

Behavioral Management Strategies for Initiating and Maintaining Exercise Adherence

A Tool for Health Care Professionals

Techniques	Practical Applications/Recommendations
Preparation	Establish realistic expectations for patients new to exercise/physical activity.
Shaping	Begin the exercise program at a dosage (frequency, intensity, duration) that is comfortable for the patient and increase slowly until an optimal level is attained.
Goal-setting	Goals should be individualized and based on the patient's physiologic and psychological status. Goals that are specific, yet flexible, are more effective than longer term goals.
Reinforcement	Patients should be queried as to what reinforcers (rewards) would work for them. Rewards might include certificates of achievement, attendance records, or getting a medal for having completed an event (10 K run).
Stimulus Control	Environmental cues or stimuli (written notes, watch alarms, dates on a calendar) may be used to remind patients to maintain their exercise commitment. Having a routine time and place for exercise establishes a powerful stimulus control.
Contracting	A behavioral contract has been shown to enhance the commitment to exercise. Signing the contract formalizes the agreement and makes it more significant.
Cognitive Strategies	Patients should be oriented to the advantages and disadvantages of exercise. Individuals who select their own goals generally demonstrate better adherence.
Generalization Training	Specific steps should be taken to generalize the exercise habit from a structured class or home setting to other environments (travel, work, etc).
Social Support	Support of family, friends, coworkers should be sought from the beginning. Finding a compatible exercise partner often serves to enhance exercise adherence.
Self-management	Patients should be encouraged to be their own behavior therapist. They should practice self-reinforcement by focusing on increased self-esteem, enjoyment of the exercise itself, and the anticipated health and fitness benefits.
Relapse Prevention Training	Prepare patients for situations that may produce relapse and ways of coping with them so that a complete relapse is avoided. Relapses should be viewed as inevitable challenges, rather than failures.

Adapted from: Methods for changing exercising behaviors. In: American College of Sports Medicine's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription, 6th ed.. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams and Wilkins; 2000:p243-244.

