

7 Excercise: Inexcusable Excuses for Not Exercising

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“*Excercise*” is “getting exercise out of making excuses for not exercising.” This twist of a phrase/play-on-words is a small attempt at including humor in addressing the serious subject of sedentariness. A sedentary lifestyle, or *Sedentariness* (Magnon et al., 2018), is most likely the leading factor behind the mortality rate associated with our current obesity epidemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020), in the years 2014–2018, rising adult *Physical Inactivity* (self-report of engaging in no leisure-time physical activity during the past month) estimates across all US states and territories ranged from 17.3% to 47.7% of Americans. During the early COVID-19 pandemic period, it was reported (Matthews, 2022) that although US adults on average spent less time in overall transportation and more total time in leisure pursuits, there was no increase in exercise and recreational activities compared to pre-pandemic levels but rather an increase in sedentary discretionary leisure-time behaviors (such as couch and web surfing).

The epidemic of overweight/obesity in our society has serious ramifications for our health and well-being. This increase in weight can be traced to a simple equation: calories taken in (food consumed) exceeding calories expended (taken out via exercise/physical activity)

There are too many calories being consumed and not enough calories being burned off. Alas, a visit to the local mall or beach reveals evidence of this increase in overweight/obesity in our society. The caloric intake side of the equation is best addressed by registered dietitians/nutritionists – they can help people with portion size, substituting healthy for unhealthy foods, reducing fat in our diet, adequate nutrients, and so on. This chapter focuses on helping people tackle the sedentariness/physical inactivity side of the equation.

In the not-so-distant past, people were quite physically active – they had to plant and harvest crops, roam afar to hunt wild beasts, build and defend their caves/huts/homes, fend off dragons and trolls, tender sheep from the herd, transport themselves to work, perform manual labor, etc. But progressively we have developed many labor-saving devices that make our jobs less physically demanding (if demanding at all), often delegate/hire others to perform manual labor (e.g., cleaning and landscaping), and have increased our forms of entertainment that are more sedentary (e.g., television, video games, the computer/internet, smart phones). Presently, many of us just sit around all day, actively engaged cognitively/mentally, but with very little physical activity.

Even worse, many people have forgotten the joy of human movement, how wonderful it felt as a kid to run, jump, and play. Today, physically illiterate students are relegated to “play dates” where the emphasis is on social networking. Many parents/adults have let themselves lapse into sedentary lifestyles, even though most would like to be physically active and even engage in this thing called “exercise.”

Perhaps some clarification is required to get us all on the same discussion page. First, what is exercise? This is addressed to some degree in Chapter 3 by Ciaccio and Sachs. However, the concepts are worth repeating/expanding upon here. By exercise, we do not necessarily refer to

running a marathon, or swimming across the English Channel, or riding a bicycle for hours. “Exercise can be seen as leisure time physical activity engaged in with a focus upon developing physical fitness” (Bouchard & Shephard, 1994). Exercise and physical fitness are both structured forms of physical activity. Physical activity can be seen as bodily movement produced by individuals’ skeletal muscles which results in energy expenditure (Caspersen et al., 1985). Physical fitness can be broken down into health-related vs. sports skill-related fitness. Most of us would be best served spending time on our health-related physical fitness parameters of aerobic/cardiovascular exercise, flexibility, muscular strength, muscular endurance, and body composition. Those who are competitive may wish to work on their sports skill-related fitness parameters, including exercises to improve speed, power, agility, balance, coordination, and reaction/movement time. One does not necessarily need to seriously compete in tennis, basketball, soccer, pickleball, etc., but it may provide a wonderful, enjoyable, and beneficial source of motivation for those desiring to challenge themselves while remaining physically active,

We are, however, really talking about any structured, or unstructured, program of purposeful physical activity. Exercise and sport would fit in that category, but it could also encompass household tasks such as cleaning, doing yard work, washing the car, transporting oneself from place to place, as well as recreational activities like hiking, kite flying, Ultimate Frisbee, dancing, and romancing. Any physical activity that gets someone off the couch (couch potatoes) or away from the computer (mouse potatoes) is fair game. While many people may prefer the term physical activity, as being less value-/emotion-laden and more general, in this chapter, we will stick with the term *exercise* (see Chapter 3). Exercise is the end goal – regular, planned, physical activity routines. And our concept of *Excusercise* includes the word *Exercise*.

