

# Overwhelmed and Running on Empty

Solutions for overcoming the obstacles, barriers and excuses that keep you from exercising regularly.

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Illustration: Stephanie Carter

**R**achael Passi, 31, is a very busy person. With two young children under the age of five and a husband who works long hours, she has a problem juggling everyone's schedule and maintaining her exercise program.

"I like to weight train and to run. But for the last year I've had a hard time being consistent, and lately I've been finding excuses."

In fact, Rachael knows she doesn't get enough sleep and that her poor eating habits are a result of her hectic schedule. "There's just too much to do. The children come first, and there's no time left for me."

Rachael doesn't exercise to lose weight or to develop the perfect body; for her, exercise is all about maintaining balance and creating a little space for herself in her own life.

"I'm never alone," she sighs. "I can't even go to the bathroom by myself. I need some solitude, and I'm only able to get that when I'm exercising. After I exercise, I can handle the daily challenges."

Like many parents, Rachael always puts the needs of her family first. The problem arises when everyone else's needs stop her from taking care of herself. She feels guilty when she takes time away from her family to take care of her own health.

However, taking the time to eat properly and exercise is one of the most unselfish things she could do for her family; regular exercise would ensure that she is a happy and healthy parent.



## Obstacles, barriers and excuses

When Rachael thought about what she had to do in a day, the list was overwhelming. "It's hard to fit it all in," she said.

She told me that she liked to work out in the mornings but was usually too tired since she goes to bed late. She didn't like to work out in the afternoon and found the gym too crowded in the evening. Because of her lack of consistency, she wasn't getting the results she wanted and was feeling frustrated.

To get a clearer picture of Rachael's challenges, I asked her to write down all the reasons, situations or challenges that got in the way of exercise and to classify them as *barriers*, *obstacles* or *excuses*.

A *barrier* is an unpreventable event or circumstance that hinders our plans or actions.

An *obstacle* is a foreseeable event or circumstance that impedes our plans or actions.

An *excuse* is a foreseeable or unforeseeable event or circumstance that, with planning, can be overcome.

Under *obstacles*, Rachael listed: her husband's erratic work schedule, children's extracurricular activities and housework. With planning she could work around these.

In the *excuse* category, she placed: being too tired in the morning, not liking to exercise in the afternoon or evenings, her frustration and her low motivation.

Rachael was surprised that she had no *barriers*. She set out to develop strategies to overcome her three *obstacles*.

## The breakthrough moment

"I'm so surprised," said Rachael. "I thought that I had all these really valid reasons for not working out. But now I see that many of them were just smoke and mirrors. After writing them down, I realized that some of my reasons were just excuses and that I needed to work on my obstacles."



"Rachael, your three *obstacles* are your husband's work schedule, your children's activities and getting housework done. What do you think about your list of obstacles?" I asked.

"Well," said Rachael, "my housework is flexible. I mean there's no deadline to get it done. I just feel that everything should be done before I go to bed."

"What would happen if it wasn't?"

"Nothing", Rachael laughed. "I just never thought about it. I could always hire someone to come in once a week to do the big jobs like the floors, the bathrooms and maybe some laundry, which I hate doing anyway."

"Would that free up some time for you?"

"Yes, a lot," said Rachael.

"What else on the obstacle list could you tackle?" I asked

"Instead of getting my husband's work schedule on Sunday nights, I could ask for it by Wednesday the week before. He knows what it is two weeks in advance and that would help me with planning my workouts." Rachael had a lightness in her voice.

Rachael then told me how she could combine her workouts with her children's activities.

With her new plan in hand Rachael said, "This fits in with my life. I always thought of my own exercise as something extra, something on the outside of my life. Now I know that once you weed out your excuses, anything is possible if you want to make it possible." «



# "There's just too much to do. The children come first, and there's no time left for me."

## Sorting barriers, obstacles and excuses

**If you want to exercise more consistently or just get started, try the following exercise:**

**STEP 1:** List all the reasons, situations or challenges that prevent you from exercising

**STEP 2:** On a piece of paper make a chart with three columns titled *barriers*, *obstacles* and *excuses* (see definitions above).

**STEP 3:** Place each reason for not exercising in one column. Be honest!

**STEP 4:** Take a careful look at the *barriers* and *obstacles* items. Pick one item that you could change today and that would move you forward.

**STEP 5:** Disregard the *excuse* column items. They are, after all, just excuses.

**STEP 6:** Start to develop strategies that will help you move past all your *barriers* and *obstacles*.

**STEP 7:** Put a time limit on the completion of your plan.

**STEP 8:** Set your plan into motion!

Susan Cantwell is president of The Lifestyle Coaching Institute which provides individual and group lifestyle coaching. It also trains health and fitness professionals who want to become lifestyle coaches.

## Invitation

If you have a fitness or lifestyle goal and would like to be coached, send an e-mail describing your challenges and goals to Susan at [editors@activewoman.ca](mailto:editors@activewoman.ca). Include your contact information, age and city.