

The Can-Do Fitness Plan

Determined to get into better shape? Use this inquiry-based self-coaching process to develop a plan that works - and get real results that last.



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More Can-Do Encouragement

If you'd like to launch a fitness program — or ramp up your current one — spring is a great time of year to do it. But that initial motivation is only the first ingredient. You also need a solid plan and a healthy frame of mind.

That's because the most daunting barriers to beginning or upgrading a fitness program rarely concern the body. Instead, they center around things like time, focus and creativity in overcoming obstacles.

Identifying and addressing these likely barriers requires some forethought. But with a little bit of planning and introspection, you can launch an enjoyable, sustainable program — one that not only supports your current health and fitness goals, but also puts you on a path toward a healthier future.

From Choice to Challenge

It's one thing to say, "I want to get in shape." It's quite another to determine what exactly you're prepared to change, and what kinds of support you'll need to start and keep moving forward. "Most people genuinely want to do their best, but their belief systems, lack of

clarity or lack of support get in the way,” says Kate Larsen, author of *Progress Not Perfection: Your Journey Matters* (Expert Publishing, 2006), and a certified life-, executive- and wellness coach based in Minneapolis.

Coaches like Larsen help clients address such issues directly and then help them brainstorm plans and solutions. But if you’re not quite ready to work with a coach, says Larsen, you can still benefit from working through a step-by-step self-coaching process.

A successful fitness plan involves four basic phases that, taken together, form a repeating, cyclical process: assessment, commitment, feedback and follow-through. In the pages that follow, we’ll help you establish a strategy that offers you both immediate motivation and lasting support for your goals.

Before you begin, take out a notepad or journal to document your answers to the questions that follow. Your notes will become the basis of your plan — and will also serve as a powerful resource during times of flagging focus. After all, preparing for challenges is what successful fitness planning is all about.

Assessment

Where You're At and Why

The objective of the assessment phase is for you to figure out where you stand today, what you want and what’s driving your desire.

Where are you now?

What health and fitness blessings can you count today? What, if anything, is bringing you down? Are you satisfied with the way your body feels and performs? Or are you longing to improve your energy and strength, to become more flexible, to upgrade your sports performance, improve your posture, or increase your stamina for daily living?

How much exercise are you getting now, and what type? If you’re coming off an exercise lapse, get a checkup to make sure you’re healthy enough for regular exercise. This will give you an opportunity to take some benchmark measurements, too, such as blood pressure, cholesterol and triglycerides, blood sugar, and weight.

You can also go a step further and get fitness testing (metabolic assessment, body composition and so on) completed at your local health club or sports clinic (see the “Fitness Testing 1, 2, 3” series from the April, May and June 2006 issues of *Experience Life*, available in the archives). Or conduct your own mini fitness assessment by timing yourself walking or jogging a mile so you’ll have numbers to compare with later.

What do you desire?

What larger benefits would you like to achieve by becoming more fit? Is being healthy and fit one of your core values, or a means of supporting a core value? Make a list of the personal values driving your fitness endeavors.

What are the priorities in your life? How will becoming more fit affect them? Note the obligations and pastimes that may take a back seat as you proceed, as well as those likely to climb in importance

Write down your fitness vision in the present tense: “It’s one year from now, and I am _____.” Be detailed about what you are doing and experiencing, as well as how you’re feeling.

What are the forces at play?

Give some thought to the life circumstances and contexts that are likely to influence your fitness efforts and ambitions now. Here are a few questions to consider:

When in your life were you at your healthiest and most fit? What were the factors at work then, and how might you employ some of them to your benefit now?

Which of your habits or attitudes contribute to poor fitness? Which do you feel motivated to change?

Who or what in your life will encourage you to become more fit? What support systems do you have or can you easily cultivate?

Who or what may be an obstacle or limitation toward becoming more fit? Consider both external and internal obstacles. What can you do to work around any potentially negative influences?

What necessary skills, strengths or resources might you be lacking that you’ll need to cultivate? What skills or resources do you currently enjoy in other areas of your life that you can apply to this effort?

Assessment question: What’s the best use of my energy now?

Commitment

Develop an Action Plan

If you’ve worked through the questions in the assessment section, you probably have a good sense of the commitment you’re energized to make. You also have a sense of the actions you’ll need to take in addressing potential obstacles. Spend a moment articulating your fitness commitment on paper (just a simple sentence or two will do), then sign your name beneath it. Let this represent your contract with yourself.

“There is no one-size-fits-all program,” says Jana Beutler Holland, co-owner and director of SWAT (Strength Wellness Athletic Training) Personal Training in Tucson, Ariz. “Every program has to fit the individual person’s lifestyle, as well as their personality and values.”

Your next step is to consider what it will take to fulfill this commitment. Most goal-setting experts advise creating SMART goals — goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, reasonable and time-anchored. While this is a good and informative exercise, it can also bog down some people in details they aren’t quite ready to address. If you’re motivated to define your goals in SMART language, go right ahead. If not, you can simply keep your commitment firmly in mind while developing an action plan that includes many SMART components.

To help make their plans take concrete shape, Beutler Holland recommends that her clients address five key questions: What?, Who?, When?, Where? and How?

What?

What life changes are you willing to embrace to demonstrate that health and fitness are real priorities for you? What types of changes are most energizing and appealing to you now? What resources and how much time can you commit?

Who?

