

Couch potatoes should be leery of exercise demon

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Editor's note: *This is the third of a four-part series on athletes coping with injuries, stress and related problems.*

What's so bad about feeling good — as a couch potato? Why does everybody make exercise so complicated?

If a couch potato is under stress at work, he may be unable to focus on problem-solving.

What is there to understand about exercise anyway? And who cares why you exercise? You just do it.

Or you don't. Sounds simple too. But it isn't. Even if you abandon couch-potato land and begin to vigorously pursue physical activities for the sake of fitness, it's smart for you to know why you're doing so and what benefits may begin to accrue to you psychologically.

But especially if you don't exercise, it might be time for you to examine some valid psychological reasons why you should end your couch potato days and be in an exercise program.

In today's fast-paced society, with demands of the workplace or school or the family constantly part of our lives, exercise offers a respite from the daily grind

and may in fact prolong life emotionally and psychologically as well as physically.

Reducing stress

The value of exercise in reducing stress can not be overemphasized, but at the same time it must be kept in perspective and not become so all-consuming that exercise to minimize tension evolves into a source of stress itself.

Although stress reduction may be the motive for exercise that most closely meets the human needs presented by a sometimes impersonal society, there are other motivations that might work for those who need something to spur them into activity.

If a couch potato is under stress at work, he may be unable to focus on problem-solving there, but may discover that even a 15-minute walk twice a week will afford him the opportunity to not only take the edge off but also to use the freedom of exercise to solve problems, e.g., his next move on the job, interpersonal conflicts in the work place, mitigation or anger toward a boss, etc.

Creative motives for exercise may come into play with runners and other high performance athletes, particularly those engaged in individual sports rather than team-oriented ones. When the body is on automatic pilot in the activity, particularly when training, all sorts of creative solutions to problems can occur. Some writers, artists and others with a creative bent may find the free flow of exercise as beneficial to a free flow of ideas in one's mind.

Of course, another motive for exercise is an age-old one — esthetics. We all want to look good to others and to ourselves, not so flabby, not so old, a little more powerful or muscular,

a bit more appealing, nothing to do with fitness, but with looks. And if that's enough to motivate you, why not?

There's health and well-being. Every day we're bombarded with studies and reports and advice telling us to do this or that to live longer, happier and healthier lives. Notwithstanding the occasional jogger who dies of a heart attack, advice to exercise is advice that's good. And given that living a longer life certainly beats the alternative, that too might be motivation enough for you.

There are social motives. You might have spotted a cute girl or handsome guy at the health club or on the local bike path or jogging trail. Certainly you as a fellow exercise buff would be better placed to meet him/her than a couch potato who watches bowlers or golfers on TV.

Or you might discover you're one of the few remaining purists, motivated by the sensual pleasure or the natural high many athletes get when competing or working out. You may want to exercise for the sake or exercise itself and that for you can be motivation aplenty.

OK. You've got enough reasons to be motivated toward exercise. Pick one, or two, or a different one every time out if each applies to you on one occasion or another.

Initial steps

Now, if you've found your motivation, it's time to decide on your initial steps, including what not to do. On the "not do do" list: don't raise your own expectations or set your standards too high, don't criticize yourself for not doing enough, don't try to do too much too soon.

Do, however, set realistic

attainable goals consistent with your current level of fitness (or "non-fitness"); do set a goal tied into one of the motivational factors mentioned earlier; do keep it all in perspective.

The last point might be the toughest of all to adhere to. Even though you as a current couch potato may not believe it possible, you could become possessed by the exercise demon, so caught up in the pursuit of fitness that you begin to abandon other important things in your life.

We all want to look good to others and to ourselves.

Don't become so focused that you become depressed if you can't exercise. If you become stressed out while working out, you've gone too far.

The various physical, social, psychological and other benefits are usually wonderful motivators, but only insofar as we control the actions that result from their positive aspects.

When we let positive motivations become negative compulsions, we cause more trouble for ourselves than we ever would by staying on the couch.