

WORKING WITH WILL: HELPING CLIENTS ALLY WITH THE APP TO BETTER MOTIVATE SUSTAINABLE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

By Michelle Segar, PhD, MPH

Will came in for his first appointment with me in a dark state of frustration. “I don’t even know why I’m here,” he muttered, “I should have known from the beginning that I’d never be able to handle regular workouts. I’m a nerd, not an athlete. That’s been proven!”

Will had worked in computer animation and special effects for the past twenty years. His job was creative and consuming, and he sat about twelve hours every day. At age 37, he looked up from his computer to find that he was puffing when he climbed even a few stairs. At his annual exam, he was shocked to realize that he’d managed to pack on thirty pounds of extra weight since college. His physician warned him he was on an unhealthy path. “After I left that appointment, I wanted to do something, anything,” he told me, “and when I expressed these concerns to my friend Rick he showed me his Fitbit and told me to get one. He swore by it, said it had changed his life, motivated him like nothing had. That convinced me to get one.” He held out his wrist and showed me the sleek black plastic band.

“That was a month ago,” Will told me. “The longest month of my life. For the first couple of weeks I threw myself into it. I walked for an hour a day after work, five days a week. On the weekends, I was jogging in place just to keep my step numbers up over 10,000. Then it was four days a week, then three. I got *so bored*, I wasn’t losing weight, and I felt really guilty. I don’t even want to look at my numbers, and I haven’t walked for two weeks. I am the opposite of motivated!”

Will seemed completely deflated, and at a real loss as to where to go from here. “Okay, Will,” I said, “let’s think about your app and how you’ve been using it from a different perspective. *Why* are you trying to increase your steps? Because you bought the Fitbit? Or because you really want to benefit from being more active?”

“Well,” he replied, “I do want to be more fit and lose weight . . . and you have to do 10,000 steps a day to achieve that, right?”

“Let’s come back to that,” I said. “Tell me what being more physically active and being more fit would mean to you on a daily basis—how would you feel?”

“I guess I would have more energy, maybe I would feel better about myself.”

I nodded in agreement. “Then let’s be really frank: Research suggests that dietary change is more effective than exercise when it comes to losing weight.”

“Wait—what?”

“Sounds crazy, I know, but that’s what [the science](#) is showing. In addition, that 10,000 step goal is very hard to achieve, and as you’ve noticed, chasing it can actually motivate you to choose *not* to move.

So here's a radical suggestion—let's pause that weight loss goal and put that 10,000 step goal aside for now. Let's get the levers in place that will support you making better choices, consistently. You get to still use the Fitbit, but as your ally-not your enemy."

Like most clients who are offered this new strategy, Will smiled, clearly relieved. "What do I have to do?"

Tracking Steps + Energy Levels

"Let's start by identifying just one experience you'd like to have from becoming more physically active."

"Well, I seem to just run out of energy by two or three in the afternoon. I feel like an old man."

"Energy is a great benefit to aim for—higher energy in the afternoon. So let's do an experiment. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, at 1:30 I want you to walk for 17 minutes—I know, that's an odd amount of time. Just walk outside, look at the trees, whatever. Don't do anything special in terms of how you walk, but do log the experience. Write down your energy level after the walk from a scale of negative 3 (low energy) to positive 3 (high energy). Then check your Fitbit and write down the number of steps you took next to that number. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I don't want you to walk, but do log your energy level around 2 p.m."

When Will came to his next appointment, I asked if he'd noticed anything different on the days he walked.

"Yes," he said, "I felt less stressed, and it did impact my energy level—I logged a negative 1 when I wasn't walking, but it jumped to a 2 on the days I walked."

"Good! Let's stay on this course for a while—I think using the app to understand the connection between walking and feeling better is going to be more motivating than just using the app to count steps. Do you know how motivation actually works?"

"I guess not," he laughed.

"Well, when you think about it, it's pretty simple. Research shows that we are much more likely to do activities that make us feel good than ones that make us feel bad or that feel like work. And we also are more likely to stick with activities *we choose* to do rather than ones we feel pushed to do or obligated to perform."

He was nodding now. "Makes perfect sense. What do I do?"

