Did you have the intention to make 2019 the year to embrace physical activity in a big way? Did you shortly thereafter fail to follow through on these shiny new positive intentions? Don’t be discouraged, as you are certainly not alone. In fact, research shows that about half of physical activity intenders fail to follow through and 2/3rds of intenders fail to follow through when starting a brand new exercise program. While having shiny intentions is an excellent starting point for behavior change, they are often not sufficient to enact behaviour. This phenomenon has been termed the intention-behaviour gap.

It really comes as no surprise that we don’t always succeed. Physical activity generally and exercise specifically are complex behaviours requiring motivation, concerted self-regulation, and habituation. Our program of research in the Behavioural Medicine Lab is focused on theory and interventions designed to address the intention-behaviour gap. While our work is ongoing, with considerable research still needed to address such an important phenomenon, the results from our lab and related work from our colleagues around the world in health psychology may help you bridge this infamous intention-behaviour gap.

HOW TO KEEP TO THOSE DWINDLING NEW YEAR’S EXERCISE INTENTIONS

By Stina Grant and Ryan Rhodes
Four take-home points to consider:

1. **We often form our exercise intentions based on the overwhelming positive outcomes that come from regular physical activity (weight loss, improved appearance, disease prevention).** Unfortunately, these positive outcomes are achieved in the long term and have nothing to do with the day-to-day experience of exercise. Research has shown that our enjoyment of the exercise experience is a far more reliable predictor of who will follow-through on intentions than our beliefs about the long-term outcomes of exercise. Indeed, even when the affective experience of a single bout of exercise is measured, research has shown that only how we feel during exercise matters. That great feeling you have when you finish exercise does not predict future participation. The take home point is to spend considerable thought designing your exercise experience to make it as pleasant as possible. We find ways to be “too busy” or “too tired” for experiences that are unpleasant, no matter how good they may be for us in the long term. An enjoyable exercise experience can mean different things to different people but we recommend self-paced exercise at a bearable intensity, and pairing the activity with other enjoyable aspects such as social activity (friends and family), and maximizing aesthetics (e.g., taking advantage of Victoria’s scenery).

2. **Regular exercise takes time and effort and represents a choice among many other alternatives we have in our day.** As a result, motivation alone is often not enough to keep the momentum of those good intentions. Research has shown that people who use and employ planning and self-regulation skills are far more likely to follow-through on good intentions. The take away point is to include weekly planning of exactly what, where, when and how you will achieve your exercise, followed by back-up plans for what you will do if there are interruptions. Schedule exercise as if it was an important business appointment (what is more important than your health?).
Find a way to monitor your progress using either wearable technology or good old-fashioned calendars and notebooks. Failed intentions should be analyzed and new goals should be set (have a reboot day for your plans every week). Missing a few bouts of exercise is normal but the use of planning skills will make the difference between missing the odd bout and drifting away from those good intentions altogether.

**Reliance on motivation and constant planning is tiring.** In our laboratory, we have spent considerable research on building exercise habits to overcome this challenge. A habit is a behavior that is implemented with low awareness from repeated environmental cue-behavior pairing over time. Some researchers suggest that 60% of our daily behaviors are habits! While many people think of bad habits, desired behaviors like exercise are easier to maintain when it becomes a habit. Our research suggests that keeping a specific exercise practice tied to critical environmental cues (e.g., exercise at the same time, or following an existing routine) can help form a habit. This process appears to take about six weeks but the results vary widely by how often one exercises and other factors we yet understand.

**Similar to the benefit of habits noted above, research has shown that building physical activity into your identity helps to translate intentions into behaviour.** Identity is how we self-categorize our experiences and create our own personal standards. Research has shown that the shift in thinking from “I exercise” to “I am an exerciser” can have a profound effect on our behaviour because we have an aversion to being inconsistent with our selves. The take home point is to re-label exercise and healthy living as who you are with affirmation, self-expression (attire and photos), and re-prioritizing your life to place exercise at the level you believe it should sit.
So, in parting words of wisdom from the research so far, don’t give up if you haven’t succeeded in turning your intentions into actions. It happens to the best of us. Instead, focus on your small successes. Try some of these approaches noted above and give yourself the gift of starting over!

For more information on our work please see https://www.uvic.ca/research/labs/bmed/ and https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/mpac/

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References for further reading


