



How to Start Exercising When You're Already Overweight

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2/12/14 11:00am

Healthy living isn't easy. For some, it comes naturally, but for those folks who are already overweight—large enough that it's difficult or even painful to do what thinner people can do—it's even tougher to get started. Here are some tips to help.

Ever since I was a teenager I've struggled with my weight. Not necessarily from a health perspective—I've always been pretty healthy, but I've struggled because

I want to look better, feel more energetic, and get all of those great benefits that fitness offers. However, when you're already overweight, a lot of the activities that other people just pick up without trying are either impossible or feel like death. High Intensity Interval Training? Hot yoga? Insanity? Crossfit? Even jogging? You've got to be kidding.

It's not those workouts don't work. It's just that doing them when you're a beginner, or large enough that they do more harm than good is a ticket to hating and giving up early, and feeling ashamed for ever having bothered to try. Keep in mind, we're not just talking about someone who's a tad overweight, where you can push past the discomfort. We're talking about those of us who have enough extra weight on our bodies that jumping into a running regimen or Crossfit workout isn't just unpleasant, it's painful, and can be harmful to your health.

I talked to two fitness experts and friends of Lifehacker to get some tips on how to do just that: Dick Talens, co-founder of Fitocracy and personal trainer for Miss America 2013, and Roger Lawson II, fitness expert and trainer behind Rog Law Fitness and creator of the Lifehacker Workout.

Before You Begin: Cut Yourself Some Slack

This may perhaps be the single most important tip to ensure your success: Approach everything you do from a place of self-compassion. It may sound silly, but there's hard science to back up the idea. Dick explains:

Those who beat themselves up for getting to the point that they've gotten to are more likely to fail. There is a very scientific reason to this. If you come from a place of guilt, then you exhibit a *fixed mentality* rather than a *growth mentality*. Any slip ups that you have along the way are therefore viewed as a character failure. Research shows that self-compassion, however, allows you to think of exercise with a growth

mindset—as a skill—something that you can improve. From an email to a client of mine:

"One last thing I want to mention...Being overweight is not a character flaw by any means."

Too frequently will people think that they're overweight because "something is wrong with them" and that's the furthest thing from the truth. Unfortunately, when these people fail on their diets, they'll continue to think that something is wrong with them and beat themselves up.

Popular weight loss stories on TV almost always start with someone "fed up" with their looks or health problems. While those things can be triggers, they're never motivators that stand the test of time. Dismiss the people who'll tell you to "just go to the gym," or "just put down the fork," or that it all boils down to "eat less and move more." Soundbites don't keep you motivated.

Focusing on your clothes size, waistline, reflection in the mirror, and so on are all short-term motivators that don't adapt with you. Relying on them guarantees any stumbles you have along the way will make you feel horrible about yourself and set you back to square one. Instead, concentrate on the long term benefits, and use the immediate ones as a motivational push. In short, make your fitness plans because you love yourself and want to be the best, most healthy possible you that you can be—whatever size or shape that involves.

The next thing someone to remember is that a healthy lifestyle is a skill you work and get better at—not a thing you just get up and start doing one day. If you expect to just hop on a stationary bike, start lifting, or turn your diet upside down without challenges or setbacks, you're setting yourself up for trouble. Approach

your health and fitness goals like you would any other skill that you're learning. Dick explains:

If you fell and scraped your knee the first time you attempted to ride a bike, you wouldn't beat yourself up and say "Shit, something is horribly wrong with me...I just don't have the willpower and discipline required to ride this bike," would you? Nope, you'd realize that you just don't have that skill yet. You just need to get better at it and learn how to control the bike when you hit different terrain...a bumpy road or a patch of grass, for example.

How silly is it that when people attempt to lose weight—often by reducing it to "eat less, move more"—then fail, they think that they're lazy? Undisciplined? They feel guilty and horrible about themselves, rather than think about what caused them to slip up—how to control the bike past a new terrain.

If there's one thing that you take away from all of this, it's that losing weight is a skill...a composite of underlying skills like mindfulness or nutritional knowledge. There's one more important implication – You can go ahead and forgive yourself for any past slip-ups. It's important in this entire journey to be self-compassionate.