Transforming Exercise from a Chore to a Gift

"Well, you've already started just by noticing that walking is giving you more energy. We need to transform your feelings about exercise from punishment to pleasure – [from a chore to gift](#), is how I usually put it. And that means changing your *why* for exercise—the reason you're doing it.

I know you want to lose weight, but the fact is that physical activity is a much better “elixir of life” than a tool for weight loss.”

“Don’t tell me—science?”

“Right. Studies show that when your reason for becoming more active is to feel better or boost your quality of life in a way you value, you are more likely to stay motivated than if your reason is to lose weight, or even aiming [for better health](#). So let’s keep on this logging track for a few more weeks—we can change the parameters later.”

Allying for Success

Will’s story reflects the beginning of the process of transforming physical activity from a chore he has to accomplish into a gift he wants to give himself. In partnership with his app, Will learns to identify and illuminate a concrete and compelling “why” for being more physically active. This is a [systematic process](#) that can be applied in most situations.

Research suggests that our “whys,” our reasons for starting to exercise or become more physically active, are the foundation of the entire behavior change process. So, first, let’s make sure that we help our clients and patients ally their apps and trackers with whys that have the potency to fuel ongoing, stable motivation. When our patients and clients become successful, so do we. While counter-intuitive, if we help clients learn to think that they are successful with fitness when they incorporate movement inside and outside of the gym, we are more likely [to retain them as members and clients](#).

For questions to help your clients/patients spark and sustain their motivation with their Why, Way, and Do, see the questions in the Table. For more information about the science and method for helping people create lasting exercise motivation and behavior read [No Sweat: How the Simple Science of Motivation Can Bring You a Lifetime of Fitness](#).

Table. Using Why, Way, Do to Help Clients Ally with the App for Sustained Motivation

WHY, WAY, DO	STRATEGY	STRATEGY GOAL
The Why <i>(Compelling Reason to Prioritize Daily Physical Activity)</i>	Ask: Does physical activity feel like a chore or a gift?	When you know how exercise makes them feel you can better understand their core relationship with being active. Then you can help change it, if needed.
	Ask: Why did you decide to become more physically active/exercise NOW?	Help them understand how come future or vague “whys” are not as motivating long-

		term as ones related to feeling and being better today.
	Guide your clients/patients toward using their tracking app as a way to become aware of how moving benefits their daily life in concrete ways they value.	Teach them to use tracking apps to get useful feedback about the relationship between exercise, energy, and mood, creativity, etc. For example, “When I took 1,000 steps I noticed a surge in my energy! That helped me focus for the remainder of the afternoon.”
The Way <i>(Immediate Positive Experiences)</i>	Encourage people to be active in ways that work for them. Ask them which activities feel good to do, or are at least palatable.	Some people will not know how to answer this question because they have only been active in ways that have felt punishing before now. Help guide them to activities, intensities, and place that will cultivate positive experiences.
	Ask about physical activities beyond the gym experience that they enjoyed as a child (biking, skating, swimming, dancing, sports) and give them permission to do these activities.	This exploration can help identify the “Right Ways” for each person they may not have considered as “allowed.”
	Help clients use their trackers to learn the associations between the moments that they move and the positivity they feel.	Trackers offer concrete support that exercise really is helping to improve their quality of life.
The Do <i>(Learning Mindset)</i>	Help your clients value the idea of becoming consistently and regularly physically active as a process, not a target to hit.	Understanding exercise as a life-long journey of learning how to integrate and sustain physically active lives allows them to continue to adjust their activities to their changing daily needs, and

		help them continue to enjoy the incredible benefits that it brings.
	If clients ask for radical, fast change, use the science described in the article as justification for taking a more strategic, slower, long-term approach. Then guide them to build small steps and create strategies for integrating consistent physical activity into their lives—both inside and outside the gym.	When you help them become successful both inside and out of the gym, you will be more likely to retain them as clients and members.
	If they enjoy tracking, make sure they track and count even the smallest activities—walking from the parking lot to the office, walking the dog, going down to the basement for laundry, playing with the kids outdoors—and recognize those opportunities to move as valid activity that counts!	Activity trackers are great tools to help people learn that it all adds up! They also can be used to help people learn how to integrate more physical activity into their life—for life.