



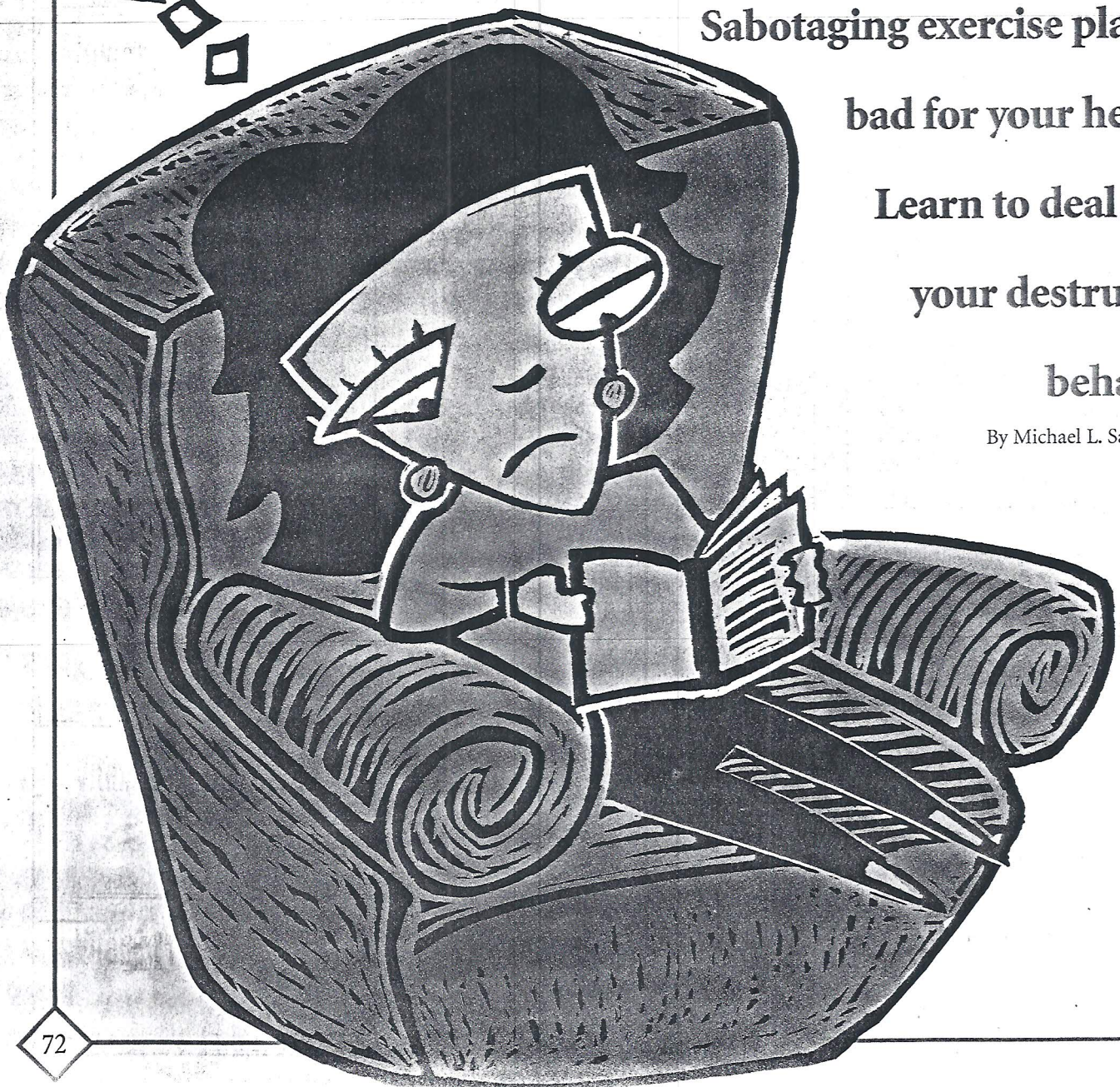
No More Excuses

Sabotaging exercise plans is
bad for your health.

Learn to deal with
your destructive

behavior

By Michael L. Sachs, Ph.D.



If you've never come up with excuses for avoiding exercise, read no further. Three cheers for you. Enjoy your workout today. Most of us, though, have had a day here or there when we just haven't felt like exercising. That's when our energies turn to creative excuse-making. Ever try it? Making excuses for exercising is a guaranteed way to get fatter, slower, softer and lazier. Keep it up and you'll age more quickly, and, inevitably, sacrifice your health.

As a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, specializing in exercise and sport psychology, as well as a psychologist and past-president of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology, I've heard many superb excuses for not exercising. I believe I've heard almost every excuse imaginable, since I've worked with all manner of fitness participants, ranging from Olympic-level athletes to recreational sports buffs.

