

Social support

If you talk to other individuals who exercise regularly and ask them how they're able to do it, they are likely to mention social support. Social support can take several forms. It can be emotional support, such as words of encouragement and motivation. It can be informational support, like offering advice or sharing knowledge. The form which is likely especially relevant to exercise is instrumental support, which involves providing concrete, tangible aid (e.g., your money, time, or direct assistance). Here are a few examples:

Between work and family responsibilities, Jane finds it nearly impossible to make time for physical activity. Her kids are involved in so many activities that it feels like she's shuttling people around every evening. By the time they get home and have dinner, she's exhausted and ready to crash. But recently Regina, one of the other parents at her daughter's soccer practice, had a great idea. She suggested they could start walking around the soccer fields while their kids practiced. Each week more and more parents have joined them. Jane looks forward to soccer practice now, because not only does she get to be active, but she also has gotten to know the other parents, who she now considers her friends.

Nina swears she could not be as active as she is if it weren't for her husband, James. After several years of sparse activity, Nina discussed her desire to be more active with James, and he volunteered to help. He said he would be in charge of the morning duties – getting the kids up, fed, and ready for the day– so Nina could exercise before work. Nina has stuck with her routine for 2 months so far and is feeling great both physically and mentally. She also does her part – she picks the kids up after work and prepares dinner each night so James can spend an hour at the gym.



Nick was very physically active throughout high school and college. After graduation, Nick found a job at a marketing firm. His new job requires him to work long hours most days of the week. After about a month, Nick has noticed his motivation to workout has declined. One day, after a meeting at the firm, Nick talked with a couple coworkers about his concerns over fitting fitness into his daily routine. His coworkers shared his concerns and gave advice about working out over the lunch hour and scheduling time during the day to get some physical activity in. Some of his coworkers invited Nick to sign up for a membership at a gym just 2 blocks from their office building. Now, Nick has a couple of regular fitness buddies and is able to fit an hour of physical activity into his daily schedule.



I joined a fitness group for young professionals, and it's been so great. It's more than just exercise, it's so much fun. I look forward to having that conversation, and it keeps me motivated to continue to do it when I have other people there exercising as well.

If you're lucky enough to be in a situation where you have a supportive spouse, parent, co-worker, friend, or neighbor who is happy to lend a hand, give thanks and take advantage! Even for the most motivated and conscientious individuals, there comes a point when you simply can't do it all yourself. Meeting your goals will be much easier if you have others to support you. If you don't feel as though you have a lot of support right now, here are some ideas for getting the help you need:

1. Ask! It may seem too obvious, but take a second to consider it. Have you asked your husband to help out with dinner? Have you mentioned to your best friend that you're desperate for an exercise buddy? You never know what they'll say if you don't ask.
2. Turn to online communities for support. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of web-based groups of individuals of all ages who have the same healthy living goals as you.
3. Talk to co-workers and try to drum up interest in a healthy living initiative. For example, you could start a pedometer challenge in which teams compete to accumulate the most steps. When a culture of wellness is in place, a culture of acceptance of working exercise into your day is likely to follow.
4. Bargain with neighbors, friends, or family in the area. Offer to watch their kids if they'll return the favor and watch yours. You'll get some time alone to exercise while knowing your kids are having fun with their friends!

You might find it useful to complete a support contract with your spouse or another friend or family member. In the contract, you can lay out (in writing) the things you will do to help each other reach your goals. Complete the contract together, and remember your SMART principles. Only write down specific, realistic things you can do. For example:

- Too vague: *We will encourage each other to be more physically active.*
- SMART: *We will walk together for 30 minutes during our lunch hour on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.*

Social Support Contract

We, _____ and _____, are striving to live a healthier lifestyle. To meet our goals, we need help from each other. By completing and signing this contract, we agree to take specific steps to help each other succeed.

_____'s Exercise Goals:	
1)	
2)	
_____'s Exercise Goals:	
1)	
2)	
I, _____, pledge to do the following to help _____ meet his/her exercise goals:	
1)	
2)	
3)	
I, _____, pledge to do the following to help _____ meet his/her exercise goals:	
1)	
2)	
3)	
Signed: _____	Date: _____
Signed: _____	Date: _____