



e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

Volume 7, Number 3

March 2011

Thoughts about Exercise

Exercise is a physical activity, but whether or not we actually exercise is commonly a result of mental activity. My usual exercise is running, something that I've been doing for 30 years. However, even though it is enough of a priority for me that I build it into my schedule, on many occasions my thoughts represent obstacles to overcome. "I'm too tired." "I'll skip tonight and run tomorrow." "It's already too late." "I'd rather do _____." Some of the thoughts I had in the past ("It's too cold." "It's raining." "It's dark.") no longer apply since I now have a treadmill in the basement. Fortunately for my health, I have learned to counteract such thoughts, on most occasions. "I'll feel better after I run." "It's important for my health." "I can eat more if I burn calories with exercise." "I can watch the game on television while I run." "I'll feel good about having completed the run when I'm done."

There are times when I start running and it just doesn't feel good. Each step seems like a major chore. And that physical experience triggers more thoughts. "I'm definitely too tired to do this tonight." "I'll wait until tomorrow and try again." "I don't think I can do this." However, over the years I've learned that if I'm able to push through the first mile, I often get into a routine and it isn't so hard. In fact, some of my most satisfying runs have started terribly. I'm not unique in this regard. Most people would say that the beginning stages of a workout are typically less enjoyable than the later stages, even if the physical demands of the warm-up and cool-down are similar. People also commonly report that they generally feel better after completing an exercise routine, even if there is physical fatigue.

Often there is a sense of accomplishment, related to having done something good for one's health.

In the most recent issue of Health Psychology, a team of investigators from the University of British Columbia report the results of a series of studies in which they examined the forecasts people made about how much enjoyment they would get from exercise, and then assessed their actual enjoyment after their exercise was completed. What they discovered was that study participants tended to underestimate the enjoyment they would experience from their exercise. They concluded that "myopic forecasting" was occurring, meaning that participants' predictions of exercise enjoyment were disproportionately negative, because they were based on what they expected to feel at the beginning of the workout --- typically the least enjoyable part of the workout.

In one of their studies, the investigators also looked at whether or not cuing participants to specifically think about their predicted enjoyment for the various phases of the exercise routine --- warm-up, main workout, cool-down --- would impact their overall forecasts about predicted enjoyment. The intent of this variation in the research protocol was to see if myopic forecasting could be overcome. Indeed, participants in this condition made more positive (and accurate) forecasts about how much enjoyment they would derive from their exercise, because forecasts were not simply based on how the beginning of the workout would feel.

Thinking about the less-enjoyable beginning phases of a workout appears to be an important obstacle to exercise. Replacing this near-sighted (myopic) forecasting with far-sighted (hyperopic) forecasting, that is, basing enjoyment forecasts on the more satisfying middle and ending phases of a workout, may help more people to exercise more regularly.

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