Second, what is an excuse? If you look in the dictionary, there are many definitions for the word “excuse.” An excuse (as a noun) basically is an explanation, justification, or reason one gives for not doing something. Sometimes people seemingly have logical/valid/true reasons for not doing something, but we will put excuses in the illogical/not so valid/false (fake news) category.

In the health behavior adherence literature, “perceived barriers” is often the nomenclature used synonymously with “excuses.” Perceived barriers, along with perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, and perceived benefits, make up part of the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1966; see Chapter 5 by Weinberg and Bianco). This theory is most useful for individuals who believe they are susceptible to illness or disease outcomes if they do not take responsibility for their health actions. It is most often reflected when your doctor unceremoniously notifies you, at your latest physical, “if you do not start exercising and lose weight – you are going to die!” or, at least, “cause your knees to implode or explode under your severe weight load.” For these individuals, it takes the threat of life and death to unearth them and motivate them into motion. This fear motive may work to create a sense of urgent or emergent response and enable one to adopt/start exercising, but it must be nourished further with broad-based social support, increased self-efficacy, and multiple enjoyable activity modes in order to achieve long-term adherence - ultimately leading to sustainable successful health/exercise behavior change.

To that end, excusercise research that included 931 participants from the US (Cohen, 2004) has indicated the following top five barriers (e.g., excuses) for “relapsers”: (1) lack of time; (2) lack of motivation; (3) lack of energy; (4) feeling sad/blue; and (5) illness/injury. Relapsers were defined by the statements; “I was exercising regularly at times over the past 12 months.” “I am not currently exercising regularly.” “I intend to resume exercising regularly in the future.” The length of lapse from exercise averaged four months and occurred an average of twice during the year. For many, this lapse might be mere days after their oft fabled and chronicled unsuccessful New Year’s Resolutions – *this year I will eat, sleep, and exercise religiously!* Alas, by mid-January, many individuals have already become inconsistent with their recently commenced exercise routines, and it is not long before they relapse completely back into sedentariness. We recommend

taking a shorter horizon approach, looking at new month's, new week's, or even new day's resolutions! Perhaps adopt the motto: today is the first day of the rest of your life!!!!

A Relapse phase can be seen as an offshoot of/addition to the original Transtheoretical Model (TTM Model) of Behavior Change (see Chapter 5; Prochaska et al., 1994). The model initially applied to smokers and smoking cessation wherein the final stage of progress corresponded to termination/extinguishment of this unhealthy behavior. When applied to exercise behavior, the theory proposes that individuals move sequentially back and forth through five stages of exercise behavior change: (1) Precontemplation; (2) Contemplation; (3) Preparation; (4) Action; and (5) Maintenance. This is because they struggle to adopt/start (Action) and develop long-term adherence (Maintenance) to exercise behavior. In this case, termination of exercise would result in a relapse back into the unhealthy behavior of sedentariness. It was further suggested (Cohen, 2004) that exercise Relapsers may exist as a separate stage and possess fewer and distinct barriers/excuses than Contemplators, but more barriers/excuses than Maintainers. As such, once an exerciser relapses, they could be quickly brought back into the Action stage as they have fewer barriers/excuses to overcome.

Knowledge of and creative use of the TTM (Prochaska et al., 1994; Prochaska & Prochaska, 2016) can be helpful in working with relapsers and getting them back into action and maintenance. Related approaches, such as that of Norcross (2012), in his book *Changeology*, suggest five steps in becoming a "changeologist" in 90 days: (1) psych (getting ready); (2) prep (planning before leaping); (3) perspire (taking action); (4) persevere (managing slips); (5) and persist (maintaining change). Interestingly, step 3, perspire relates closely with exercise and physical activity in that we should take inspiration from perspiration!! Several others have also conducted research on the stage model directly with exercise and physical activity, especially Dr. Bradley Cardinal and Dr. Bess Marcus (Cardinal, 1997, 1999; Cardinal & Sachs, 1996; Loprinzi et al., 2012; Marcus & Forsyth, 2009).