Most people don't expect to be able to do difficult things without training, whether it's a new job, playing the piano, or learning a language. There's no reason to expect that when it comes to exercise, diet, nutrition, or any other element of healthy living. Remember, the goal is to make positive changes that stand the test of time. Short term weight loss plans, bursts of exercise, and fad diets have been proven over and over again to be ineffective.

Find Something You Enjoy Doing, and Start From There

Getting into the right mindset is only half the battle. The rest, obviously, is actually putting your plans into motion. If you're already struggling with your weight, or if you have no idea where to start, this can be one of the biggest hurdles to get

over. What kind of exercise should you do, and how much? How can you tell if it's working? How can you get the biggest bang for your diet and exercise buck, as it were?

Frankly, the best response to all of these questions is to ignore them. If you focus on results out of the gate, or think in terms of optimal benefit instead of building habits, you're already on the wrong track. I've known people who took up running or spinning because they thought that's what they *had to do*. They hated it, but kept going until something happened and they missed a day. It may have been the holidays, a late meeting, or illness, but whatever it was, that was all it took to get them off the horse.

Instead, seek out exercise that rewards you mentally and emotionally as well as physically. Find things you enjoy doing, at any activity level. Don't get caught up in the "all or nothing" mindset, where you think you have to buckle down and do an hour of cardio or strength training every other day for the rest of your life—start slow with something you know you can do, even if it's once a week. It's more important, especially when you're getting started, to focus on what you can do and step up from there.

Focus On What You Can Do Right Now, Not On the Finish Line

Once you've figured out what you want to do—whether it's a karate class, a half-hour of Wii Fit after work every day, or hand weights while you watch TV—you have to get started. Start slow, and focus on what you're physically capable of. If you're heavysset or sedentary, don't expect an explosive start. Roger has a suggestion:

The best piece of advice that I can give is to begin without being in a hurry to accelerate things by doing what others (who have more experience with exercise than you) do. Start where you are with what you have. Initially, this may be limited

to a few modified bodyweight exercises such as pushups from counter tops (or other elevated surfaces) and bodyweight squats.

Don't be discouraged by focusing on what you can't do yet and instead focus on what you can do. Outside of formal, traditional exercise there are tons of options for movement and activity - walking, ping pong swimming, Wii/Kinect games, etc. The key factor is finding an activity that you enjoy and consistently do.

Combined with a sensible nutrition strategy, this can take you much further than most people would have you believe. Much like a video game, as your fitness improves more options will open up, allowing to do more as you're ready for it.

Sure, short, light workouts won't get you in shape, or even all the way to your goals. That's not the point, though. Starting light—just doing whatever you can, even if it's not much—is critically important to building good habits, getting you moving, and acclimating your body to activity. Is it all you'll ever do? No—but it's a start, and getting started is everything.

Think of Healthy Habits Like a Video Game: Keep Your Life Bar Full

Once you've started, listen to your body. You'll get immediate feedback that will help you adjust and adapt. Dick continues the video game analogy and takes it up a notch:

Imagine that your motivation to lose weight is represented by a life bar in a video game. You know, the ones that decrease when your character gets hit and takes damage. This life bar starts sky high and decreases over time. If it dwindles down to 0, you lose motivation to get in shape. This bar has a few attributes:

- Things that are painful/unenjoyable OR require the use of limited resources like time and willpower decrease this life bar.

- Conversely, seeing tangible results increases this life bar. Tangible results are: Weight lost, inches lost, seeing results in the mirror, etc. Beware for false results like "steps taken." They may increase your life bar in the short run but once you realize it doesn't mean anything, they can backfire.
- Things that are done based on "habit" neither decrease nor increase this life bar.

Now, take something an activity like "running," which no one would ever say is unhealthy, but see what it does to your life bar. For people who are overweight—including my past self—running is a bitch. It makes you sweat and gasp for breath, hurts your knees, and it's almost like you're being shamed. These things decrease your life bar. You might see some results from running, but not enough to replenish the damage done.

Going on a diet also decreases your life bar because the way that most people diet makes them hungry, lethargic, etc. But let's suppose we manipulate someone's diet to cause as little pain (e.g. hunger) and use as little willpower as possible while still seeing results... Suddenly, you're NOT draining your power bar very much from dieting but you're actually replenishing it from results. You're actually increasing your power bar! This is the concept of the positive feedback loop.

