

# Motivational Strategies For Every Stage of Exercise

By Windee M. Weiss  
Photos by Gratana Perry



# W

Why is it that some people choose to exercise and others do not? Incorporating a “daily dose” of exercise and physical activity sounds easy enough, but yet millions of us in this country still fail to exercise on a regular basis.

One way of examining the exercise dilemma is from the transtheoretical model perspective, which suggests that any behavior change (such as adopting an exercise program) does not occur quickly but rather it is a gradual process (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983; Prochaska et al., 1992; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997). That is, we move through various stages on our road to becoming physically active.

## Stage 1: Precontemplation

Individuals who are “pre-contemplators” have no desire to begin an exercise program; in fact incorporating exercise into their life is not even a thought. If anything, individuals in this stage probably see exercise as having more negatives associated with it than positives—that is, the cons outweigh the pros. This stage seems to be relatively stable thus suggesting that without additional information or some type of intervention, these individuals will remain sedentary.

## Stage 2: Contemplation

Individuals who are “contemplators” are thinking about and at least considering starting some type of exercise regimen within the next six months. They have intentions to exercise, but they have not yet walked through (or out) the door yet to begin. For the most part, these individuals realize they should exercise but yet still see those cons or barriers as potentially too much to overcome.

## Stage 3: Preparation

Individuals in the preparation stage have actually begun the process of preparing to exercise: bought a gym membership, purchased new workout shoes and apparel, and maybe seen their physician about exercise. These individuals may also actually start working out and exercising, however they tend to be very inconsistent and sporadic about their exercise. This stage is considered to be fairly unstable, that is once individuals begin taking these tiny steps toward incorporating exercise into their life they usually will progress to the next stage.

## Stage 4: Action

During the action stage, individuals are exercising! In fact, these people tend to be highly motivated early on and eagerly incorporate a regular, consistent exercise program into their daily life. An individual is said to be in the “action stage” when they have adopted regular exercise (30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity most days of the week) for less than six months. Of the five stages, the action stage seems to be the most unstable because people find it difficult to maintain this new exercise routine. That is, we are fighting not to fall back into our sedentary lifestyle.

## Stage 5: Maintenance

To achieve maintenance, individuals must have been exercising consistently at optimal levels for at least six months. By this point, individuals do not find it difficult to maintain their exercise routine, and for the most part this regimen has become “habit.”

One of the best things about viewing exercise from this “stage” perspective is that how we motivate people to think about, incorporate and maintain exercise varies depending on which

stage each individual is in. For example, we need to use different motivational strategies for pre-contemplators than we do for preparation individuals.

Strategies to help pre-contemplators to become contemplators

- Education, education, education! We need to educate these individuals about the potential harmful effects of a sedentary lifestyle for themselves and their children. Once a month, gym owners could send home information flyers or handouts providing facts about how physical activity (e.g., gymnastics) can help offset obesity, depression, heart disease and other health-related problems. Additionally, regular exercise can help with mood state, self-esteem and general mental health. Another way to provide education to your clientele would be to create posters with interesting facts about the benefits of physical activity in both the lobby and throughout the gym.
- One issue that might keep pre-contemplators from thinking about exercise could be that they had a bad experience in the



past—either they failed to adopt a regular exercise program, they did not feel that they were very good at exercise or sport, or those involved in the program had a negative influence on the individual. To overcome this issue, we need to provide these individuals with a positive experience—hopefully one where they have some fun, find it enjoyable, and feel good about themselves. One way we could accomplish this in the gym could be to let current participants bring a friend or family member to class with them. Select one week out of the term/session in which these friends and family may participate. The focus of that week's session would be to expose the individuals to the fun, challenging aspects of our sport and exercise. If we can provide these individuals with an enjoyable experience, they may begin to consider exercise or gymnastics in the future.

#### Strategies to help contemplators to become preparers

- These individuals are now considering starting but we need to give them that little push to get them going. A great strategy is to provide “deals” or “discounts” on memberships and fees. For example, “pay for the first session; get the second session half price.” Or providing a discount for the second member of the family, or waive initiation fees, etc. These individuals have decided they should begin to exercise; now we just need to help them walking through the door.
- One reason some people never begin an exercise program is due to a lack of knowledge about what to do, how to do it and how the heck do you work this machine! For example, how many of you “just knew” how to work the treadmill or stairmaster? There is some level of knowledge required to begin, thus we need to help them by removing this barrier. You could provide an “intro night” or class where you take anyone considering joining or beginning through

each machine and teach them what buttons to push, how to figure out the correct weight, how to maneuver through some of the equipment. When you show the individuals how to do this, allow them to push the buttons and try everything out. This will only increase their self-confidence that they could get going without your being around. Or you could just designate an employee that takes each “newbie” around during their first workout to teach them. This might increase the chances that when the new person has a problem or question they will come and ask for help rather than get frustrated and quit.

#### Strategies to help preparers to get to action

- Now that we have them going, we need to keep them going! One of our biggest obstacles to overcome is boredom. Individuals can only spend so much time on a treadmill or stairmaster without going insane. During this time, it is very important that we offer alternatives or variations in the exercise regimen. This is more than just changing the order of exercises. Maybe you introduce a new skill, encourage individuals to sign up for an aerobics, pilates or strength training class. You could offer multiple “open gyms” during the course of the week—an hour at the end of the evening three nights a week. This will provide an extra opportunity for individuals to not only practice what they have learned, but also an opportunity to be even more active and try new things.

#### Strategies to get them from action to maintenance

- An issue that prevents individuals from continuing exercise or activity is that once they miss a class or a week due to hectic schedules or illness, they feel that they have failed. Thus, they quit coming altogether. Some ideas that might help get these individuals going again could be to send little postcards telling them you missed them this week and hope to see them on Monday or provide make-up classes at no extra charge a couple of times a month. Another strategy could be to help them re-evaluate their goals, maybe alter target dates for achieving their goals to ease the anxiety associated with “missing a deadline.”
- Social support is a huge factor when it comes to continuing an exercise regimen. Ways to increase social support is organizing workout groups, not like a class where there is an instructor but rather formulating groups to come in at the same time to exercise. Sometimes it just takes someone who works at the facility to organize it, but then the group takes care of what they do while they exercise. Maybe on some days they all do the same thing and on other days, they exercise on their own. This creates a sense of accountability, if they are expecting me to be there, I'm more likely to be there.
- Another great strategy to help people continue to exercise is to ask them if they are interested in becoming a personal trainer, teacher or instructor. This may help rejuvenate their motivation to continue as well as eliminate that boredom issue. Some of our best teachers and instructors were once pre-contemplators. They understand the obstacles and barriers their clients are working through.✘

*Windee M. Weiss, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Sport Psychology School of Health, Physical Education, & Leisure Services University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA*