

# WELLNESS

## Using Behavioral Science to Build an Exercise Habit

A new scientific research project to help you get active—and keep you motivated

- By Katherine L. Milkman, Angela Duckworth on May 1, 2018

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Spring has finally sprung, which means bathing suit season is just around the corner. That ominous thought will lead many Americans to start a workout routine in the coming weeks, but having great abs at the beach isn't the most important reason to exercise. Too little exercise is responsible for 9% of premature deaths worldwide, and we know that physical activity improves mental health as well as reducing the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. In spite of that, less than half of Americans exercise as much as they should.

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So what's the problem? It's the same challenge that stands in the way of attaining most goals: a combination of forgetfulness, procrastination, and limited motivation. Thankfully, the field of behavioral science has solutions to offer.

### 1. MAKE IT SOCIAL

Scheduling workouts with other people has many scientifically-proven benefits. Finding a workout buddy ensures you'll be held accountable for skipping a visit. It also makes exercise more fun (assuming you pick a buddy you like), and builds on the fact that we like to do the same things we see our friends doing. The next time you want to kick-start an exercise routine, find a workout buddy to help.

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### 2. PICK THE RIGHT DAY FOR A FRESH START

Our motivation to tackle new things naturally ebbs and flows. Some days feel particularly well-suited to new beginnings because they signal to us that change is in the air. These are dates like the start of a new year, a new season, or even a new week. Birthdays also boost fresh start feelings and can be a great time to initiate a new routine. Pick a date that feels like a fresh start to you, and use it to motivate the launch of a new workout habit.

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### 3. SET A TOUGH GOAL WITH WIGGLE ROOM

Goals are highly motivating. Research indicates that many marathon runners use goals to improve their performance. If you look at the finishing times for millions of marathon runners, they pile up before round numbers like 4 hours and 5 hours. This suggests runners aim for these round number race times and then manage their performance to ensure they finish on track. The most useful goals are tough to achieve but not impossible. Recent research suggests setting ambitious goals with some wiggle room is particularly valuable. For instance, give yourself a "free pass" if you, say, miss one or

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two days of exercise one week when aiming to work out daily. You can create workout goals that are ambitious, but be sure to let yourself off the hook if you occasionally fall just shy of them.

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#### **4. KEEP TRYING FOR AT LEAST A MONTH**

Research has shown that rewarding people with small sums of cash every time they visit the gym for a month can lead to a lasting exercise routine. Since only a month of repetition is needed to build lasting habits, be sure that when you try jumpstarting a workout routine, you keep at it intensively for at least 28 days. That should be long enough to generate lasting change.

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#### **5. STEP UP**

If acting on the above tips sounds hard, a team has come together to make things easier: nearly fifty of the most talented minds in economics, psychology, computer science, neuroscience and medicine, including multiple Nobel laureates, members of the National Academies of Sciences, MacArthur “genius” award winners, best-selling authors, and TED speakers. We’ve built a free, non-profit, 28-day online program that only takes a few minutes of commitment each week to kick-start an exercise habit. It’s called the StepUp Program and exists thanks to the University of Pennsylvania.

The program is science in action—it’s packed with the best ideas about how to promote exercise from behavioral scientists, and we’re testing fifty-seven different variants of these best practices to figure out what most effectively helps people establish a workout habit at 24 Hour Fitness gyms around the country. When we’re done crunching the numbers on the ingredients that yield the most benefit to StepUp Program participants, we’ll share our recipe for creating a lasting habits with the world. Register at [24go.co/stepup](https://24go.co/stepup), and then, stay tuned!

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*Tup here: It seems that if you go this website – <https://24go.co/stepup>, they will enroll you in some sort of study and give you exercises to do. But all I know is what I read at the website.*