

How I Turned My Errands Into Exercise

One reluctant exerciser found that ditching his car and walking or biking to the store was a boon for his mental and physical health.

By Andrew Leonard

Since the fall of 2019, the writer has biked his groceries home roughly 50 times.

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I was physically destroyed the first time I rode my bike home from Costco lugging a trailer full of groceries. The 11-mile round trip left me with dead legs, a sore back and the sneaking suspicion I had made a mistake.

A month earlier, my 23-year-old minivan broke down for the last time. Rather than replace it, I decided a new “car-free” reality would encourage a healthier lifestyle. My aching muscles questioned the viability of this plan.

Three years later, I now know that giving up my car was the first step toward solving a lifelong struggle: maintaining consistent physical activity. What started as a necessity — I had no car, so I must bike — became a strategy: Errands are an opportunity for exercise.

This reframing turned out to be a motivational bonanza. I began seeking out new errands just for the exercise they would provide. A need for new socks became an opportunity to walk to Target. Running low on Sichuan peppercorns spurred me to cycle the nine-mile round trip to the Chinese supermarket. Earlier this year, I learned that the public library stocked a book about an ancient tomb I was researching, and my first thought was: Excellent, that’s a 4,000-step round trip!

Rain or shine, I became an errand-running machine. My mood improved, my grocery runs got easier and I had to buy a new belt for my shrinking waistline. For most of my adult life, I’d been trying, and failing, to consistently exercise. Only now, as I hit my 60th birthday, did I feel I’d cracked the code.

Experts who study exercise psychology say it was no accident my new errands-based regimen had lasting results. Better yet, what worked for me can work for others.

Find the right motivation.

I am no stranger to motivational gimmicks. After my marriage broke up in the early 2000s, I told myself losing weight would make me more attractive. Mindful of my doctor’s advice about cholesterol, I told myself I was only allowed French fries with dinner if I biked over the nearest hill.

But nothing stuck. Michelle Fortier, a physical activity psychologist at the University of Ottawa, said that outside motivations, like doctors’ warnings and weight insecurities, do not result in lasting behavior change.

“That can get people started,” Dr. Fortier said, “but it will not maintain their physical activity. It doesn’t lead to positive consequences or positive emotions.”

Intrinsically generated motivation, which is driven by a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction, is much more powerful, she said. “You do it because it’s enjoyable,” she said, “And the research shows that type of motivation is good” for exercise maintenance.

My own behavior change, Dr. Fortier said, was probably the result of combining two intrinsically generated motivations that had nothing to do with body-image fears or outside pressures: I love to ride my bike, and I love the satisfaction of getting things done.

Make a mental shift.

But that doesn't mean my carless strategy will work for everyone. People bike more in cities with biking infrastructure and walk more in walkable communities. I'm lucky: I live in the San Francisco Bay Area, which has an extensive network of bike paths, including a gorgeous trail that curves along the water that I take to get groceries.

But what happens if you live in a rural community 30 miles from the nearest shopping center? Or if your office no longer allows you to work from home, where you can slip out midday for a walk? The trick can be as simple as just changing how we think about the act of exercise, said Benjamin Gardner, a researcher in the psychology of habitual behavior at the University of Surrey, in Britain.

Too much focus on the word "exercise," Dr. Gardner said, "brings to mind going to the gym, lifting weights, running on treadmills and so on."

Recognizing that day-to-day tasks often involve movement is an opportunity to "build physical activity habits into our everyday lives," he added.

Every weekday, after driving his kids two miles to school, Dr. Gardner said, he parks his car and walks home, occasionally calling into meetings as he strolls. Then, in the afternoon, he walks back to the school to retrieve the kids and the car. "I've formed a habit of asking myself," he said, "with all the tasks I do each day, whether there's a way to do those in a more physically active way."

You could decide to walk a mile to get a sandwich for lunch instead of grabbing one from the deli around the corner. If you live in a rural area and can't bike to get groceries, try spending 20 minutes a day weeding or reorganizing the garage. Anything you've been putting off, like digging up an old stump or hauling yard waste, becomes a more inviting prospect when you think of it as a workout.

But maybe don't start with Costco.

"The most important thing," Dr. Fortier said, "is that people find ways to make their bout of exercise — be it walking the dog or biking to Costco — the most enjoyable possible." In her work with clinically depressed women who are inactive, Dr. Fortier tells her patients to start out by picking a nice day to go for a walk, and then setting a timer for 10 minutes. If they're feeling good when the timer goes off, maybe walk a little more. If not, call it a day.

Listening to Dr. Fortier, I realized that by beginning my new exercise regimen with a grueling grocery run, I ran the risk of squelching my enthusiasm before I'd barely started. Best to pay attention to the pleasure principle, begin with easier challenges, and work oneself into shape.

So run your first exercise errand on a sunny afternoon: Take a stroll to the nearest post office to mail a package. Ramp up for a few months, and your to-do list will start to fill up with more strenuous tasks. You may even find yourself buying a used bike trailer on Craigslist and scoffing at an incoming rain squall, and loving every minute of it.

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