

Health Behavior Change Project Report

What was your target behavior?

My goal for this project was to increase the amount of time I spend each week engaging in exercise for a few specific reasons. Being an athlete from age 5 to age 18 taught me how important exercise is for my physical health as well as my psychological health. I felt my body decreasing in muscle mass and getting fatigued with less physical effort, which I wanted to reverse. I also wanted to use exercise to de-stress and improve my mood, knowing that it is one of the ways I expend energy in a healthy way. My specific goal was to exercise 4 times a week, incorporating cross training types of exercise such as running outside, going to the gym for cardio and weight lifting, going to yoga, and hiking. In my plan, I set specific guidelines for my different types of workouts, such as “10-15 minutes of warm-up on the bike, 10-30 minutes on the elliptical for cardio, and at least 20-30 minutes weight lifting” for my gym workout. I also set a goal to stretch more often before and/or after my workouts.

Did you revise your short-term (this semester) goal in any way? If so, why and how?

As my behavior change project progressed, I learned to expand my definition of what counts as exercise. There were moments when I thought I was doing this only to ‘count’ other activities as exercise so I could meet my goal, but in reality this project made me more aware of my body and what is truly ‘exercising’. In fact, I starting noticing activities that made me sore, helped me sleep, built strength in my muscles and made me feel better mentally, which were

all results I was looking for from consistent exercise. For example, I love live music, and whenever I go to shows, I dance for hours! I wasn't calling that a "workout" because I wasn't in workout clothes in a gym, but in reality dancing for hours often has all the benefits I was looking for, plus a great social experience and the joy of great music. Also, I wasn't able to make it to the yoga classes offered here, so I had to substitute those for other activities. Lastly, waking up before classes for workouts did not lead to good workouts and depleted my energy (sleep deprivation), so I cut those out of my schedule and worked out in the afternoon.

Describe the progress you made toward your goal (original or revised). Exactly what was accomplished and how do you know?

Physical progress: Over the course of the 8 week project, I was able to lift slightly more weight in the weight room, specifically on the machines that focus on lateral back muscles and leg muscles. However, there was a gap in time when I wasn't doing as much weight lifting, and I felt myself revert back to a lesser strength rather quickly. Also, I was able to run for longer periods of time before needing to walk and catch my breath. As I continued to stretch, I became able to reach further stretching positions with less resistance from my muscles.

Psychological/mental health: Each time I had a moment in which I felt my physical health improve, it motivated me to push myself harder because of my growing desire to keep improving. I continue to feel more confident in my body and my abilities each time I work out. I usually feel my mood improve, but sometimes the stress of my academic course load hits me soon after I'm finished exercising and I struggle to keep my stress levels down for long. This is something I'm continuing to work on.

For three weeks out of the eight weeks, I was able to reach my goal of working out 4 times a week, and the other 5 weeks I worked out 3 times a week (see appendix). Although this does not reflect that I directly reached my goal every week, I realized 3 workouts per week is a more realistic goal (specific to this semester), and I was still able to obtain the benefits I was seeking from increased exercise, such as improved sleep, mood, alertness, calmness and focus.

I used my records of my workouts each week and journal entries to monitor whether or not I was reaching my goal and to write encouraging and optimistic comments to help my personal motivation. The records helped me keep track of when I needed to work out more and how many days I had left in each week to fit in more workouts, which I tried to implement. Some weeks, I failed to balance my academic work with my 4-workouts-per-week goal, which my monitoring journal and graph indicate.

Why were you able to be successful and/or not able to be more successful?

My motivation to increase the amount of time I spend exercising each week stemmed from my history as an athlete and my experience with the benefits of sustaining exercise practices over time. Moving to college and taking on intense course loads allowed me to make excuses to skip the gym and deny joining a sports teams, but this project gave me a tangible reason to get back in the practice of consistent exercise routines. My drive to do well in Health Psychology and on this project along with my existing drive to become and stay more fit were useful motivating factors. As we progressed, the research supporting the positive effect of exercise and the negative effects of living a sedentary lifestyle really helped light my fire.

