

Consistency beats intensity

As we step into 2025, the start of a new year offers a natural moment to revisit our health and fitness goals. Although change is possible at any time, there's something about turning the calendar that inspires fresh aspiration. However, overly ambitious resolutions often backfire. More than half of adults abandon their resolutions,¹ with 23% giving up before the end of January.² If you're looking to build strength and improve fitness, consistency beats intensity every time.

Health and fitness are long games, not quick fixes. As physicians, we routinely recommend healthier habits to our patients—quit smoking, reduce alcohol consumption, cut back on sugar, and move more. Yet even for us, sometimes the advice is easier to prescribe than to follow. Change is hard. On average, it takes 66 days to solidify a new behavior into a habit.^{3,4} SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound) provide a helpful framework, but achieving them demands perseverance.

Intensity can be the enemy of sustainability. If a workout is too demanding, it can be harder to maintain and can increase the risk of injury. In studies on distance running, for example, the 80/20 rule suggests that the optimal balance is 80% low intensity and 20% high intensity.^{5,6} Elite athletes understand this, and so should we. There's no need to push your limits every single day.

My 2024 resolution was to complete an Instagram-purchased daily hip-stretching course (a goal that may not have been smart *or* SMART). With 18 days down and 348 to go, its efficacy remains to be seen. But stay tuned: 2025 is going to be much more flexible.

If you have resolved to move more, remember, every bit counts! Research shows that the benefits of moderate to vigorous physical activity apply whether it happens sporadically or in sustained bouts.⁷ Reflecting this, the Canadian 24-hour movement

guidelines removed the 10-minute minimum bout requirement to achieve the recommended 150 minutes per week of moderate to vigorous physical activity.^{8,9} This change acknowledges that short, frequent bursts of activity make health goals more accessible and achievable for more people.¹⁰

If you have resolved to move more, remember, every bit counts! Research shows that the benefits of moderate to vigorous physical activity apply whether it happens sporadically or in sustained bouts.

Setbacks are inevitable, but perfection isn't required. James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits*, reassures us that “building better habits is not an all-or-nothing process.”⁴ Progress comes from small, consistent actions. Focus on manageable behaviors that create momentum and, over time, lead to meaningful, sustainable change.

The most enduring resolutions are internally driven—“I want to run with my dog”—versus externally motivated—“Everyone in my office is doing the Sun Run.”¹¹ Internal motivation fosters a sense of ownership and accomplishment, increasing the likelihood of long-term success.

Even smaller pursuits, like a lunchtime stroll or taking the stairs while doing rounds, can contribute to wellness. If we choose activities that bring us joy and fit seamlessly into our lives, we'll create sustainable routines, proving that consistency, not intensity, is the key to exercise results. ■

—Caitlin Dunne, MD, FRCSC

References

- Norcross JC, Mrykalo MS, Blagys MD. Auld lang syne: Success predictors, change processes, and self-reported outcomes of New Year's resolvers and nonresolvers. *J Clin Psychol* 2002;58:397-405. doi: 10.1002/jclp.1151.
- Lark A. New Year's resolutions statistics and trends [2024]. Drive Research. 18 November 2024. Accessed 16 December 2024. www.driveresearch.com/market-research-company-blog/new-years-resolutions-statistics.
- Lally P, van Jaarsveld CHM, Potts HWW, Wardle J. How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2010;40:998-1009. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.674.
- Clear J. How long does it actually take to form a new habit? (Backed by science). James Clear. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://jamesclear.com/new-habit>.
- Seiler S. What is best practice for training intensity and duration distribution in endurance athletes? *Int J Sports Physiol Perform* 2010;5:276-291. doi: 10.1123/ijsp.5.3.276.
- Witts J, Bozon J. What is 80/20 training? Runner's World. Updated 22 March 2023. Accessed 16 December 2024. www.runnersworld.com/uk/training/motivation/a27718661/what-is-80-20-running.
- Saint-Maurice PF, Troiano RP, Matthews CE, Kraus WE. Moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and all-cause mortality: Do bouts matter? *J Am Heart Assoc* 2018;7. doi: 10.1161/JAHA.117.007678.
- Clarke J, Janssen I. Sporadic and bouted physical activity and the metabolic syndrome in adults. *Med Sci Sports Exerc* 2014;46:76-83. doi: 10.1249/MSS.0b013e31829f83a0.
- Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology. Canadian 24-hour movement guidelines for adults aged 18-64 years: An integration of physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://csepguidelines.ca/guidelines/adults-18-64>.
- Prince SA, Roberts KC, Lang JJ, et al. The influence of removing the 10-minute bout requirement on the demographic, behaviour and health profiles of Canadian adults who meet the physical activity recommendations. *Health Rep* 2022;33:3-18. doi: 10.25318/82-003-x202200800001-eng.
- American Psychological Association. Speaking of psychology: How to keep your New Year's resolutions, with Pauline Wallin, PhD. 1 January 2020. Accessed 16 December 2024. www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/new-years-resolutions.

