



PART TWO: BE ACTIVE FOR YOUR MIND AND BODY

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1. Introduction

Part one of this two-part article pointed out that physical activity is a good way to build your mental fitness, a reserve you can draw on to tackle life's challenges and help you fully enjoy your surroundings and the people around you. Knowing that you should get active is just the first step.

Good mental health - feeling good about yourself, feeling that life is meaningful, that you can manage life's challenges - is important for your overall health and well being. Physical activity can improve your mental health, as well as your physical health, so keeping your new year's resolution to be more active is doubly important.

2. Getting active isn't always easy

Whether we're active or not can depend on many things, such as if:

- Our friends and family are active
- We feel safe walking in our neighbourhood
- We know what activity to do and have the skills to do it
- We have money to participate

Some of these factors that affect our ability to make healthy choices like exercising are under our control, but others are not.

Not having enough money for registration fees or equipment, or not having a safe place to play can get in the way of being active. Helping more people to participate in recreational opportunities can improve the lives of children and their parents physically, socially and mentally. Some ways to do this are:

- Collect new and used sports equipment so children can participate on sports teams
- Organize group exercise programs in seniors' apartments to eliminate transportation costs and provide social interaction and exercise
- Offer combined parent and child recreation and exercise programs to eliminate childcare costs
- Offer a shared ride program to reduce transportation costs

Having support from family and friends is strongly linked to good mental health and people without this support can experience more distress and depression. Physical activity, by its nature, often involves groups that provide social support and a sense of belonging. Caring relationships develop that help people deal with the stresses of life.

3. Getting active where we live, learn and work

With the demands of daily life - juggling family responsibilities and jobs - it is not surprising that time is the most commonly cited barrier to physical activity.

Where we live, learn and work can make it easier for us to be active or more difficult.

- Community planners can take steps to help us to be active in our day-to-day activities. For example, they can create walking trails, shopping areas and schools that are easy to walk to from home, or offer summer programs at neighbourhood playgrounds.
- Schools are finding creative ways to build physical activity into the school day, such as including physical activity in lesson plans, or taking a little time from every lesson block and from lunch breaks to create 30 minutes for physical activity at the end of the day.
- Workplaces can provide opportunities to be active at work, from installing showers to organizing walking clubs to subsidizing wellness classes.

There are many ways to make active living part of your part of your community, school and workplace.

4. Tips to start making physical activity part of your everyday life

“When people think of physical activity, the word physical comes to mind first... but there is a mind-body connection and the mental benefits are just as important as the physical benefits.” (Kaliopi Nakitas, personal trainer)

Here are nine tips to help you build confidence in your ability to be successful in the long term:

1. List why you want to be active and what you will gain - refer to this list often
2. Set specific goals you can achieve
3. Keep a log or diary to chart your progress and reward your accomplishments
4. Find an exercise buddy to talk to and give you a nudge when you are dragging your feet
5. Schedule a regular time and place - it is too easy to say you'll do it later
6. Expect occasional setbacks, and get back on track as soon as you can
7. Sample different activities to find something you enjoy
8. Try an exercise that connects the mind and body like yoga or tai chi
9. When you are feeling upset or low in energy, take a walk to boost your mood

Look for ways to be active. Taking the stairs, parking at the far end of the parking lot and walking to the corner store are small steps that add up. It will take a little effort in the beginning, but once you get in the habit of adding activity to your day, you won't even know you are doing it.

Resolve to be active for your mind and body

When you make physical activity part of your day, especially in winter, you will have more energy, sleep better, feel calmer and cope better with the stresses and demands of your life. Taking control of your physical health will give you a feeling of accomplishment and a sense of confidence in handling other aspects of your life.

The new year is a good time to think about doing things differently. Take Kaliopi's advice: "Keep moving, keep doing it and you'll feel better for it."

This article was prepared by the Alberta Centre for Active Living in collaboration with the Canadian Mental Health Association. It can be found at www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/chn/feature-articles/.

Production of this material has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Public Healthy Agency of Canada.

Last reviewed/updated: December 10, 2007