Who will be involved in supporting your fitness program? You may want to draw on the support of an exercise buddy, a personal trainer or a life coach.

In what ways can you ask your spouse, family members, friends or coworkers to support you?

When?

How often will you be active, for how long at a stretch, and over what period of weeks or months will you extend your initial commitment? Commit to a specific number of workouts — even if it's just one small walk each day for the next month. Planning when you'll exercise — and writing it on your calendar — makes you far more likely to do it. Create a log or check-off system to make your commitment visible and help you track your progress.

Where?

Where will you be working out? Make a list of the places where you can incorporate activity near your home and work. The more enticing the environment, the more likely you are to keep up your program.

How?

How will you stay motivated to stick with your plan? For some people, hiring a personal trainer or joining a weight-loss group is the answer. For others, it's regular check-ins with a fitness buddy or tangible rewards for meeting small goals along the way.

How will you track your achievements? Set some check-in dates now and decide what you'll assess.

How will you celebrate your successes — not just for achieving your defined goals, but also for reaching key points along the way?

Commitment Question: How will I act on and support my choices?

Feedback

Work the Plan, Observe the Results

From the moment you begin your program, you'll begin receiving feedback, but it's a good idea to make a point of formally collecting it on a weekly basis. No matter how solid your strategy seemed when you set it, you'll inevitably learn that some aspects of your planning were better than others. And you may encounter some challenging or uplifting factors that you never planned for at all. That's why monitoring your progress — and being willing to adapt and change your program — is essential.

“People who are successful in setting and reaching and following through with their goals have a certain degree of resiliency,” says Beutler Holland. “And one of the components of being resilient is noticing that a challenge or obstacle is only that — a bump in the road.”

You skipped a workout? OK. So how, exactly, did that happen? What were the circumstances that contributed? The feedback phase of your planning is when you ask:

What's working? What's not?

How realistic is your plan turning out to be? How satisfying? What parts are you enjoying most? Least?

Where are you running into trouble or losing motivation? Under what circumstances (physical, mental, emotional, schedule-related) do you tend to lose steam or get discouraged, and under what circumstances do you get revved up?

Are there other life demands (sick kids, looming deadlines, work travel) affecting your fitness progress? How can you modify your program rather than ditch it entirely? Call on the core values you identified in the assessment phase to help you keep your health and fitness priorities front and center.

What obstacles popped up? Would developing certain skills (time management, boundary setting, healthy cooking) help you overcome them? Would additional support (from family, workout buddies, a trainer, coach, nutrition expert or other resources) help you make better progress or enjoy the process more?

What could be better?

Are you seeing or feeling some encouraging results? Feeling some frustration or impatience? Take note of areas of success and challenge.

Are you having any fun, or experiencing some stress relief, a boost in self-esteem or other "soft" results worth noting?

Are you getting the kind of nutrition you need to support your fitness goals? Are your eating habits limiting your energy and vitality, or are they fighting your weight-management efforts?

Are your plans to benchmark your progress and patterns working for you? Do you need better feedback?

What next?

Are things getting easier? Are you getting bored? Do you need some inspiration or accountability? Are you ready to take it up a notch or try something new?

Are you feeling overwhelmed and exhausted? Injured? Do you need to take a step back? Ask for help?

As you pursue the program you've designed, keep watching and asking: What has happened — and what's happening now? Without judgment, learn from your experiences and improve your plan as you go. And remember to celebrate the small wins along the way!

Feedback Question: How am I doing — and what am I learning — so far?

Follow-Through

Making Midcourse Corrections

The follow-through stage is your opportunity to act on the information you've gathered during the feedback phase. Ideally, feedback and follow-through are continuous and interconnecting processes that are going on all the time. But you may want to establish some formal check-in dates (say, every two weeks) when you sit down to evaluate feedback and then build the appropriate follow-through and troubleshooting plans into your larger strategy.

Based on the feedback you've observed, identify some priority areas for adjustment or deeper work. Look back on the notes you gathered during the feedback phase, then

identify at least three follow-through adjustments that deserve action. Consider likely candidates from the following areas:

Scheduling, and time and energy management

Soundness of plan and available resources

Mental and emotional attitude, focus

Nutritional support and eating habits

Nature of fitness activities (frequency, variety, intensity, fun, challenge, etc.)

Document key changes in your workbook or journal, and make any necessary alterations to your schedule.

Follow-Through Questions: What's the best thing to do now? What could I be doing differently?

The Cycle Begins Anew (Back to Top)

Once you've incorporated your follow-through adjustments and had a chance to observe the results, you effectively begin the assessment phase all over again. This is a good time to analyze your overall effort and results. How realistic were your original goals, and should they evolve? How well did you treat yourself as your plan progressed?

Success or failure against the original goals isn't the issue here. The biggest potential jackpot lies in creating success by harvesting the acquired wisdom. It's about implementing what you've learned in a way that respects your highest choices, now. It's about celebrating your fitness gains and your personal insights in a way that inspires you to continue your forward momentum.

Nobody knows the real you — your hopes, your dreams, your values — better than you know yourself. And when you act as your own fitness coach, you discover how you're wired and what makes you tick. You become the architect of your own success, the holder of the blueprints for the fitness future that excites you most of all.

Kelly James-Enger is coauthor of *Small Changes, Big Results: A 12-Week Action Plan to a Better Life* (Clarkson Potter, 2005). This article was adapted from an earlier version that appeared in the January/February 2007 issue of *Experience Life*.