The main model I used to progress towards my goal was the behavior change outline in the first chapter of Switch by the Heath brothers that included setting a specific goal and altering the environment to allow for change, engaging my emotional drive, and creating clear directions to move forward. I implemented this by monitoring behavior conflicts and implementing changes that align with my goals. At the outset of our project, I focused on how I could best *shape the path* (Heath & Heath, 2011, p. 14). I made some effective changes in my environment and in my conscious thoughts about this project. On a minor scale, I put my work out clothes and my running shoes in a place where I can always see them from anywhere in my room, instead of hiding them away in a drawer. This helped me avoid the “out of sight, out of mind” conflict. I also acquired new workout clothes that helped me feel more confident in my body and get excited about going to the gym (seems petty, but it worked). An attempt to keep the music on my iPod fresh and up to date also motivated me to plug in my headphones and keep me pumped during my workouts. A little later into the project, I used mental contrasting, a concept I interpreted as contrasting your ideal end goal with realistic steps to get there, to determine that working out 3 times a week may actually be more realistic and can still help me get to my end goal.

I made a fairly strict schedule for myself during the planning stages of this project, and made a point to treat those designated times like a work out “class” in order to motivate myself to follow through despite my time constraints. Unfortunately, that only worked for the first 4 weeks of the project because the added stress of a sixth “class” was causing me mental fatigue, which I will discuss in more depth later on. I decided to make exercise fit more naturally into my schedule. After monitoring what kinds of exercise activities kept me most engaged and

brought joyful experiences, I began to expand my definition of what I consider exercise to include activities that I love, like dancing. I believe that exercising in social settings, like at concerts where I can dance for hours, can be just as intense as a gym workout, with the additional benefits of great people and great music.

Making time to work out 4 times a week during an academically intense semester has been my greatest challenge with this project, as I predicted, but I found a few ways of making it work. Broadening my definition of exercise was one useful implementation. I realized, though, that the real challenge was balancing time for homework and time for physical work, so I combined them. I did almost all of my reading for Health Psychology while riding the stationary bike or walking on the treadmill. That way, I was able to tackle both my academic work and my HBCP project at once, and the research I was reading about Health Psychology gave me food for thought that functioned as directly applicable motivation for the work I was engaged in to create a healthier lifestyle.

By creating a more supportive and conducive path, I felt able to focus more energy into my health behavior change and incorporate more of our class concepts to *direct my rider*¹, the step to behavior change focused on directing the logical thinking about the behavior by giving

¹In addition to creating clear and specific direction to “direct the rider” as described in *Switch*, I considered my conscious thoughts and what I was learning from research to be helping direct my logical or rational thought, which I considered “directing the rider”, though it overlaps with direction of my emotions, or “motivating the elephant”.

“crystal-clear direction” (Heath & Heath, 2011, p. 6). First and foremost, all of the empirically-supported evidence about exercise and stress reduction led me to believe that increasing the

amount I exercise may help me feel less stressed about the time I take from school work to devote to working out. My academic load, combined with stressors such as too little sleep, financial stress, relationship pressures, and other potential stressors add up to my total allostatic load, or my total amount of perceived stress. Coming from a lower economic status, research from Fagundes and Way (2014) suggests that I could already be prone to more intense and more frequent psychological stress, meaning that a high allostatic load has the potential to bear down heavily on my body and psychological health because of my increased likelihood of appraising stressors as a threat (p. 281). This idea really resonated with me, leading me to put more time and effort into stress reduction, which took form primarily as exercise for this eight week period.

In addition, I was continuously seeking to explore the cognitive benefits of exercise on my brain, how they would influence my academic success, and how they could help me avoid potential health risks linked to stress. I haven't experienced many issues with psychological health, but there have been times that I have used exercise to extinguish bouts of depressive symptoms and thoughts of using disordered eating patterns to slim down. Often, I can link these health risks to stressful times, as Schneiderman, Ironson, and Siegel (2008) suggest in "Stress and Health: Psychological, Behavioral, and Biological Determinants". They state that "consequences of stress that could provide linkages to health have been identified, such as increases in smoking, substance use, accidents, sleep problems, and eating disorders", as well as depression and anxiety (p. 3). All of those threats to health were aspects that I consistently seek to avoid, and using exercise as a catalyst to healthy behavior (and avoiding non-healthy

behaviors like binge drinking) was a useful way of decreasing stress levels and therefore preventing such behaviors.