Furthermore, numerous books address barriers to exercising regularly. For instance, Shimer (1996), in his book entitled *Too Busy to Exercise*, provides strategies for overcoming barriers and exercising regularly. Shimer brings up ways to fit exercise into one's day in a variety of settings. Sweeney (1998) has advanced seven steps to take in removing the 'but' from exercise, including making exercise fun, planning to move, gathering support, and making exercise a priority. Menefee and Somberg (2003) identified 10 hidden barriers to weight loss and exercise and potential solutions for addressing these. Menefee and Somberg emphasize setting goals, taking responsibility for the choices one makes, and making good habits a part of one's life.

To add to these, we recommend borrowing early concepts and constructs from Marlatt and Gordon's Relapse Prevention Model (1980, 1985) to prevent or limit relapse time. While this model was originally developed for alcoholism, it has practical applications for exercise and sedentariness behavior. The model proposes that both immediate determinants (e.g., high risk situations, coping skills, outcome expectancies, and the abstinence violation effect) and covert antecedents (e.g., lifestyle factors and urges and cravings) can contribute to relapse. Beginner, intermediate, and advanced exercisers should develop a comprehensive plan that includes multiple strategies to overcome known (through past experience) and anticipated (pending moves, job changes, relationship changes, marriages and outcomes of marital bliss, i.e., births) changes/barriers. These exercise strategies should encompass what to do in foul weather, during osteoarthritic knee/hip flare-ups, when vacationing, during the week vs. the weekend, alone or with others, day or night/seasonal changes, when under work/family time constraints, and any other personally relevant challenges.

Sachs et al. (2011) conducted a study where they surveyed 92 participants from various exercise and sport psychology listservs. Almost half of the respondents (54%) engaged in exercise and sport psychology consulting and reported on 50 most commonly used excuses and strategies for countering these excuses. According to this work, the most "common" excuses encountered were "not enough time," followed by "too tired" and "other responsibilities." The most "challenging" excuses noted were "no time," with "too tired" and "not in the mood" tied for second.

Of particular prominence were the successful strategies employed/recommended by participants for addressing/overcoming these excuses. For example, for the “not enough time” excuse, the strategies of “making a schedule/plan,” “waking up early,” and “figuring out time spent watching tv and adjusting accordingly” were most often suggested. For the “too much work” excuse, the strategies of “exercise will lead to greater productivity,” “using exercise as a work break,” and “committing to exercise/scheduling exercise” were suggested. These recommendations, from exercise and sport psychologists engaged in research and applied work in these areas, are highly valuable in addressing the significant challenges addressing excuses made for not exercising.

The role of humor within applied exercise psychology is an area that has received little attention, both within research and applied perspectives. However, it is the authors’ contention that utilizing/employing humor and a creativity/ingenuity approach can be a powerful tool in making connections with individuals within therapeutic contexts. Humor can enhance rapport with clients and put them at ease, assisting in addressing serious issues. Creativity/ingenuity allows for out of the box (off the charts!) incorporation of less traditional activities into the realm of exercise.

There are hundreds of excuses that people give for not exercising. While we are sure few, if any, of the readers have ever dared use these, we are certain that you may know others doing so. Our humorous approach, mixed with serious strategies for countering the excuses, is provided in the following example with what most folks say is the number one excuse – not enough time! In *Excusercise: Inexcusable Excuses for Not Exercising*, by Cohen and Sachs (2023), we provide a list of the top 50 excuses (others include excuses dealing with work, boredom, injury, cost, and family) for those in need of even more excuses. A snapshot to our humorous approach, mixed with evidence-based strategies for countering these excuses, is provided in the following excerpt from our book.

EXCUSE NUMBER 1: “I DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH TIME ...”

This is the number one excuse most often given for not exercising. You perceive yourself as not having enough time in the day to squeeze in a high-quality exercise session. Too much to do, and not enough time, and exercise is certainly not one of those high priority things to do!

Aliases:

“I’m too busy.”

“I’ve got too much to do.”

“I gotta be somewhere 10 minutes ago.”

“Exercise is too time-consuming.”

“If I could save time in a bottle, the first thing I would do is anything but exercise.”

“I haven’t got time for the pain.”

“Does anyone really know what time it is?”

