

# A LINE ON LIFE

12/26/93

## Resolving to Exercise \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

With the New Year, most of us make resolutions to do better. To improve our health, we might resolve to exercise. How can we maintain our resolution to exercise regularly?

One problem is that many of us make too many New Year's resolutions, rather than concentrating on one or two lifestyle changes. Also, the first few weeks of any change – including exercising – are the most difficult.

Benefits from exercising become noticeable within three weeks. First, the exercise will start to seem easier. In addition, your resting heart rate and blood pressure will decrease, and your metabolic rate – how fast you burn calories – will increase. You will have more energy during the day and be able to sleep better at night.

Unfortunately, half of those who start an exercise program quit within six months. Here are some hints to help you to continue to exercise.

---

### Exercise for yourself, not for someone else.

---

- **The motivation to exercise must come from within you.** If you think that you "should" exercise, you are doing it because *others* want you to do it. If you can truly say that you "want" to exercise, then this is your goal. (This is a good test to see if *any* behavior is your goal or not. If you can honestly say that you "want" to do it rather than you "should" do it, then it is your goal.)
- **Start out slowly.** Start with low-intensity exercise sessions about three times a week, with a day between sessions. Begin with a level of exercise that is comfortable for you. Then increase the duration or intensity slightly, so it is just outside of your "*comfort zone*." When that level becomes comfortable, raise it again slightly.
- **Make your exercise enjoyable and varied.** Choose several activities that you enjoy. When one type of activity becomes a little boring, switch to another.
- **Workout with family or friends.** If you obligate yourself to workout with others, you are less likely to skip a session. The emotional and social support will help to make the exercise more fun. However, if you stop exercising to socialize, then the presence of others might hinder more than it helps.

- **Make exercise convenient.** Choose activities that fit into your schedule. (That doesn't mean that you can't modify your schedule for the exercise.) Exercise close to home or work. People who drive less than eight miles to an exercise facility are more likely to continue exercising.
- **Challenge yourself.** Rather than judging yourself by the performance of others, use yourself as a standard. Set your own goals and measure your improvement by recording your performance. When you reach your goals, find additional ones for yourself.
- **If you are in pain or out of breath, stop or reduce your exercise level.** If you are in an exercise group or class, it is okay to do the exercises at lower levels than the class. If you don't know how to modify your exercises to a lower level, ask the group leader. Good leaders will be able to recommend options without judging you for asking.
- **Reward yourself with non-food treats.** As you achieve gains, give yourself something you want – tickets to a favorite event, clothing or even jewelry.

If you stick with the exercise, your bigger rewards will not cost any extra money. Not only will you feel better physically – you will feel better about yourself as a person.

---

\* Adapted from Jeff Zwiefel's "How to Achieve Your New Year's Exercise Goals," *Vitality*, January, 1993, page 9.