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with taking a day off now and then, but when excuses begin, it's time for serious concern. When non-workout days and excuses accumulate, you end up with a recipe for dropping out. Exercise is a key component of quality of life; once the key component is gone, you lose.

There are as many different strategies for dealing with excuses as there are different excuses. I've come up with the top ten excuses and three coping strategies for each. So stop making excuses and start reading.

Excuse number 1

"I don't have enough time."

This is the number one excuse given for not exercising, so you're not a very creative excuse maker. You perceive yourself as not having enough time in the day to get in a good exercise session, but that's just your perception.

Strategies

- Prioritize your time, and make exercise a priority. List things you must do each day. Make sure exercise is in the top five for at least four days a week.

- Try multitasking, or doing two or more things at once. Exercise and watch television; take a long, brisk walk with the dog, read the newspaper on the stationary bike, learn a new language by listening to a Berlitz tape while on the stair stepper. Some treadmills even have computerized Internet access.

- Break exercise sessions into smaller chunks, such as three 10-minute walks rather than one 30-minute session. (See "One Foot in Front of

the Other," page 34.) Research shows that benefits are about the same as one longer session.



Excuse number 2

"I have too much work."

This is a handy excuse when you think you've got too much going on at work, school or home. Indeed, there may be times when deadlines present themselves and you must prioritize in such a way that you have to pass up exercise, but these can be rare occasions with a little creative time-management.

Strategies

- Plan ahead. Get some work done in advance rather than waiting until the last minute.
- Cut out something such as watching TV or hanging out at Starbucks. Sleep 30 minutes less and use the extra time for work or exercise.
- Delegate. This is the secret of successful executives. Give that pile of work to some eager junior employee. You'll be a mentor to them and improve your disposition at the same time, because you'll have time to exercise, which will make you feel great.

Excuse number 3

"I'm too tired."

The fatigue factor makes it hard to get up and exercise. Does it make sense to tire yourself out more by exercising? Listen up, couch potato: Research shows that unless you're suffering from sleep deprivation or an illness, exercise can reinvigorate you. Even if you have a physically demanding job, you should exercise above and beyond what you normally do at work.

Strategies

- Exercise in the morning. A good session can start the day off right and make you feel fresh.
- Take a nap, then exercise. You may have a better workout if you're rested.
- Cut back or ease up on exercise. You may be working at a level that is too intense for your current fitness level. Perhaps scaling back for a few days will help restore your energy. Do a low-impact aerobics class rather than high. Take a step class with one step, or no step, rather than two. Slow the pace on your treadmill, stationary bike or stepper. Lift lighter weights. Every workout doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing proposition.





Excuse number 4 *"I'm not in the mood."*

Got a temporary case of the blahs? Relationship problems, job stress, family ordeals all can contribute to a lack of energy for the gym. It's a real challenge when life's got you down.

Strategies

- Changing your focus to fitness will get your mind off your problems and help put them in perspective. Endorphins are natural mood elevators. When they take over, after about 10 minutes of exercise, you feel better.
- Cutting out exercise will make you feel worse, because you'll get angry at yourself for not exercising.
- Try a fun activity. Take a hip-hop class, square dance or go ice skating. Play baseball with your children, take a walk in a park or try beach volleyball. Join a walkathon to raise money for charity. You'll be doing a service by helping others as well as yourself.

Excuse number 5 *"The gym is too crowded."*

Waiting for machines or trying to move in an overcrowded class can dampen the energetic spirit.

Strategies

- Pick a time when the gym is not crowded. The most popular times to avoid are after 8 a.m. (the place is full of moms who drop their children off at school) and after 5 p.m. (most people get off work). Try early mornings, or between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. A few gyms are open 24 hours a day; you'll probably have your pick of machines after 11 p.m.
- Learn how to work in on the weight machines. It may be scary to share a machine with someone who looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger, but the muscle-bound are well-acquainted with gym etiquette. Most are gracious about this macho rite-of-sharing. Plus, it allows you to watch someone else's form and share training tips.
- Vary your workout location. Run up and down bleachers at the local high school, take a spin at a velodrome, take ballet at a dance center, go inline skating at the park, hike trails. Or work out at home. For a modest investment you can purchase basic home fitness equipment. Following a cardio exercise video and lifting free weights in the living room can give you a complete workout.

Excuse number 6 *"I'm too stressed out right now."*

Exercise is an excellent way of releasing tension. It's all how you approach it. Don't make the demands of exercise part of your stress. Look at a workout as a solution toward easing it.