So many strategies, so little time!

1. Work on time management in order to more efficiently use the precious/valuable time you do have available. Time management is a teachable/learnable/transferable skill.
2. Prioritize what you do with the time you have (making sure exercise is a priority) – you may have to cut out some other thing(s) or do them less often. Raise the level of priority or urgency and place exercise on your early morning “to do” list – get it done before tackling other activities. It is a great way to start the day. You can review your day’s goals/priorities while working out!?!?
3. Multi-task: Do two things at once: exercise and watch TV, tablet, or your phone. Record the ballgame or latest episode of your “must see” TV program and you can watch the next day while on the treadmill, stationary bike, rower, or elliptical machine – you can even skip

the time-outs and commercials – saving additional time. Better yet, watch the 10-minute game YouTube highlights while working out, or after you work out as reward and HUGE time-saver. Exercise while you walk the dog, exercise with the kids, and so on. Take extreme care not to text while on the treadmill or walking/jogging in traffic, but maybe hold a phone conversation with a wireless headset on.

4. Break up your exercise session into smaller chunks (such as three 10-minute walks rather than one 30-minute session) – it may be easier to squeeze these briefer periods of time in. Studies have shown that the cumulative benefits are nearly as good, if not as good, as the longer session. Heck, you may even reduce your water bill if you don't perspire as much in 10 minutes. Then again, some of us who sweat profusely may benefit from purchasing stock in our local water utility company as we may need three showers per day!?!?
5. Sleep less – although not recommended by circadian experts. Consider dreaming about exercise? Studies show that those who sleep more are better at adhering to their daily tasks (i.e., exercising!), lose or maintain desired body weight and, wait for it, exercise more often with better/higher quality workout sessions. Makes sense, you've got more energy and will get more done, better and quicker. But experiment and see if sleeping a tad bit less (30–45 minutes and using that time for exercise) would work for you.
6. Go for a walk/jog around your children's playing field during their practice or game. Don't forget to reverse direction periodically, or you'll end up with a crick in your neck, a sore hip from swinging one leg further round the turns, and unevenly worn-out sneakers.
7. Exercise at lunchtime, and then eat at your desk while working. Bring/leave utensils and lots of napkins at work to avoid sticky, messy hands and food stains on paperwork. For those environmental enthusiasts – just view the documents online to save paper – but keep your mouse/keyboard free of sticky or stinky cheese.
8. Add more hours to the day (let us know if you're successful at this!). Purchase one of those 25-hour/day clocks, and while you're at it – 8-day week calendars!
9. Take a walk with loved ones while reviewing the day's events – kills two birds with one stone, freeing up more time for TV watching.
10. Schedule your workout as part of your day's activities. Try the 2% solution – there are 1440 minutes in each day, exercising for 28 minutes is only 2% and right at the recommended guidelines of 30 minutes a day five days a week (150 minutes of moderate physical activity – 75 minutes of vigorous instead is okay too).
11. Instead of sitting once again in a movie theater in silence, plan a physical activity such as tag, twister, hide and seek, or soccer when spending quality time with your significant other, the children, your friends ... even playing some Wii fitness computerized games is better than nothing.
12. Best time to exercise.... whenever you can do so!
13. Acronym and MANTRA. Feel free to use this one or make up your own!! **IGT** – *It's Go Time!* **TTE** – *Time To Exercise!* **IET** – *It's Exercise Time!*

As seen here, our approach to dealing with excuses for not exercising considers a long history of exercise adherence failures on the part of many individuals. While a small percentage of individuals adhere to exercise on a regular basis, far more do not exercise at all (the precontemplators and contemplators of the TTM model) or do so irregularly (preparation stage within the TTM model and perhaps action stage as well, if those in the action stage do not make it to maintenance). Still, planning ahead by including adequate/generous social support with multiple enjoyable activities will enhance self-efficacy and reduce sedentariness relapse time. While there are other approaches to address exercise adherence issues (using a decisional balance scale approach, for example, see Chapter 5), a combination of evidence-based and creative strategies mixed in with humorous approaches may be an approach worth considering for those working within applied exercise psychology.

Note: Some content taken verbatim (with minor editing) from Cohen and Sachs (2023) with permission by these sage/wise authors.

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