

# GETTING MOTIVATED HOW TO HELP A COUCH POTATO BECOME EXERCISE FRIENDLY

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If I start out by trying to convince you that it's psychologically healthy to understand your motivations for exercising, you're likely to interrupt with "Why? What's there to understand? I do it, that's all. Fitness is important." But if I ask you to help a sedentary friend who hasn't yet found an important personal reason for making exercise or sport an integral part of his or her life, I can accomplish the same thing.

Why? Because putting yourself in somebody else's Adidas or Reeboks creates some psychological distance—you have a better chance of understanding your friend's motivations—or lack of them—if you first examine your own. Once you have an idea about what fuels your physical activity, you may be able to break through your friend's resistance.

**Competitive Motives.** When competing with ourselves, we seek reassurance that our maximum level of performance can be reached, that we can beat our own best time or master a new activity. In competition with others, we seek the enhanced self-esteem that accompanies our ability to participate and win.

**Aesthetic Motives.** Whether we strive to reduce, expand, shape, or tone all or part of our bodies, the goal is an ideal appearance of beauty or strength or at least a noticeable improvement.

**Health/Well-Being Motives.** When the emphasis is physical, we may be trying to strengthen a particular system, such as cardiovascular or musculoskeletal, in order to prevent disease or injury or to increase our chances for longevity. When the emphasis is mental or psychological, we're often attempting to offset the effects of sedentary jobs, balance in-

tellectual and motor activity, or reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Enhanced creativity and problem-solving ability are among the positive effects of this motivation.

**Social Motives.** We seek companionship and want to be part of a group that places a high value on fitness.

**Pleasure Motives.** There's nothing complicated here. We're simply looking for the enjoyment that comes from play and physical movement.

Now, if you've found yourself in one or more of these categories, let's return to your friend, the procrastinating couch potato.

First, don't assume those who don't exercise are simply lazy. In other aspects of their lives, they could well be as achievement-oriented as you are; but because of their high expectations of themselves, they're afraid they won't do well at this fitness business. So don't criticize. Select one of the above motivations that works for you, then tell your friend about it.

If the response is at all positive, don't let the idea of regular exercise become overwhelming. In this case, think small. For example, don't say "Let's sign you up for a year's membership at my health club!" That's both unrealistic and intimidating. Instead, suggest that you meet tomorrow morning for a 15-minute walk or run through the park. If that works, suggest the same activity two days later, or test the response to a weekend bicycle trip.

The next step for beginning exercisers is deciding on personal goals and interests. Take up tennis? Lose 20 pounds? Train for the triathlon? Do isometrics in

the office? Clear the cobwebs from the mind? If it turns out that your friend's motives aren't primarily social, this may be the time for you to leave him or her alone so that the momentum can continue to build.

Getting motivated doesn't seem difficult when the positive effects that I've emphasized here are the result. Who would argue with enhanced self-esteem, pleasurable recreation, and relief from stress? Unfortunately, that's not the whole story, for these same motivations can have negative effects as well.

When strong motivations lead toward compulsion, you become so focused on the pursuit of fitness that you begin to abandon other important aspects of your life such as career responsibilities and personal relationships. When you become depressed if you *can't* exercise, when you become aware of pressure, tension, and stress *while* exercising, or start taking too many risks, something's obviously gone wrong.

The ability to identify both the positive and negative effects of your motivations is essential to psychological health. Better tell your friend that too, but wait a while before you do. [FE]