

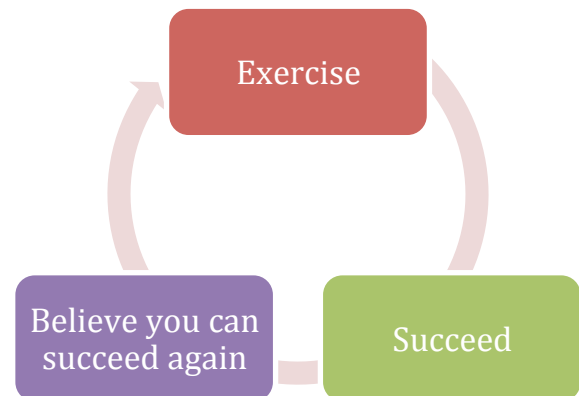
# Enhancing exercise confidence

Many exercise researchers have conducted studies to determine which factors increase the likelihood that someone will stick with an exercise program. Which one often tops the list? **Self-efficacy.**


*Self-efficacy* is the confidence one has in his/her ability to successfully complete a given task. In the context of exercise, individuals who report high levels of confidence that they can stick with an exercise program, even when faced with common barriers, tend to also report greater amounts of physical activity. It makes a lot of sense if you think about it! If you have confidence in your ability to succeed, you'll try harder to reach your goals and persist longer when you encounter challenges.

So how can you increase your exercise confidence? Consider the four primary sources of self-efficacy:

1. **Mastery Experience:** This is the #1 source. If you've succeeded before, you're likely to believe you can do it again. Think of it as a cycle: *Danielle has been trying to fit in more regular exercise. Her goal is to walk for 30 minutes 4 times per week. Last week, despite feeling extra busy with work and all of the kids' activities, she was able to reach her goal. Now, even though this week is looking equally busy, she is feeling more confident that she will reach her goal since she has already proven to herself that she can do it.* So, succeeding leads to greater confidence that you can succeed again, which makes you more likely to invest the effort to exercise, which makes it more likely that you will continue to succeed. And the cycle continues!



2. **Vicarious Experience:** Also known as “modeling” – seeing others who are similar to you exercise successfully can increase your confidence in your own capabilities. *Dawn has been feeling overwhelmed in her new job. Some days, she felt like she barely had time for a shower, let alone exercise. Then she went online and joined a social network for young professionals. Suddenly she realized she was not alone. There were so many men and women out there feeling just like her! She brought up the topic of exercise, and some of her new “friends” shared the ways they had been able to fit exercise into their lives. They talked about overcoming feelings of guilt and exhaustion. Dawn felt encouraged and thought, “If they can do it, I can too.”*



I PARTICIPATED IN A BEGINNING WOMEN'S RUNNING GROUP, AND THEY HAD WOMEN WHO HAVE COMPLETED THE PROGRAM IN THE PAST COME BACK AND ACT AS MENTORS TO THE WOMEN WHO ARE JUST STARTING. AND THAT WAS SO HELPFUL, TO HAVE SOMEONE I COULD GO TO FOR ADVICE AND ENCOURAGEMENT, AND TO SEE SOMEONE WHO HAD STARTED WHERE I WAS IN SUCH GREAT SHAPE.

3. **Verbal Persuasion:** Support from friends and family who tell you “you can do it” can go a long way! *Jacob had always been an active person, but lately exercise was not making it to the top of his priority list, and he was feeling frustrated. One evening, after venting his frustrations to his co-worker, Jim, he said he would help Jacob stay encouraged. On days when Jacob was feeling weighed down, he would talk to Jim, who would remind him of how much better he would feel after squeezing in a quick workout. And he was right! After Jacob had completed a great workout, Jim would congratulate him and tell him he was proud of him. It was exactly what Jacob needed.*

4. **Physiological/Emotional State:** Pay attention to how your body feels physically and emotionally after you exercise. Appreciating your body's capabilities can boost your self-efficacy for exercise. *For a long time, Cheryl viewed exercise as an activity that took time away from all of her obligations at home and at work. Then she noticed a pattern: on the days when she made time for a 30-minute workout after work, she felt less stressed and was more patient with the kids in the evening. Realizing exercise made her feel better gave her the confidence and motivation to keep up with her routine.*

Here are some more ideas for improving your exercise confidence:

- **Exercise in a group.** Exercise partners can help provide the motivation and emotional support that are critical for success. They add a level of accountability, and the companionship will make workouts go by a lot faster.
- **Set reasonable goals.** Start with low-intensity, easier exercise tasks and gradually increase the challenge. You'll be able to gauge your improvement and experience many small successes along the way.
- **Use feedback.** Use a pedometer or other activity tracker to evaluate your performance. Focus on all the positive progress you're making!
- **Make it fun!** Design your exercise routine so it's enjoyable for you. Vary your mode of exercise, work out with a friend, or make an exercise playlist with all your favorite songs... whatever it takes for you to stick with it!
- **Pay attention to improvements.** Do you notice you're able to walk farther this week than last week? That you don't get so winded carrying the laundry basket upstairs? Improvements might not always be drastic, but small changes are a sign that your body is becoming stronger and healthier. So take note of them, and use them as encouragement to keep going.
- **Explore support networks.** If you don't have a built-in support network at home or at work, seek support elsewhere! There are local groups, as well as online communities, designed to support new and/or experienced exercisers. Having others like you to discuss successes and failures will help you feel at ease and remember you're not the only one going through an experience.

