

How to Fit in a Workout Routine (Even with a Long Commute and No Gym)

Career Development





You are here because you want to work out, but working out as a busy lawyer seems virtually impossible. The good news is that (1) it is possible, and (2) you are done with the hardest part: wanting change.

If you don't want to work out, then there is not much else I can tell you other than the fact that exercise will increase your happiness and productivity at work. But if that convinced everyone, we would all be working out every single day.

But you do want to exercise more, which means you have just three steps to go:

1. Reconsider your mindset

You may want to start strength training, for example, but you might still be doubting that you actually can. Is it impossible to fit in a workout in your hectic schedule? Are you just too tired before or after work to do anything physical? Or do you just not know where to start? We'll tackle this problem in step three.

If these are your concerns, not a problem. You have the power to change them right now. First, identify exactly what is stopping you. What are the doubts that are creeping up in your head? Be honest with yourself. You could be unsure that you would have enough "willpower" to do this.

Spoiler alert: There is no such thing as willpower. You do it, or you don't. Just like you got through law school, your first memo, or the last meeting you had to attend, even though it may have been one of the most painful experiences, you got through it. You realized you had to do it, and you just did it. And you survived — and even thrived! Same idea applies here.

Or, you could be doubting whether you have the time. Another spoiler alert: You have time. If you have 24 hours in your day, you have the choice like everyone else. If you made the decision to stop by Starbucks instead of using the office coffee machine, you have time. If you spent five minutes walking to the nearest takeout restaurant, waited in line for 10 minutes, and walked another five minutes back to the office, you have time.

There may be a lot of time-sucking activities you engage in without even realizing it. Take a look at your browser history, for example. How long did you spend and on which sites? Are you surprised about how long you were on certain pages?

Second, identify what new thought patterns you need to make this change. Truthfully, you need only one: *I am doing this no matter what.* Done! Sometimes, unfortunately, the simplest ideas can be the hardest to implement. So make sure you take time to accomplish this, because without completing this step successfully, the next three steps may be more difficult. But once step one is solid, the remaining two are easy.

2. Create a morning routine

This step might seem daunting (or even unnecessary if you're a night owl), but it can be simplified by answering these three questions:

Why work out in the morning?

The morning is the best time to work out for physiological and psychological reasons. The physiological reason is that the morning is when your cortisol levels are higher, helping regulate metabolism so you can use the stored energy effectively during exercise. Exercising at night raises your core temperature, which is not optimal for falling asleep.

The psychological reasons are twofold. First, you get it over with it so you can get on with the day, and when you do so, you feel ahead because you accomplished the toughest task. No homework to do after clocking out.

Second, the morning has the biggest potential for consistency because it is when you have the fewest disruptions and when you have full control over your time. When you follow through with the promise to yourself in the morning, you feel more in control, and you can start the day with confidence. When you push it back to the evening, you are more likely to get distractions and obligations, and your sense of control may feel out of reach.

How much time should I exercise?

The short answer is: It doesn't matter as long as you do it. Do it for 30 seconds. Do it for a minute, 10 minutes, or 30 minutes. Progress is not about how long you exercise during a given day but how many days you can sustain the habit of exercising.

If you are just starting out, giving yourself just five or 10 minutes to start is perfectly fine. Making yourself workout for 30 minutes the first time you exercise is like making a toddler run across a field.

Do not make the mistake I did: I ran an entire 5K without a single day of running in the prior three months, and I could not walk for a week. Biting off more than you can chew is not healthy for your mind, body, or soul.

How do I make sure I follow through?

Be specific about the when and the where. Think about the last time you did well under vague instructions. Do you have a clear memory of that time? Especially when it comes to exercising in the morning, when you are already struggling to wake up, you must be 100 percent clear and make the instructions as convenient as possible so that your sleepy self can go on autopilot.

Which of the following would work better? "Exercise more" or "Right after I make the bed, I will train legs every Tuesday and Thursday at 7:15 am each morning on the yoga mat in the living room before I brew some coffee." Of course, the latter.

There is a formula to this: [NEUTRAL HABIT], then [DESIRED NEW HABIT] at [DESIRED TIME] at [LOCATION], then [HABIT THAT YOU LOOK FORWARD TO].

Don't forget to include the habit you look forward to. When forming new habits, it should not be all pain and no gain. Don't let your new activity interrupt your day so much that you begin to resent it.

3. Do the workout

But what exercises do you need to do? That's the easy part. There are so many options, but start small. Write down five exercises that you can think of immediately (e.g., jumping jacks, squats, plank, push-ups, sit-ups). Do them for a minute each. Repeat each exercise three to five times. That is already 15-25 minutes. If you get bored, take 30 seconds to find a free app (e.g., Nike Training Club , Daily Workouts Fitness Trainer, Yoga Studio) or a paid app (e.g., Sweat, Aaptiv) that will walk you through a more diverse set of exercises.

That’s it. To stick to your new routine, join a community (e.g., Mindful Lawyers Community) or listen to podcasts (e.g., Happy Lawyer Project, TEDTalks Health, or my blog's Fit to Practice podcast) during your long commute.

Keep in mind that waking up a bit earlier or changing things around in your morning routine (or creating one) is a lifestyle change that may be difficult at first. It took me about three months before I felt like I could keep this going.

During the first three months (or four, if I am being honest), I felt like I could not survive my first waking hour. The only way I got through it was by going through this process and automating my habit. A habit cannot be formed in a day, but each day is essential to making one last. What is that one habit you’ve been putting off? You can start today.

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