

Making Resolutions Stick by Beating the Dropout Odds

It is that time of year again – when we, our students, colleagues, family and friends decide to start a physical activity routine. However, studies show that 50% of people drop out of activity programs within 6 months of starting and that less than 1/3 of those who start are still active by the end of their first year. Is becoming active, regularly, virtually impossible???? NO! You can improve your odds of 'sticking with it' by knowing what to expect and developing strategies to overcome stumbling blocks.

So – how do you beat the dropout odds and become a (regularly) physically active person this year?

Week 1: Critical Week

The first week of any activity program has an extremely high dropout rate. Trying 'too much, too soon' often leads to soreness, fatigue and injuries. It also can be frustrating if you have trouble performing certain movements and are using unfamiliar equipment. **Beat the Odds:** Start slowly. Be sure to warm-up, cool-down and stretch to help prevent soreness and injuries. Work at your own level and pace. Gradually increase the length, intensity and difficulty of your workouts. It is natural to feel awkward at this stage – remember – everyone was once at the beginning!

Week 2 to 11: Unrealistic Expectations

Expect some problems 'sticking with it' over the next weeks. You may find that your enthusiasm drops when you do not see 'overnight' results. **Beat the Odds:** Do not expect immediate and dramatic changes in body shape or weight. There are many internal changes that are happening at this stage but the external benefits will not be visible for a few more weeks. Do you have more energy? Are you more rested? Be sure that you are doing a variety of activities to help prevent overuse injuries and boredom.

Week 12 through Month 6: Commitment Crisis

Physical changes are more obvious at the stage. Increased aerobic capacity, reduced blood pressure, elevated mood, increased muscle mass and decreased weight are all potential benefits. So why does 1 out of every 2 people give up by the end of month 6? Sheer mental drive is often enough to get people through 3 months but during months 4 to 6, reality hits. Life happens – vacations, illness, work and family commitments – and physical activity programs take a backseat. **Beat the Odds:** If you have been forcing yourself to do something you really do not like, you are likely to quit. So – find activities that you enjoy and that fit your personality, schedule and needs. Focus on the fun parts of your routine and on the many health benefits your body is experiencing. Try to integrate family and friends into your routine to help increase the fun factor!

Months 6 through 9: Plateau

You will see the biggest changes such as stronger heart, lungs, joints and muscles and reduced blood pressure, cholesterol, weight and body fat; but your improvements will start to level off as you get into better shape. In order to continue to see improvements you may have to increase your intensity and frequency. Plus, the mental benefits (improved self confidence, increased energy, reduced tension) become 'normal' and you may forget what not feeling good is like! You may be vulnerable to being discouraged. **Beat the Odds:** Think long-term. If you are not happy with your fitness gains, increase the intensity and frequency of your workouts – but make sure that you are realistic. You have likely experienced the largest improvements in your fitness level and further gains will happen but in much smaller amounts over a longer period of time. Try a new sport, machine or class to add variety and interest.

If you make it through these 4 transition phases to the end of year 1, your chances of being active for your lifetime are nearly 100% and the lifelong health benefits of activity will be yours.

Here are some quick tips to help you to **Stick to Your Resolutions and Beat the Dropout Odds.**

1. Make change an adventure. Step out of your comfort zone and try something new!
2. Be flexible (and regular) in your structure and planning.
3. Limit your negative self-talk and use positive statements that are personal, positive, possible and in the present tense. Focus on what you are doing rather than what you are not able to do.
4. Make it convenient. Your physical activity choices should be easy to get to.
5. List the positives. This will act as a reminder on why you are getting more active and why you should stay that way.
6. Make SPECIFIC goals challenging yet reasonable and manageable. Success breeds success – take baby steps one at a time.
7. Overcome the fear of failure. Remember – fail is a four-letter word – if you fall 'off the activity wagon' – simply dust yourself off and get back on it.
8. Focus on pleasing yourself. You are as important as everyone else – take time to put yourself first.
9. Buddy up. Find someone who wants to achieve the same thing that your do and is available when you are. Make activity appointments with each other and do your best not to break them.
10. Keep records. Make dates with yourself. Note what works and what does not.
11. Celebrate your successes! When you achieve a goal do something you like to congratulate yourself for a job well done!
12. Remember – resolutions can be made any time of the year!