The cognitive benefits and energy boosts from exercise were noted, in that I was more focused and felt a larger pool of energy to draw from, which I could readily apply to my academics. Reynolds (2011) in “How Exercise Can Strengthen the Brain” states that exercise can initiate neurogenesis, or the creation of new brain cells, as well as increase the amount of muscle mitochondria that function as “biological powerhouses” to our body (p. 1). In addition, she suggests that exercise for the body is also exercise for the brain, helping to continuously build endurance to fatigue and amplify the benefits to the body and brain. (Reynolds 2011, p. 3). In my practice, I incorporated this information into my specifically-defined workout goals to motivate my “rider” to keep strengthening my brain and body in order to utilize the benefits of strength and endurance to their fullest potential.

The last, and potentially most personally important, aspect of the three-part model for behavior change described in the Switch chapter is called *motivating the elephant*, which I utilized significantly as a way to carry out my health behavior change (Heath & Heath, 2011, p. 5). I motivated my elephant, or addressed my strong emotional drive, most often by figuring out ways to make exercise a positive social experience. Brody (2012) offers that people may stick to their exercise goals because of “the friendships, sense of community and camaraderie that may otherwise be missing from their lives” by engaging in exercise activities with a group (p. 3). For me, this meant going on a hike or to a concert with friends and family. Such activities not only provide a joyful way to get a good workout, but they help maintain the idea

that social support is important for psychological health, which I continuously found to be valuable.

As I monitored my progress through journaling and exercise records, I noticed that I occasionally experienced fatigue, but was usually able to counterbalance it with self-compassion and moderating factors. When I was putting a lot of effort into working out specifically when I had scheduled during the planning phase of this project, it was difficult to plan around my existing schedule, and I felt guilty when I missed the gym. I found it more effective to allow myself a more flexible schedule and to practice the concept of self-compassion. Inzlicht, Legault and Teper (2014) state that “the power of the implementing system to engage control seems weakened after it exerts itself”, which is why I felt fatigued and guilty for shifting my schedule (p. 305). However, Terry and Leary (2011) (in agreement with Inzlicht, Legault and Teper) suggest that treating oneself with kindness and accepting our mistakes (self-compassion) helps to avoid the depletion of self-regulatory resources and can help improve self-control, which is how I was able to reach my exercise goals with less additional stress or negative emotions that could sway my elephant (p. 358).

Overall, I was able to shape my path, direct my rider, and motivate my elephant to successfully increase the amount of time I spend exercising each week, but there is still room for improvement. Adjustments to my environment and my perspective on exercise as a whole, paired with the concepts I was learning from class reading and discussion, provided a useful foundation to fuel my exercise initiative. Incorporating enjoyable social bonding, practicing self-compassion, and intertwining our study of mindfulness allowed me to be intentional about exercise and improve my sense of control over the situation (which decreased stress, as in the

Whitehall study). In fact, a major outcome of this project was my improved self-image and a strengthened drive to keep working on health-promoting behaviors.

Will you continue this project?

I definitely plan on continuing to incorporate exercise into my life, and I will use the strategies of goal setting, monitoring conflicts with goals, and implementing behaviors aligned with my goals. Ideally, I can keep up the strategy of setting aside specific times or outlining possible times to workout no matter where I'm living or what I'm doing (for example, during my internship in Alaska). To ensure I make forward progress, I want to continue keeping track of my workouts in a journal. Even if I cannot increase the amount of time I work out because of time constraints, I can increase the intensity during cardio, increase weight lifting maximums, and learn new types of exercise as I go. In addition, I feel I now have the skills to expand this project beyond exercise and try it with new behaviors, such as eating habits, using the same or similar methods I learned throughout this project.

What did you learn?

Through engaging in this project, I learned about a few different methods of changing behaviors to be more healthful, such as the cybernetic principles of behavior change described in "Exploring Mechanisms of Self-Control Improvement" (Inzlicht, Legault, & Teper, 2014) and the model described in *Switch* which resonated with me most meaningfully. From a combination of behavior change models and academic journal articles from class readings, I've learned to define my goals with specific details, monitor how my behaviors coincide with my goals, be kind to myself when I falter, and to keep implementing small changes in order to

reach my end goal. Making sure my goals are personally meaningful is another useful skill I learned from the *Switch* chapter.

