue exercising is they succumb to “internal” barriers that consistent exercisers overcome. The internal barriers Kimiecik refers to are the thoughts, feelings and perceptions that impede successful lifestyle change. Try using the following tips to break through your own internal barriers to exercise:

1 Understand What You’re Up Against. Don’t underestimate the barriers that keep you stuck on that couch or in front of your computer screen! Do you have difficulty *starting* a regular exercise program? Your barriers could include intimidation and embarrassment, anxiety about your physical appearance, negative feelings about yourself (poor self-esteem) and lack of confidence in your physical abilities. What about *maintaining* regular exercise? If this is your major struggle, your obstacles could be outcome fixation (focusing on the goal instead of the process), boredom and perceived lack of time.

2 Get Individual Attention. A personal fitness trainer, lifestyle coach or mentor can help you identify barriers and develop strategies to penetrate them. Remember that you can work with someone via e-mail or phone as well as in person. “Most people need far more encouragement, follow-up and feedback than we think in order to believe they can become regular exercisers,” says Kimiecik.

3 Consider a Lifestyle Approach to Exercise. The lifestyle approach requires that you accumulate 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day, rather than doing your whole workout at once in a structured session. If shorter sessions are easier for you to maintain, try the lifestyle approach.

4 Build Confidence Through Education. Whether you learn from books, videos or live professionals, your efforts will pay off in increased confidence. Don’t expect to “automatically” know how to perform a new exercise or sport. There’s nothing wrong with being a beginner, and the more information you get, the better chance you have of becoming a regular participant.

5 Set Realistic Short-Term Goals. If your only goal is to lose 50 pounds or maintain a lifelong exercise program, it will be quite some time before you can feel successful about achieving your goal! So create a goal for each exercise session. Short-term goals might include feeling more energized after your workout or concentrating on your intensity during the session.

6 Progress Your Training to Avoid Plateauing. Once your program is underway, you might find yourself on a “plateau” where your fitness level does not seem to improve much at all. When this occurs, discouragement can set in easily. (This can be a problem particularly if you are fixated on long-term goals like weight loss.) One solution is to keep progressing your exercise sessions by pushing yourself to new levels. This strategy will put you back in touch with your body’s abilities and the challenges of working out.

7 Try “Toys” and Variety to Combat Boredom. Remember, adults are kids at heart! Let yourself play. Changing from a stair stepper to an elliptical trainer or other new “toy,” alternating group fitness classes, researching a new activity such as rock climbing, or checking out exercise information on the Internet are all options for sparking interest when your sessions start to feel “stale.”

8 Create a Personal Exercise Mission Statement. This statement describes how you want to incorporate exercise into your life, explains Kimiecik. You can use your mission statement to help you stay focused and overcome barriers as they arise.

9 Notice How Much Time You Spend Being Inactive. Most people underestimate the time they spend in sedentary activities, such as working at a computer or watching TV. Start a log (in your day planner or on a calendar) to record your activities in 20-minute intervals over three days. Then plan specific ways you can substitute movement for your sedentary times. (This is a great activity to do as a family, especially since you serve as a role model for your children.)

10 Integrate Movement Into Your Life. It’s hard to make time for physical activity if you keep it isolated from the rest of your life. Instead, find ways to combine exercise with family activities, social times with friends, creative brainstorming with colleagues, or emotional and spiritual rejuvenation.

This handout is a service of IDEA, the leading international membership organization in the health and fitness industry.

How to Stay Motivated