

Overcoming the Fear Factor

Fear of failure stops many people from exercising or trying new activities. According to David E. Conroy, PhD—assistant professor of kinesiology and director of the sport psychology lab at Pennsylvania State University, University Park—they may specifically fear the shame and embarrassment that come with failure. They may be afraid that they won't fulfill their ideal self-image. The thought of not doing well at exercise may make them anxious that they are not as competent as they believed and lower their self-esteem. If fear of failure keeps you from exercising, try these motivational tips from Conroy.

1 Start Small. Usually, those who fear failure are very critical of themselves. Do what you can to cultivate your success. Take group fitness classes or start an exercise program at the level right for you. In addition, don't assume that, just because you excel at one sport, you'll be equally skilled at other sports or fitness activities; give yourself time to make mistakes and learn. If you don't want to go through that learning curve in front of others, hire a personal trainer who can train you in a private location.

2 Exercise More for Rewards Than to Avoid Punishment. There are two main ways to motivate yourself to exercise. If you're **avoidance-oriented**, you exercise to avoid punishment such as criticism or embarrassment. If you're **approach-oriented**, you exercise to receive a reward such as praise or improved

Set Yourself Up for Success

Fear of failure is a significant obstacle to sticking with exercise. Consequently, people tend not to put themselves in situations that don't offer at least a slight opportunity for success. Help yourself succeed by focusing your exercise goals not on what is beyond your control but on what is within your control. For example, don't try to lose weight in a specific area of your body: Not only is controlling where pounds come off as a result of exercise impossible, but achieving the ideal body image presented by the media is also unrealistic. Set goals that focus more on effort and skill improvement.

fitness. Both orientations can influence the quality of your exercise.

An avoidance orientation can make you avoid activities that would leave you feeling unskilled or inadequate, such as fitness classes too advanced for your current level or activities in which others may evaluate the appearance of your body. On the other hand, an avoidance orientation can make you pursue exercise to avoid future health problems. For example, if you are recovering from heart surgery, you may be motivated to exercise out of fear that a heart problem may recur. You may also be shamed into exercising out of fear of the other, general health consequences of inactivity.

In contrast, an approach orientation can lead you to exercise because you *want* the physical and psychological benefits of exercise. Although both orientations can motivate, avoidance-oriented motivation is associated with higher levels of fear and anxiety and therefore less likely to motivate you to continue exercising. Approach-oriented motivation is usually associated with greater persistence and therefore more likely to help you keep exercising.

3 Develop Your Inner Motivation. Of course, although external, tangible rewards can be quite a motivation to exercise, constantly focusing on them by saying to yourself things such as "If I go to the gym three times this week, I will buy myself a new outfit" decreases your intrinsic motivation. You begin to exercise not for the enjoyment of the activity itself but only for those rewards, and, once you no longer have them, you become much more likely to stop exercising. Instead of exercising for an external reward such as weight loss, develop your inner motivation to exercise.

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