

Making physical activity automatic

Physical activity is a pretty complex behavior. Compared to other behaviors that are quick and easy (e.g., brushing your teeth) or that are infrequent (e.g., getting a physical), being regularly active is very difficult! It requires sustained motivation, a conducive environment, and ongoing planning and scheduling. There is good evidence that behaviors are easier to do when they happen automatically. That is, when you're able to perform the behavior without decision or formal thought (like driving a car). When a behavior is as complex as physical activity, it is unlikely that it will ever become completely automatic, but incorporating regular activity into your day without a constant motivational struggle would certainly be an appealing outcome. So how do you get to that point?

First, make small changes to create an exercise-friendly environment. Essentially, you want to modify your surroundings so you're constantly exposed to cues that prompt you to be active, and you're avoiding the things that promote sedentary behavior. These cues don't have to be anything elaborate. Here are some examples:

- Lay your exercise clothes out the night before if you're planning to exercise in the morning (or sleep in them!). You'll be reminded of your goal when they're the first thing you see when you wake up.
- Keep a few small dumbbells in the living room or family room and squeeze in a few sets of arm exercises while you're watching TV.
- Keep a pair of athletic shoes in the office and use them to go for a brisk walk during your lunch break.



Another idea for fitting physical activity into your day seamlessly is to link small bits of activity with habits that are already part of your routine. Think about something you do reliably multiple times a day and plan to do a tiny bit of activity right after this “anchor.” For example, you might say: *After I send an email, I will do 3 squats* OR *After answer the phone, I will stand up*. Keep the new behavior you want to incorporate very short and simple, and make sure to choose an anchor that is already a reliable habit. The idea is that eventually the new behavior will become a habit as well. To start your own tiny habits visit tinyhabits.com.

Finally, think of scheduling your exercise sessions as a way to increase automaticity. If you've already planned when, where, and how you're going to be active, you don't have to rely on a flash of motivation to get you up and moving. If you've added a 30-minute walk at noon every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to your calendar, your mind will begin to link that time with physical activity. Even better, set up an alert on your phone or computer, and when the alarm goes off, get up and go!