Strategies

- This might be the opportunity to release stress through a powerful discipline. Kickboxing, karate, boxing and racquetball can unleash pent-up emotions in healthy ways.
- Opt for a class that helps you become centered and focused in a quiet peaceful atmosphere such as yoga, tai chi, ballet or stretching.
- Exercise to music, especially if your routine consists of walking, stepping or cycling on machines. Pop a favorite tape into your Walkman and get lost in the music. Choose tunes that make you pick up the pace: rock 'n' roll, country western, marching bands, lively show tunes, rap. Make your own tape from favorite songs that rev you up.



Excuse number 7 *"I'll never be able to look like that."*

Striving for perfection will almost guarantee failure.

You can get into superlative physical condition over time, no matter what your current weight or physique is, with proper diet, discipline and hard work.

Strategies

- Realistically assess your physique. Don't strive for the long, lean look if you're petite and muscular or vice versa. Learn to appreciate your body type; work with it, not against it.
- Talk to others who have achieved a high level of physical conditioning and development. Use them as role models. Most people are flattered when asked for advice and guidance.
- Stop using self-defeating measures to attain your goals. Desperation can lead to compulsive exercising and eating

disorders. Strive for total well-being with a fitness program that doesn't take over your life but complements your mental and emotional well-being.

Excuse number 8

"The weather is terrible."

A flawed excuse for not exercising, full of holes and ultimately falls flat. Flexibility and creative thinking will enable you to figure this one out.

Strategies

- Dress for the weather. Technology now provides durable fabrics for any conditions. On warm days, choose cotton canvas shorts for hiking or walking or select styles designed for breathability such as CoolMax or Solombra, which provides sun protection. In wintry weather, choose underwear with a sweat-wicking material; activewear should have thermal layering or a waterproof material such as Gore-Tex.
- Find alternative all-weather exercise locations: an indoor pool, climbing wall, ice skating rink or roller rink, a racquetball club, college gym, martial-arts center or dance academy.
- Let the weather dictate your program. Snowing? Try snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, snowboarding or ice-skating. Very hot weather activities include swimming laps, aquatic classes, snorkeling, scuba diving, water skiing, and surfboarding.

Excuse number 9

"I hate the fitness instructor."

If you enjoy taking classes, fitness instructors can be instrumental in helping you achieve fitness goals. If you don't like someone's personality or teaching style, it can be a problem.

Strategies

- If you think the instructor isn't doing an adequate job, tell the management. You're a paying customer. Valid complaints are: poor cuing, poor technique, an absence of a warm-up and cool-down, inappropriate comments, or just an overall lack of knowledge.



- If an instructor is too easy or difficult, modify your routine. If a class is low-impact, throw in high impact steps (but move to the back of the room so you won't distract fellow exercisers). If it's too difficult, eliminate the upper-body moves and follow from the waist down. In a cycling class, increase your bike's tension. If you can't keep up, lower the tension and sit on the saddle more often. In step class, use the number of risers that will challenge but not exhaust you. Muscle conditioning is the same. Choose a weight to challenge you. Or if you can't lift for the designated repetitions, perform fewer reps or switch to a lighter weight. Or don't use weights at all; use bands or create your own resistance. When it comes to yoga or stretching, ask your instructor to suggest more- or less-challenging moves.

- Approach the instructor after class and diplomatically tell him what you don't like. Either you will learn why the teacher conducts his class in a particular way, or he will get meaningful feedback. A professional will listen to your concerns.

Excuse number 10

"I've stopped making progress."

This is a common complaint of those who have been working out for a long time. Attending the same classes, walking a set distance, or swimming a routine number of laps on a regular basis will challenge you for a while, but not in the long run. You've hit an exercise plateau. It's normal.

Strategies

- Hire a personal trainer to create a challenging program for you.
- Vary your routine. Your body gets used to doing the same activity week in, week out. If you always ride the stationary bike, try the treadmill. Add intervals to your cardio program. If you lift weights, experiment with supersets, drop setting, split routines and multiple sets (see "Basic Trainer," page 76).
- Get a workout partner and challenge one another into lifting a bit more weight or running a little farther. Get into a competitive mode: Join a swim team, or enter a race. You might be inspired by the competitive edge. ♦

Michael Sachs, Ph.D., is too busy to exercise because he is currently writing a book with partner Bruce Cohen called Excusercise.

No-Excuses Reading (to be read on the stair stepper)

- *Advances in Exercise Adherence*, Rod K. Dishman (Ed.), Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994.
- *Physical Activity & Mental Health*, William P. Morgan (Ed.), Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis, 1997.
- *Running as Therapy: An Integrated Approach*, Michael Sachs and Gary Buffone (Eds.), Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997.