Youth social media use: Like and subscribe to healthy approaches

In November 2024, Australia passed a new law banning social media use by youth under 16 years of age. The Social Media Minimum Age bill will require social media companies to take “reasonable steps” to prevent the use of their platforms by youth.¹ This legislation aims to protect youth mental health and will be backed by fines of up to C\$45 million for failure to comply. Meanwhile, critics have suggested that this approach may be ineffective or even harmful. Is an outright ban necessary amid other available measures? Is it sufficient to prevent harms to youth in a complex social media universe? And what role do health care practitioners have in this area? In short, it’s complicated.

The impacts of social media on youth mental health and well-being are increasingly widely studied; findings show a litany of negative effects linked to social media use, including addiction-like experiences such as uncontrolled use, neglect of other activities, and withdrawal during pauses in engagement.² A growing body of research describes dose–response relationships between social media use and symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as inattention and distractibility.³ These effects are familiar to many: the experience of negative cognitive impacts flowing from social media use has become so pervasive that a term describing the experience—*brain rot*—was named Oxford’s word of the year for 2024. Many social media platforms and features are addictive by design. It has been demonstrated that compulsive social media use engages similar reward pathways as other addictive behaviors. Users may be particularly vulnerable to these effects during adolescence, a crucial period of neurological development.

Weighing the mounting evidence and identifying a need for action, the US

surgeon general issued an advisory noting “growing evidence that social media is associated with harm to young people’s mental health” and recommending protective action by policymakers, technology companies,

In primary care, pediatric, and psychiatric contexts, screening and counseling for harmful social media use may become as fundamental as discussions on drug use.

parents, and youth themselves.⁴ In BC, the provincial government passed a law restricting students’ use of digital devices in the classroom, with stated aims including support for mental health, social connection, and distraction-free learning.⁵

On the other hand, evidence suggests that youth may also experience benefits from social media, including feelings of acceptance and connection.⁴ Potentially isolated young people can find others who share interests and experiences, either across town or around the world. Discussing life challenges with online connections distant from family and local friends may be less awkward for some, and in some cases it may indeed be safer. The positive and negative effects of social media play out in the context of identity and environment, and evidence suggests that supportive aspects of social media may be particularly positive for racialized, disabled, and transgender people. Experiences of social media are as varied as the myriad platforms and diverse populations of users.

Health care practitioners can anticipate and respond to the rapid evolution of social

media use among youth. In primary care, pediatric, and psychiatric contexts, screening and counseling for harmful social media use may become as fundamental as discussions on drug use. Public health authorities should use emerging evidence to inform policymakers, with attention to potential restrictions on use by youth, more nuanced interventions in the online environment, investment in early childhood development, prevention of traumatic adverse childhood events, and promotion of healthy social connections.

No single law, digital feature, or offline program will be protective against all potential harms of social media among youth. Instead, a variety of complementary options will be necessary. We may not be able to delete all negative aspects of youth social media use, but as a society, we can block many harmful impacts by applying health-promoting policy and practice. ■

—Michael Schwandt, MD, MPH, FRCPC

References

1. Kaye B, Menon P. Australia passes social media ban for children under 16. Reuters. Updated 28 November 2024. Accessed 4 December 2024. www.reuters.com/technology/australia-passes-social-media-ban-children-under-16-2024-11-28.
2. The Lancet. Unhealthy influencers? Social media and youth mental health. *Lancet* 2024;404(10461):1375. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(24)02244-X.
3. Weigle PE, Shafi RMA. Social media and youth mental health. *Curr Psychiatry Rep* 2024;26:1-8. doi: 10.1007/s11920-023-01478-w.
4. Office of the Surgeon General. Social media and youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory. 2023. Accessed 5 December 2024. www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf.
5. Government of British Columbia. Cell phone restrictions in schools. Updated 10 September 2024. Accessed 5 December 2024. www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/cellphones-in-schools.