

Why quarantine led some people to better fitness habits, and how they can maintain them

By **Pam Moore**

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Although being in quarantine undoubtedly has its downsides, for many, it presented an opportunity to establish a new fitness routine. Now the tough part: continuing such routines as we try to find normal footing in a post-quarantine era — although that era is looking more distant as cases continue to rise in some areas of the country.

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Before we move on to tips for maintaining these new fitness levels, it helps to understand one of the reasons some people have been able to adopt healthier habits during quarantine.

According to Charles Duhigg, author of “The Power of Habit,” all habits involve cues and rewards. A cue, which could be a time of day, triggers you to perform the habit, while the reward is the outcome motivating you to perform it. For example, hunger pangs in late afternoon trigger you to perform the habit of grabbing a snack; you are rewarded with renewed concentration.

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Duhigg says. Consider the fact that many people find it easier to quit smoking on vacation, for example, when “your cues and your rewards are suddenly destabilized in a useful way,” Duhigg says.

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That same destabilization has occurred during the pandemic. Someone forced to work from home might have taken advantage of this upheaval by choosing to begin running at 7 a.m., when they otherwise would have been commuting. The cue is the time, which triggers them to run. The reward is increased energy and focus.

But now — or at some point in the future — they might have to return to commuting. How will they continue running? Happily, as Duhigg says, experiencing a new way of doing things during quarantine has changed our “sense of the possible” — perhaps our runners will decide to get up early to run, for example. Here are some strategies that also will help maintain fitness habits as schedules change and time gets shorter.

Focus on your why

When free time is again at a premium, having a powerful reason to exercise is vital. Duhigg explains: “If you have better ‘whys,’ then it’s probably going to maintain your motivation.”

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Tasha Edwards, a Huntsville, Ala.-based mind and movement health coach and personal trainer, encourages her clients to examine the benefits of exercise and ask themselves: “What’s the cost of surrendering that?”

Edwards, who has a family history of chronic disease, sees fitness as a long-term investment in her health. “I’m fighting for the life that I want,” she says. “I want to be able to run with my grandchildren the same way I ran with my kids.”

But a long-term motivation that helps you establish a routine isn’t always enough to keep it, says preventive medicine professor Michelle Martin, founding director of the Center for Innovation in Health Equity Research at the University of Tennessee Health Sciences Center. If your goal is to avoid heart disease 20 years down the road and you’re faced with the choice of watching a funny movie or exercising after a long day of work, she says, “I think we probably could tell what someone is likely to choose.”

If you have a meaningful short-term reward, she says, such as improving your mood, there is a stronger chance you'll choose the workout. Edwards can relate; although she exercises to avoid disease later in life, activities such as dancing and yoga make her feel good on a daily basis.

Michelle Rogers, a Mebane, N.C., certified personal trainer, hit a turning point when she found her “why.” As a self-proclaimed yo-yo dieter, she'd exercised solely for weight loss for decades. But in 2008, at age 41, she started walking to alleviate the aches and pains she experienced at her desk job. She felt better not just physically, but emotionally and mentally, too. Though the scale didn't budge initially, for the first time in her life, Rogers stayed consistent and has continued to exercise ever since. Although she has lost weight as a result, she and Edwards are adamant that the scale is not a sustainable source of motivation.

Try scheduling

It's not enough to say you'll exercise three times a week post-quarantine and “hope that somehow in the mix of 500 million things we're doing we're going to find that perfect time to exercise,” Martin explains. She suggests marking your workouts on your calendar as you would an appointment or meeting. Rogers recommends taking it a step further by setting a reminder on your phone.

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According to Rogers, not only can scheduling your exercise ensure you make time for it, it also eliminates the indecision that often leads to excuses. Instead of expending the energy to decide when, where and how you're going to exercise, all you have to do is stick to the schedule.

For Rogers, mornings work best. "No matter what the rest of the day throws at me, my workout is finished." Edwards agrees. "At 5:30 in the morning, unless something's on fire or someone's dead or in labor," she says, "nobody's looking for you."

That said, there's no right or wrong time to exercise. Both trainers advise choosing the time that works best for you.

Embrace 'good enough'

The imperfect workout you complete is always better than the perfect workout you never start. "Often, we think that if we're going to exercise, it has to be CrossFit or nothing," Rogers explains. But even a short, low-intensity walk is better than nothing. Martin calls this "something or nothing" thinking and says this mind-set is crucial.

Also crucial: planning for failure (sometimes called coping planning). Planning for failure means strategizing about what you'll do when your plans fall through. She

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For example, if you might be late to a class, you could decide that you'll still attend, no matter how much you've missed. If you're too tired for your scheduled five-mile run, your backup plan could be a 20-minute walk.

According to Martin, coping planning is key, because “when you're in the moment, it's so hard to think about how you're going to address those barriers.” Her advice for almost any exercise snag? “Be ready for the 10-minute workout.”

Be creative

Creativity will help you prioritize fitness as demands on your time increase. Martin suggests tracking your time. She says when people closely examine the way they spend their time, they often find ways to tweak their schedules to make room for exercise.

Multitasking gets a bad rap, but it can be an effective way to squeeze a workout into a busy day. For Edwards's clients who love reading, she recommends selecting an audiobook to listen to only while exercising. If it's feasible, Rogers suggests inviting colleagues to a walking meeting rather than reserving a conference room.

If you're pressed for family time, consider expanding your idea of exercise to include all kinds of movement and involve your partner and/or children. Edwards recently enjoyed a 45-minute sweat session with her kids, ages 16 and 22, dancing to "Michael Jackson: The Experience" on their Wii. Rogers suggests going for walks and bike rides with your kids (including your furry ones). Martin says during quarantine, she and her sister have enjoyed doing the same YouTube workout video together over Zoom.

Martin encourages us to think of the restaurants, schools and live events that have pivoted abruptly during the coronavirus. "We all have to bring that agility and creativity and flexibility to our physical activity routines."

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