Dick's last point is key. The "tangible results" he talks about don't stop at weight loss, either: I find that when I work out regularly, I sleep more soundly, I feel better and have more energy during the day. I deal with stress more effectively, and I'm more motivated to get work done. Those benefits diminish pretty quickly when I miss a few workouts, so I'm pretty motivated to keep up the habit. That feedback feels good—it increases that life bar, even though it takes a few dings when it's mid-morning and I really don't feel like exercising.

So how do you use that feedback loop to get into exercise, and to get to your fitness goals? Dick continues:

In order to lose weight, you must create a caloric deficit, that is burn more calories than you consume. There is no way around this; you cannot cheat physics.

Knowing this tenet, you have room to play with how this deficit is created. For example, you can create this deficit through exercise or through diet. If you create this deficit through diet, a high protein intake will keep you full. If you create this deficit through exercise, you can strength train or do cardio. For the most part, an equivalent deficit from biking vs. dieting vs. ping pong don't really affect the total weight lost...but they do affect your power bar.

That's where the secret of getting fit lies. You need to make sure your power bar stays high... protect it at all costs. Sure, playing ping pong might be fun, but if it's wrecking your joints and causing you pain, it will deplete your power bar. If you really want to get up and get some exercise, take a brisk walk. Don't feel like you're taking the easy way out...at 400 lbs that's an amazing exercise. Hell I couldn't do that with a 200-lb pack on me.

So many people "think" that they have to exercise/diet a certain way to be fit and don't ask "why?" They have preconceived notions about fitness. As a result, so many end up depleting their power bar before they can even get anywhere. This is a prime example of something that's generally deemed "healthy," like running or going vegetarian, might not actually be healthy to the individual. After all, if it decreases your chances of success, how can it be healthy? Everything depends on context.

Don't be afraid to adjust your workout plans as necessary. If you love playing ping pong, but your joints and knees ache every time you play, you may want to tone it back a bit so you don't hurt yourself doing what you love. Similarly, mix

it up a bit and find other things to do as well. The last thing you want is for something that boosts that power bar to end up depleting it because you hurt yourself every time, or because you get so burned out that you can't stay motivated.

Don't Do It Alone: Track Your Progress, and Get Others to Help

Finally, whatever you do, don't do it on your own. You'll have much greater success if you work out with the help or support of friends or loved ones. There's something to be said for keeping your goals private so you don't feel bad when you have setbacks (and don't have to announce your setbacks publicly), but having a support network around you is extremely beneficial. Enroll a personal cheerleading squad, whether it's online or in person, and start tracking your activities. Don't use tracking as a way to obsess over results though. As Dick mentioned, obsessing over "steps taken" or "floors climbed" can feel good, but can be damaging in the long run when they don't connect directly with results. You want to keep an eye on your activities and build positive habits, that's all.

We've talked about some of our favorite fitness tracking sites and our favorite nutrition and food tracking tools, and almost all of them have robust, active communities of people just like you who are working towards similar goals. Sites like Dick Talens' own Fitocracy take the video game analogy to heart, and turn fitness into a game that earns you points and badges as a way to get you involved with a community of people who all want to see you succeed, and would love your support in return.

Find a workout buddy, or get your spouse or partner to take up the banner of fitness along with you. You're more likely to be successful if both of you eat well and exercise than if only one of you does. If you need outside help, consider a trainer. They don't have to be expensive, and they give you the opportunity to work out with someone who won't judge you, is motivated to help you get in the

best possible shape, and understands your lifestyle. If you're the type who hates exercising with other people around or doesn't like the idea of a meat market gym full of judgmental glares from skinny people, a trainer might be able to help.

Like we said, getting started is everything—and if you can get started on the right foot, your chances of sticking with your changes and making real, long-lasting, meaningful lifestyle changes is that much higher. Before long, your exercise habits will be routine, and the results you'll see from them (and from proper nutrition), will be side benefits to a healthy lifestyle. It's the long way, but it's certainly the best way.

Roger Lawson is a fitness expert and the man behind Rog Law Fitness. You can find him on Twitter at @RogLaw, on Facebook at Rog Law, and subscribe to his YouTube channel, RogLawFitness.

Richard Talens is the Co-Founder and Chief Growth Officer at Fitocracy, a fitness tracking site and social network that's makes tracking your exercise a real-world game that's fun to play. You can find him on Twitter at @dicktalens.

Both gentlemen volunteered their expertise for this story, and we thank them.

