

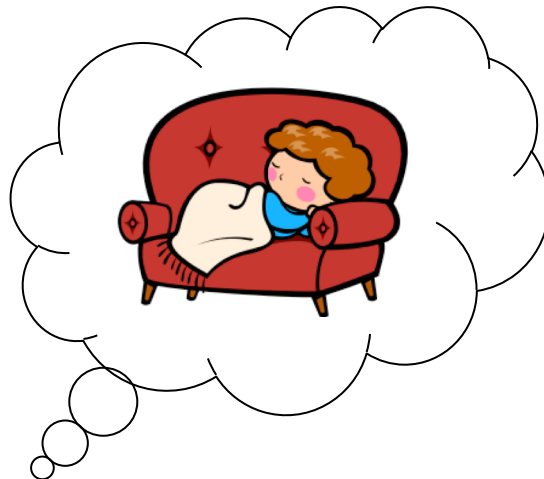
Relapse prevention

Maintaining an active lifestyle is a continuous process. Even those who have been regularly exercising for years face barriers which they must work to overcome. When equipped with the proper coping skills, however, it is possible to overcome these barriers and avoid relapse (i.e., returning to an inactive lifestyle). First, let's understand how relapse occurs.

At the beginning of the “road to relapse”, an individual must have *lapses* – single occurrences of inactivity (e.g., one missed workout). When lapses cause frustration and undermine motivation, an individual may abandon his or her exercise program completely – this is *relapse*. Thus, there are two main components to the relapse prevention process:

- 1) Prevent initial lapses
- 2) Prevent lapses from escalating into total relapse

Let's start with component 1. The key to minimizing missed workouts will be to identify and avoid or cope with “high-risk” situations. These are circumstances that make it difficult for you to stick to your normal exercise regime. They could be external barriers (e.g., vacation, sick kids, busy month at work) or internal barriers (e.g., you're exhausted and want a break).



So, how do you cope with these high-risk situations? For external barriers, it's important to try to anticipate high-risk situations before they occur. For example, if you usually exercise in the evening but you know you have a busy night ahead, you can squeeze in a workout during the lunch hour instead. Or, if you know you won't be able to stick to your usual routine when you're traveling, you can pack your athletic shoes and plan to take a long walk each day.

For internal barriers, keep in mind that as humans, we tend to have a “present focus bias.” Even if we know a behavior is unhealthy, it’s easy to discount the long-term negative health consequences when the unhealthy choice feels good *right now*. Logically, we know exercise is good for us, but logic rarely drives our behavior – emotions do.

What are 3 types of physical activity that you really enjoy?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What immediate positive outcomes do you experience when you engage in these activities?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

When you work full time and have obligations outside of work, you’re often likely to feel exhausted and overwhelmed. When you feel like you need a break from your to-do list, consider whether you might be able to substitute one of your usual sedentary indulgences with one of the physical activities you enjoy. If it’s an activity that helps you feel good, you’ll get the immediate gratification you crave AND stay on track with your exercise goals.

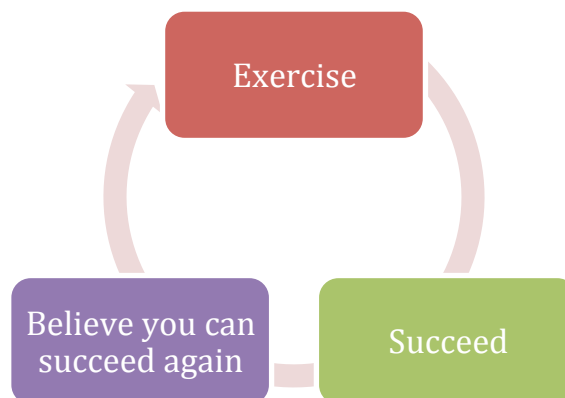


You might also find it helpful to keep a log of lapses to identify high-risk situations. You'll be able to plan ahead when you know a challenging situation is approaching. See the sample self-monitoring log below.

Self-monitoring log

<u>Time</u>	<u>Setting</u>	<u>Antecedents</u>	<u>Consequences</u>
(When did I miss my workout?)	(What did I do instead? Where was I? Who was I with?)	(What was happening? How was I feeling prior to missing my workout?)	(How did I feel after I missed the workout?)

