HOW TO EXERCISE – when you can't stand it

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You know you need to exercise.



Your body is sending out some not-so-subtle hints – pinching waistbands, achy morning muscles, a slight shortness of breath when you take the stairs.

There's a problem, though. You can't stand exercise; never could, it's a love-hate relationship that stretches all the way back to humiliating school PE classes. No matter what activity you try, it just won't stick.

So, you wonder, how do all those beaming, Lycra-sheathed bodies on social media do it? How do they make working out look like it's (way) more fun than a glass of wine and a big bag ofcrisps?

Is it possible to learn to love exercise? First of all, wrong question. Most people don't want to be seen alive, or even dead, in activewear. Most of us are dragging our reluctant butts out the door; secretly praying for an invitation to any boring thing so we can get out of it.

So if you can't stand exercise, you're in very good company.

More importantly, you don't need to love exercise to develop a healthy habit. You just need to love that you can (still) move your body, that you're making an effort for your health and longevity and that you have not Given Up on yourself.

James Clear, author of the best-selling Atomic Habits, stresses that habits are the key to selfimprovement. More than that: "Small, consistent actions hold the key to remarkable transformations."

It's true. What you repeatedly do (that is, what you spend time thinking about and doing each day) forms the person you are, the things you believe and the personality you portray.

So it's worth thinking about what you do on repeat – and whether it could do with a tweak.

And, if exercise is your Achilles heel, here are some tips for making a habit stick.

Lock the pantry, seal the fridge

If weight loss or management is your goal, there's a bigger player than physical activity here – food. Don't expect exercise to do all the heavy lifting.

Sort out your food intake to align with it, otherwise you'll just be setting up a weird compensation scheme: if I do THAT, I can eat THAT. And that will bring its own set of problems.

Write the end of the story first

Write down why you want to set up an exercise habit for life. If it's a short-term reason only, you're in trouble. What happens when the wedding's over? Or when you hit your goal weight? It has to be something meaningful to you over time, otherwise it won't last.

Leave your past behind you

It can help to know the historical reason why we're stuck, but it can also turn into an excuse – and, if you dwell on it, you're gone.

It doesn't matter that you hated school PE or once had a mean sports coach. When you've figured out why you want to exercise regularly, bring yourself into the present. Think right here, right now.

Start small (and undercook it)

Most people are too ambitious at the outset – that's why they fail. Choose an achievable routine. Don't think about whether it's enjoyable, focus on whether it's doable.

Then, whatever you've planned, cut it in half. I will go to the gym five days a week for life (from a standing start of nothing) won't work.

Pick something you'll be able to keep up – or return to when you fall over (because you will). Three times a week is a good start.

Plant a visual cue

Put your walking shoes, with their bright orange laces, by the door. Hopefully, they will speak to you when you walk past.

Block your feelings

Not generally advocated by psychologists, but we need an exception here: barring illness, NEVER ask yourself how you feel about exercising. The answer will never be: "Woohoo. Bring it on." Just pull on your shoes and go do it.

Give yourself a gold star

Rewards keep us coming back, even if it's just taking a moment to acknowledge what you've done for your health. But beware of food rewards – or you might just have another habit you need to break.