

Shareable resource: 10 ways to enhance pleasure during exercise

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Take Ten

By Leighton Jones, Ph.D., and Zachary Zenko, Ph.D., FACSM

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Exercise adherence remains a challenge for many and a renewed focus on the pleasure associated with exercise could help promote better long-term adherence. Here we discuss 10 ways to enhance the pleasure experienced during exercise. This is based on an openly accessible systematic review on extrinsic strategies to improve affective responses to exercise (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2023.1186986>). We encourage readers to view the original for citations and references.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF PLEASURE

There is growing awareness of the important role that affective responses (*e.g.*, pleasure, enjoyment) experienced during exercise play in promoting adherence. How people feel *during* exercise is more strongly related to future behavior, compared to how people feel *after* exercise. There are numerous extrinsic strategies that we can recommend to help change how people feel, but one important intrinsic characteristic is the intensity of exercise. During *heavy* exercise, some people continue to feel good, whereas others begin to feel worse. During *severe* exercise, people typically feel worse. One way to enhance pleasure during exercise is to reduce the intensity. Extrinsic strategies are related to the broader exercise environment and are outside of the FITT principles.

2. IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE...

Music is one of the most extensively studied extrinsic strategies during exercise and there is good evidence to suggest it can positively change how we feel. Tempo is of central importance with music between 120–140 bpm often preferred for repetitive rhythmic tasks (*e.g.*, running, cycling). Music can be applied synchronously (a conscious attempt to move in time to the beat) or asynchronously with beneficial effects reported for both. Music can help change how we feel over a wide range of exercise intensities from low to high.

3. TUNE IN AND TURN UP

The inclusion of purposefully selected visual stimuli alongside music has been shown to have additional positive effects. Using videos that complement the music (*e.g.*, music videos) seems to have a more beneficial effect than visual footage that is unrelated to the music (*e.g.*, Point-of-view footage of a cycle track). Therefore, consider how the audio and visual elements can be combined effectively when exercising indoors. Most exercise facilities have TVs, exercise machines with screens, and music playing but these aren't always tuned to maximize their effectiveness. Many exercisers have their own devices, and these could be tuned to promote pleasurable experiences.

4. IS THIS THE REAL LIFE? IS THIS JUST FANTASY?

As virtual reality (VR) headsets become more affordable and widespread, research on their use in exercise grows. Anyone who has used virtual reality knows that cybersickness can be a factor and care should be taken regarding the type of content used during exercise to minimize any potential cybersickness. The immersive effects of VR do have an additional benefit compared to content being delivered in a more conventional way; with music videos watched in VR more pleasant than when watched on a TV while stationary cycling. Further, using 360° videos in VR seems to be a more pleasant experience than a computer-generated world while cycling.

5. THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Broadly speaking, exercising outdoors appears more pleasant than exercising indoors. This has been shown a consistent finding across a wide range of demographics. When practicable, try to facilitate outdoor exercise if there is an option to do so. Further, exercise in green (*e.g.*, countryside) or blue (*e.g.*, coastal) environments seems more beneficial than outdoor exercise in urban environments.

6. WAKE UP AND SMELL THE COFFEE

Several researchers have demonstrated positive effects of caffeine on affective responses to exercise, in some cases compared to placebo. Within reason, caffeine could be used, and it may enhance the experience of exercise. Although physical activity certainly does not require caffeine supplementation, it may enhance the enjoyment and/or pleasure of exercise.

7. FUEL YOUR EXERCISE

Although the literature is mixed, some researchers have found that carbohydrate ingestion is related to affective responses. Exercisers have been shown to have more pleasant experiences after ingesting carbohydrates and when glycogen-loaded. Similarly, drinking carbohydrate-electrolyte solutions can enhance the pleasure of exercise, in comparison to water alone or no fluid.

8. “NO PAIN, NO GAIN” IS OUT; GOOD FEELINGS ARE IN

How do you choose your exercise intensity? Do you set an intensity based on a target heart rate? Or do you choose the intensity that feels good for you? There are positive effects of allowing people to choose their own pace such as enhanced pleasure, autonomy, and even adherence to exercise. Allowing people to choose intensities that feel good can be beneficial physiologically, as well. Similarly, though not universal, ensuring exercise ends with pleasure can result in a more positive experience overall. We do not know of any research that indicates allowing freedom to choose an exercise intensity or focusing on pleasure is *worse* for psychological outcomes, compared to imposing intensity.

Exercise does not have to be miserable to be effective. The most effective exercise program is the one that people adhere to as part of a long-term, active lifestyle.

9. BE MINDFUL OF YOUR FEELINGS

Mindfulness can include awareness of one's feelings. The Jedi were advised to be mindful of their feelings, and this may be beneficial for exercisers, too. Mindfulness can enhance the pleasure and enjoyment of exercise, and predictions of how pleasant a future exercise session would be. Mindfulness also seems to be more beneficial than focusing on changing one's appearance.

10. BE CREATIVE

There are many things that humans find pleasurable, and the task is creating ways to ensure exercise is one of them. The different approaches briefly described here only represent those that have been tested by researchers and reported, but there are likely many more strategies that are effective in positively changing how people feel during exercise. By drawing on your professional experience, consider novel ways in which the exercise experience could be manipulated to promote pleasure and then look to monitor and record the effects it has.