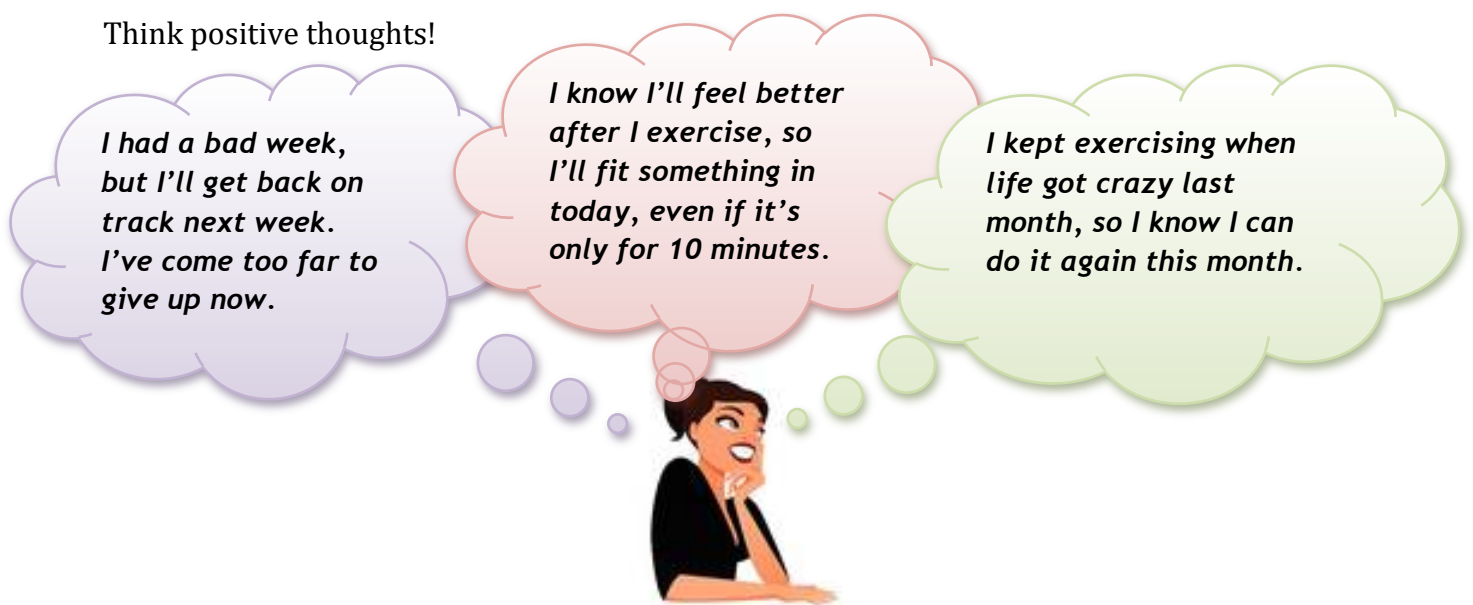
Once you successfully cope with a few high-risk situations, you'll notice your self-confidence improving! When you encounter a situation you've conquered in the past, you'll feel capable of succeeding again this time. The more you succeed, the better you'll feel, and the more self-assured you'll be as you forge ahead.



It is inevitable, however, that you will have lapses on occasion. A full time job with family obligations can present daunting challenges which, at times, are unanticipated and may be difficult to overcome. This is where component 2 of the relapse prevention process comes into play: *Prevent lapses from escalating into total relapse*. First, tell yourself that missing a workout is no big deal. You had a bad day (or week) – that does not mean you can't succeed tomorrow! Avoid all-or-none thinking. You don't need to abandon your exercise program entirely just because you skipped a workout or two.

To further illustrate this point, consider someone on a diet. For several days, she sticks with her dietary goals and follows all the "rules." One day, though, she gives in to her cravings and has a cookie. An all-or-none thinker would view this situation as a catastrophe and reason that she might as well eat the whole box of cookies since she's already deviated from her diet plan. By doing so, however, she puts herself on the road to relapse. If she had viewed eating the cookie as a little slip, or a small indulgence, and vowed to get back on track the next day, she would not be any worse off for having eaten the cookie. The same is true for exercise. One missed workout will not have any adverse long-term health consequences. So, just chalk it up to a bad day, and get back to your plan tomorrow.

Think positive thoughts!



After a lapse, it will be especially important to call on previous successes for motivation. Think about how far you've already come and how you've been able to overcome barriers in the past. Remind yourself of the exercise benefits you personally experience, and remember why you wanted to start exercising more in the first place. By maintaining a positive attitude, using active planning and coping strategies, and never losing sight of your goals, you can defeat the urge to return to an inactive lifestyle!