



Getting the

Exercise Habit

The word habit is an interesting one. Biting your nails is a habit, and so is smoking. For most people they're reflexive, unbending behaviours that can be very difficult to break. Can you get to that point with your exercise routine? Possibly – but would this be a healthy habit? I don't think so. Possessing the unconscious compulsion to exercise, with no ability to control its scale, wouldn't improve the quality of your life, even if it improved your bench press. To maintain the joy of exercise, we need to create a desire to work out, whilst keeping a sense of perspective: to allow for time off, for life to happen outside the gym. So forget about pursuing your personal best with a zeal that

advertising all the time. We can utilise this technique by linking the feeling of satisfaction, or motivation, or enthusiasm, (or all three) to a stimulus. The stimulus can be anything, but smell works particularly well because it goes straight to the emotion-processing part of the brain, i.e. you can't choose not to respond to it, it's automatic. One way of doing this is to pick a smell you like that you can carry with you, on a hankie or a wrist band. Every time you feel motivated, take a moment to savour that feeling strongly, and then take a few deep breaths of your chosen smell. After doing this a few times, breathing in the smell will automatically bring back the feeling of

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destroys everything in its path (i.e. the rest of your life). Instead, aim to create a sense of focus, regularity and purpose that motivates you in the direction of the gym instead of your couch; to run past the pub, not into it.

Recruit your unconscious

People come to see me for help with motivation because their conscious desire isn't enough; knowing you should be doing something, even something you like doing, doesn't always get the job done. If you want to establish a regular pattern of exercise, you need to recruit the unconscious, and this process needs to be approached in a certain way. From the perspective of the unconscious, all behaviour has a purpose: it's intended to take us toward reward, or drive us away from pain or danger. To accomplish this, chemicals we experience as feelings get dumped into our system to guide our actions – things like serotonin for rewarding experiences (the warm fuzzies), and adrenalin for the run/fight stuff. The trouble is, we can like the feeling of both; that's why it's possible for the exercise habit to become like smoking cigarettes: our brains can get confused and end up seeking more of the bad stuff. You end up addicted to the pain of exercise and not the pleasure it brings, without being able to tell the difference. Until something in your body breaks down...

Training your brain

So, how do we get the brain trained to release the warm fuzzies in response to exercise?

Try using a technique from Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) called anchoring, a process in which you associate something with a trigger; it's used in

motivation. Top athletes use this regularly to help them enter the peak performance zone. After a while, by 'firing' the anchor whenever you contemplate a training session, the feeling of motivation transfers to the thought of going training. What you've succeeded in doing is tuning the brain's pleasure principle into associating your workout with a pleasurable feeling. As we naturally do more of what we like, the urge to exercise becomes a healthy habit – but firmly within your control.

Focus on the reward

Something else that can help you get past the moment when the direction you take – the sofa or the gym – is hanging in the balance, is a simple visualisation exercise. Without even realising it, when you catch yourself fighting over what to do, your mind is flicking between the choices to decide which one brings the most reward. Between slogging it out in the gym after a hard day at work or reclining in front of the telly with a can of lager - you can guess which one is likely to win. The trick is to focus on two images that represent your conflict, but instead of seeing yourself running along the road, or sweating in a bodypump class, focus on the moment after the session, when you're walking away feeling pleased you made the effort and, (if you're like me), superior to every other person who's behind the windows I pass by on the way home, watching the X Factor and eating Kettle crisps. Focus on the reward of the exercise, not the struggle of it; go beyond it in your imagination, not into it. And I don't mean fleetingly. If you're struggling with your desire to be lazy, close your eyes and spend a few minutes visualising that reward moment, look for where in your body you feel that sense of satisfaction. The more you



Cognitive
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explains how to use
your unconscious to
develop the exercise
habit – and how to
control it once you
have it



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practice, the more quickly the image and the feeling of motivation will come to you. And, of course, when you get it, anchor it.

Choose your exercise identity

Exercise can sometimes become a habit that we have for no particular purpose, which often reduces our desire to do it. Maintain your motivation by setting a specific exercise target, and give that target a very personal meaning. If you're not currently working towards a goal, think of one: it should be something definitive you want to achieve, not just about how you look in the mirror. At the age of 49 I'm working towards a black belt in kickboxing by the time I'm 53. This has transformed my attitude towards visits to the gym – and who I am by doing so.

As a boy I was enthralled by the TV programme Kung Fu with Keith Carradine as a Shaolin monk. I desperately wanted to go to a Shaolin Temple, but my Mum wouldn't give me the bus fare. I still see the image of him, as a boy, standing outside the temple, waiting for days in the rain to be allowed to

learn the secrets. That's what I call my exercise identity, it gives my life a dimension it otherwise wouldn't have, and makes me feel different. I am Kwai Chang Kane, in search of the mysteries of the martial arts, moving unknown amongst ordinary crowds. Jim Courier, the tennis player, used to step onto court and assume the identity of 'the warrior'. Whoever he was off-court, on court he became a person that was pursuing his goal – world dominance. The point is, to make your life special to yourself, and your exercise routine part of that special identity. My exercise routine is geared to the level of fitness and flexibility I need to achieve my black belt. Our brains don't like to waste energy – so linking your workout to a goal satisfies its need for thrift, whilst linking your goal to your sense of identity increases your self-esteem. Just the simple act of changing the label you have for yourself can change your attitude towards something; put on sweat pants – and sweat – and you're an athlete. Walk around with that exercise identity and see how much more often you're picking up your gym bag.

So, give some thought to what exercise identity would work for you. Nobody else needs to know, unless you're confessing it in a sports magazine – and you don't need to wear your pants over your lycra to the office. Get your unconscious on board, visualise your rewards and control your exercise habit. Live for a while as if you're the kind of person who trains regularly and you will actually become that kind of person sooner than you think. **UF**



Trevor Silvester is the founder of the Quest Institute which specialises in cognitive hypnotherapy and NLP training. One of the largest and most successful hypnotherapy

training institutions in the UK, Trevor runs accredited training courses for people from all walks of life. Launching early in 2009, his new one day course, Selfhelpnosis will teach simple but effective techniques for controlling stress and anxiety. A published author, Trevor also runs a private practice in Harley Street, London. To order Trevor's books and audio downloads, or to find out more about the Quest training package, visit www.questinstitute.co.uk