



## Fitness Report



### Staying with it

#### Incentives Cut Exercisers' Dropout Rate

Having trouble sticking to your exercise program? You're not alone. Researchers have found that about half of those who begin an exercise program usually quit within six to 12 months.

There may be new hope for fickle athletes, however, a study at Michigan state University found that people stayed with exercise programs much more faithfully when they used a new approach combining monetary incentives, written contracts and carefully planned peer support.

The scientist gave 120 MSU employees instructions on how to exercise properly, then divided them into teams of four to six people. Each team member signed a contract to exercise at least 30 minutes, four times a week. The exercise sessions could be any type of aerobic activity, such as fitness walking, jogging, stair climbing, cycling, swimming or dancing.

The participants also gathered \$40 each that they would fulfill the contract for six months. Once the program began, those who skipped a workout lost half their wager at the end of the week. This lost money was distributed to other teams—but no team could receive money during a week in which one of its own members failed to exercise



four times. Not surprisingly, team members gave each other a great deal of encouragement to keep exercising.

The MSU researchers also required each exerciser to have at least one “witness,” a non-team member who verified that the exercise was actually carried out. “We weren’t really checking for liars,” says Jon Robison, a doctoral student in exercise physiology who was part of the research team. “The idea was simply to increase the amount of social support.”

After six months, participants in the MSU program had a superlative 97% adherence rate. The study’s control group, which received instruction but no incentives, had an adherence of less than 25%.

What was the secret? “Previous studies used some of the ingredients we did, but this is the first time they’ve been put together in one package,” says Robison.

Other experts agree with the MSU approach. “There’s little evidence that any single strategy can promote consistent exercise—you need to use a combination of factors,” says Neil Oldridge, a professor of health science at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. “The best strategies get people involved in their own progress.”

## **A do-it-yourself plan for keeping exercise-motivated**

The MSU program, based on one originally developed to encourage people to quit smoking, can be used by novice or experienced exercisers, in a group or on their own. To help exercise become permanent, ingrained habit, Robison suggests following these guidelines:

- 1. DRAW UP AN AGREEMENT** with a family member or friend, and put it in writing.
- 2. MAKE YOUR CONTRACT SPECIFIC.** Don’t just say, “I’ll try to exercise four times this week.” Write down the actual days on which you’ll exercise and specify what you’ll be doing.
- 3. THE AGREEMENT** should be long-term. A few weeks is not just enough to change your behavior and make you a determined, committed exerciser. Six months is a minimum contract period.
- 4. INCLUDE SPECIFIC REWARDS** and punishments. Money and vacations are most often used as rewards; on the other hand, the exerciser might agree to do an unpleasant household chore if the contract is breached.
- 5. MAXIMIZE THE NUMBER** of people who support you.