

Achieving a Successful Fitness Program Requires Mental Fitness

Association for Applied Sport Psychology offers tips to help exercisers reach personal goals

MADISON, WI—May 20, 2008—You have the workout clothes and the fitness club membership, but it still may not be enough to motivate you to start and sustain a successful fitness program. Mental fitness is a key to physical fitness and achieving your goals. It's why exercisers are increasingly borrowing sport psychology tips and techniques.

The ability to master the right mental skills when exercising can improve the likelihood of continuing a fitness program, rehabilitate injuries, build self-esteem, and make the whole experience more fun. Common psychological skills applied in exercise psychology include:

- Attention and concentration control
- Imagery
- Mental practice and self-talk, and
- Goal setting

Authorities at the world's leading sport and exercise psychology organization, the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), offer fitness fans free exercise tips and articles on topic such as weight loss, starting a walking program, body image and physical activity, and the benefits of exercise on the online Resource Center at www.appliedsportpsych.org.

AASP member and author Diane E. Whaley, Ph.D., an associate professor in Educational Psychology at the University of Virginia, has conducted research exploring exercise participation and adherence in adulthood. "Of those who begin exercise, 50 percent can be expected to drop out by six months. Rates of activity decrease with age, more so for women than men, although a study we recently did showed no gender or age difference in activity levels in a sample of fitness club members," she said.

Why don't people exercise when they know it's good for them? Why do so many people begin an exercise program, only to drop out after a few weeks? According to Dr. Whaley, many new or returning exercisers set unrealistic expectations and get frustrated more easily than those who have mastered their workout routines, both physically and mentally. "People tend to fall into a trap of abandoning a new fitness routine when they run into any type of problem," Whaley said. "In truth, exercise is an ongoing process in learning how to maintain a routine over a long period of time and pushing yourself to the next level. Setting goals is one of the first things an individual can do to jump start a successful fitness program."

According to one helpful analogy on the AASP's Resource Center, picture a traffic light where the colors represent levels of activity: consistently inactive (Red), inconsistently active (Yellow) and consistently active (Green). Shooting for Green all the time is unrealistic. Therefore the goal is to aim for Blue – that place between Yellow and Green.

Goal setting is relatively easy to master if you know the basics. A few tips from the experts include:

- Write down your goals. Having a contract, even if it's only with you, helps to keep you on track.
- Keep a logbook to monitor your progress towards goals. Make sure you have a number of short-term goals to help you achieve a longer-term goal. Remember that your goals should focus not just on outcome (like weight loss) but also on the process (like how you will manage your schedule to fit exercise in).
- Don't be afraid to reevaluate your goals. Finding that "optimal challenge" – hard enough to challenge you but not unreachable – takes some time.
- Avoid unrealistic goals like exercising every day. These can become personal roadblocks and lead to the "all or nothing" mistake where you stop exercising because you missed a day or two.
- Reward yourself for accomplishments along the way, such as buying a new outfit – preferably, the reward should help you to confirm your identity as "an exerciser."

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology promotes the ethical practice, science and advocacy of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals who practice sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,200 members in 28 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its Web site www.appliedsportpsych.org.

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