I learned to use moderating variables, such as my coping skills (which really came into play when I lost my grandmother), my social support networks, and my natural tendency to be intrinsically motivated to help power my commitment to this project. Increasing my awareness of how I appraise potential stressors allowed me to prevent such situations from activating my sympathetic nervous system (including my hypothalamic-pituitary adrenal (HPA) for hormones and my sympatho-adrenal-medullary (SAM) for functions within the nervous system) and have control over my stress levels. I often used diaphragmatic “belly” breathing and short mindful breathing practices to focus my energy before and during workouts to amplify my stress-reduction and healthy habit building.

Not only am I grateful for the immediate benefits of this project, such as cognitive and physical endurance, stress reduction, boosts in energy, and improved sleep quality, but I’m grateful to have an improved body image and an understanding of how to continue shifting behaviors to be more healthy using the methods we learned through academic readings and class lectures.

Appendix

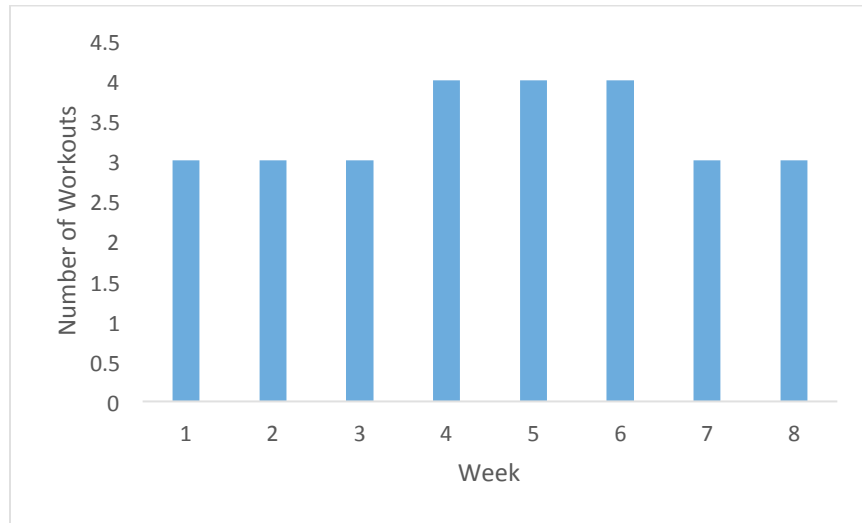


Figure 1. This bar graph shows the number of times I exercised in some way each week of the 8-week long Health Behavior Change Project. I fully reached my goal (4 times) 3 out of 8 weeks.

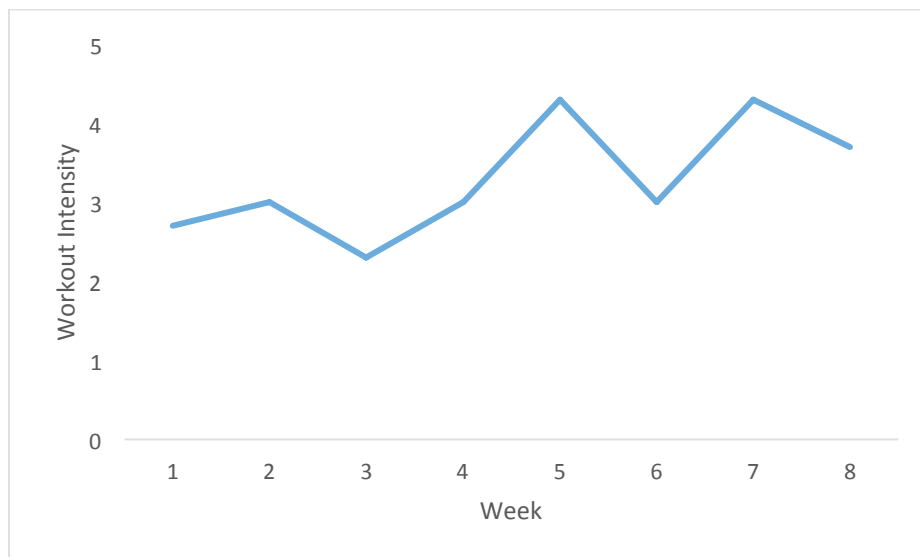


Figure 2. This graph displays the average intensity of my work outs each week based on a 1-5 intensity scale, with 5 being the most intense workout I could handle. Note, there are not workouts rated a 5 in intensity, leaving room for improvement.

References

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