4 Ways to Pump Up Your Workout Willpower

BY DR. MEHMET OZ, MD AND DR. MICHAEL ROIZEN, MD

We're betting this is typical exercise motivation math: your old skinny jeans + a photo of a once-slinky you wearing them + next month's high school reunion = a huge spurt of motivation to eat right and exercise fanatically. But whaddya do when that same motivation disappears faster than sunscreen ads in September?

Discover the bone-building benefits of exercise.

Try something new, that's what. Like these four surprising motivation-boosters:

- Give yourself an "A" first. Yup, award yourself a gold star for deciding to start even *before* you start. Research suggests that it sets you up to do better automatically. Feeling good about yourself from the get-go makes it easier to choose oatmeal and fruit instead of that supersized onion bagel or to lace up your sneakers for a 30-minute walk instead of lingering over lunch. How to pre-reward yourself? You could literally paste an "atta way" sticker to your calendar, or buy yourself a spiffy new workout log, or just tell yourself, "Wow, it's SO great that you're finally doing this."

Evidence that advance back-pats work: In a University of Missouri study, when some students got blank test forms already marked with a big "A" before they took the test, they got 6 out of 7 questions right. When others were given blank forms topped with a big "F," they got 3 to 4 questions right.

- See yourself on the red carpet. It's an old trick of athletes, performers and speech makers: Visualize yourself succeeding and you're more likely to do just that. But there's a new twist: Visualize others seeing you succeed, too (your boss, coach, spouse, gym buddy). It makes pulling off your project feel even more important. In a study from Canada's York University, people who visualized themselves succeeding while an admiring crowd looked on felt more motivated to do well than those who just imagined watching themselves do well.
- Think like Bob the Builder. Stop bossing yourself around! When you give yourself pep talks, don't make them too high pressure or turn them into guilt trips. Instead, when you think you're finally ready to start a workout routine, instead of browbeating yourself to DO IT NOW, try enthusiastically asking yourself if you're ready to commit (like Bob's "Can we build it?"). In a study from the University of

Illinois, volunteers who jotted down the words "Will I?" were more motivated to exercise (and solved puzzles better) than those who wrote down, "I will."

- Put your "inner buddy" to work for you. Tap into the human brain's "monkey see, monkey do" reaction. Think about it: When you see someone else doing something—running from a loud noise, yawning at a meeting, ordering a salad for lunch—your inner self starts thinking about doing the same thing, and the next thing you know, you're actually doing it. The instinctive reaction to imitate others around you may be one reason that married couples are more likely to lose pounds and work out regularly when they do it together: When one sees the other doing something healthy (and vice versa), they almost can't help imitating each other. But you don't have to be married to make this work for you. Whether it's your spouse, an exercise buddy or a diet support group, hanging out with people who are already doing what you want to (shedding inches, building rock-solid bodies) reinforces good behavior by automatically making you want to do the same thing. You know that old saw about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery? Looks like it's also the sincerest form of de-fattery.

Best Exercise Motivation Technique? Fun Fitness!

BY DR. MEHMET OZ, MD AND DR. MICHAEL ROIZEN, MD

Do you have more trouble getting up early to walk than a teenager on a Saturday morning? If you'd rather snooze than hop on a treadmill or take a walk in the park, change what you're doing. The difference between pulling the covers over your head and getting up ready to roll comes down to fun. When you do something you love, you get so distracted that you forget you're "exercising." That's the opposite of what happens when you just do what you've been told -- by us or anyone else.

Okay, we know that "Walk 30 minutes a day" is practically our mantra. We love walking, like 30% of adults. And physical activity is the best way we know to erase stress, increase memory, and avoid heart disease, stroke, and cancer, not to mention impotence and wrinkles.

But we bet our pedometers that avid tennis players would rather do footwork drills than walk. And that people who want to be top speedsters in their spin class will hop on their bikes with a smile.

5 ways to make exercise a habit you'll love

If you haven't found an activity that's almost as much fun as sex, keep looking. Try skating, urban rebounding, taking a Zumba class, or all three. (Variety is spice for your mind and muscles.) Think back to activities you loved as a kid. Were you a double-dutch champ? Buy a beaded rope and start skipping; teach your kids how to do jumping jacks. Then, next time you hear us, say, "Walk 30 minutes a day, no excuses," grab your rope and blow us off.