
Fortify your mental and physical health by getting back into a fitness routine

After a long year, many are finally able to re-engage with the things they enjoy, including their fitness routine. While the desire might be there, it can be tough to balance workload with fitness, especially for a busy physical therapist. But exercise can benefit every aspect of your life. Use these tips to find a routine you can stick with.

Meet yourself where you're at.

Some days are going to be harder than others, even for the most well-prepared. So what can you do? Give yourself some grace and adjust your goals when necessary. "On days when you're up for it, it's easy. You can push the ceiling," says Angelo Noto, a London-based Exos performance coach. "When you're not up for it, try and pull the floor. That means, what's the minimum requirement today to still put you in the right direction."

This means getting after a tough workout when your energy is high. And on days when you're not so sure, start with 10 minutes of your workout. You'll feel good that you did something, but not like you forced it if 10 minutes is all you can give. Or you may find you want to finish the full workout after all.

Prep for tough days.

Make tough days a little easier with some prep work. "Set yourself up for success by limiting as many barriers as possible to the actual step of doing something," says Angelo. So lay out your workout clothes the night before, or prep your post-workout snacks at the beginning of the week.

You can also work with your body to increase energy for your workout by tapping into your circadian rhythms. Chris Bertram, Ph.D., director of applied neuroscience at Exos, recommends going outside within two hours of waking to expose your brain to that bright morning light. That triggers a release of cortisol, which helps you feel awake and alert. Then go out again at sunset to switch on your melatonin to prepare for sleep.

"We can't always just decide to sleep better," says Dr. Bertram. "But what we can do is get our biology lined up so it gives us a better opportunity to find sleep when we need it and want it. And then to also get that energy and wakefulness in the morning that comes on the other side of it."

Tap into your support system.

Teamwork makes the dream work. Sounds cheesy, but it's so true. Connecting with others right now might require more effort, but it doesn't have to be hard. "Don't try and go solo," says Angelo. "Leverage friends, housemates, or co-workers to stay accountable. It works both ways; be the role model you're looking for."

Your support system doesn't have to just be other people. It includes any resources available to you. You might find an online community of physical therapists all training for a marathon, or a digital workout program you can follow along with when it fits in your schedule.

Move any way you can.

Thinking outside the box, or the gym, can be key to fitting exercise in when you're crunched for time. Try stretch breaks in between patients, or doing their rehab exercises along with them. "Little movements add up over the day and introduce a bit of fun," he says. "It doesn't have to look like your traditional gym session to still stimulate your body. Use whatever you have, be creative."

For an extra boost, go outside for a walk, hike, or bike ride. It will give your mood even more of a boost. "When your brain detects movement because objects are flashing through your visual field, it triggers something

called optic flow — a phenomenon that happens when we move through space and enhances the relaxation response,” says Dr. Bertram.

Build breakout sessions into your day.

Grinding 24 hours a day is a quick recipe for burnout. Back-to-back patients can sometimes be the norm, but that can lead to a fatigued mind for you and poor outcomes for your patients. “Sometimes stepping away allows you to rethink, reframe, and come back to execute with purpose,” says Angelo.

And it doesn’t have to be a huge stretch of time. “Even five minutes of breathwork immediately signals to your brain to bring on that rest and relaxation state that your parasympathetic system delivers,” says Dr. Bertram. “If we can do that strategically and intentionally throughout your day, you’ll be better able to manage your energy, alertness, and focus.”