

— EXCERPT —

from

MICHELLE SEGAR, PH.D

.....

**How the Simple Science of Motivation
Can Bring You a Lifetime of Fitness**

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NO SWEAT



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How the Simple Science of Motivation
Can Bring You a Lifetime of Fitness



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CHAPTER

2

Escaping the Vicious Cycle of Failure

WHEN JACK'S DOCTOR CALLED WITH THE TEST RESULTS FROM HIS annual physical, the busy school administrator and father of two teens wasn't surprised to hear that his cholesterol was too high and his blood pressure was "borderline." His doctor had already told Jack that he could stand to lose fifteen pounds. He'd heard something similar last year as well—only then it was just ten pounds. The doctor suggested that Jack could probably control his weight with some lifestyle changes, and Jack resolved to finally do something about his health. He would start eating healthier to lower his cholesterol, join a gym, and begin an exercise regime.

It's a familiar tale, and for Jack it had a familiar ending. Jack started out with the best of intentions: He paid for a gym membership, hired a trainer, and consulted a nutritionist. For a couple of months, things went according to plan. He worked out several times

a week, ate leaner meals, and cut down on snacks and treats. He was losing weight, getting fit, and feeling better.

But then life happened—all at once. Soccer season started and, during what was supposed to be Jack’s workout time, he had to shuttle his daughter back and forth to practices and games. Worse, he came up against a hard deadline at work, which meant long hours, meals eaten whenever he could fit them in, and more skipped workouts. By the time the holidays rolled around, everything from his workout schedule to his healthy eating habits had gotten blown to smithereens.

Jack made a firm New Year’s resolution to get back to his diet and workout plan. He renewed his gym membership, put workout days on his calendar, and bought some new athletic shoes. But in February, as he sat on the couch watching basketball, he realized he hadn’t been back to the gym. He reached for a beer and some peanuts. Peanuts had a lot of protein, so that was okay, right? And beer had vitamin B-something.

Two more months passed. Then three. Jack finally got the guts to step on the scale, which confirmed his worst fears: He’d gained five more pounds. He felt like a total failure. When he thought about starting up with his diet and exercise routine again, all he felt was dread.

Then, in a casual conversation with a friend, he heard about one of my workshops. He attended one that was near his office and soon after booked a personal appointment. One of the first questions I asked him was what Meaning exercise and diet had for him. He was bewildered. “I’ve never thought about it,” he said. “At first I want to work out, and then I just don’t. Right now? Exercise just means failure and humiliation.”

Does Jack’s situation sound similar to yours? Have you ever joined a gym, only to have your membership go unused after the first few weeks? Have you started a diet or exercise program that you just can’t sustain, even though you truly meant to make it work?

I can practically guarantee that you’ve been through one, if not

both, of these scenarios. I know this because the vast majority of people today struggle to lead a healthy, active lifestyle only to see their good intentions and best-laid plans evaporate. (Some estimates put the percentage of unused gym memberships as high as 67 percent!¹) I call this epidemic of starting-quitting-starting-quitting the Vicious Cycle of Failure, and it's the only way most of us have learned to exercise and care for our bodies.

No one sets out to fail. Jack certainly didn't. He started out with energy and purpose. Yet Jack is almost surely going to go through the same cycle again next year, when his doctor delivers another "time to lose weight and get healthy" speech. When it comes to sticking to diet and exercise programs, failure seems to be a given. After going through this cycle a few times, people like Jack even stop going to their annual exams so they can avoid feeling a sense of failure as well as judgment from their clinicians for not having achieved their exercise or weight loss objectives.

When we decide it's time to focus on our body shape or health, we rarely stop to ask ourselves how we're thinking and feeling about this big change we want to make in our lives. Instead, we jump to the *doing* part. It happens all the time. We believe we can go from rarely exercising to becoming the image of that active and fit person we have in our minds. We expect this approach to succeed, and we feel like failures when it doesn't.

Why do we keep running up against the same wall? We already know success doesn't work that way. It's a little bit like expecting to get an A on your math test without first going to class and reading the textbook. But knowing and believing are two different things. We have a hard time ridding ourselves of the false assumption that we can achieve our fitness goals without doing the work because so much of our advertising and popular culture focuses on instant results: Just do it! Lose ten pounds overnight! Leap tall buildings in a single bound! Who doesn't want such things to happen?

It's natural to yearn for and even believe in an easy answer, a magic bullet that will finally be our salvation. But a real solution

requires taking time to reflect on the societal, cultural, and familial messages that have been shaping our beliefs about physical activity for so many years. This deep understanding is the *real* magic bullet that will let us develop and take ownership of our personalized maps to long-term behavior and better results. The first step is to understand how the Meaning we hold for exercise affects our relationship with it.

What Does Exercise Mean to You?

Let's start with a basic, straightforward question: What does the word *exercise* mean to you?

Okay, so maybe that question isn't as simple as it sounds. According to cognitive scientist Benjamin K. Bergen, "Making meaning . . . [is] something we're doing almost constantly . . . What's perhaps most remarkable about it is that we hardly notice we're doing anything at all."² Without even realizing it, our Meaning for a behavior is constructed from what we learn about it through living in our society (the media, our culture and communities, conversations with health professionals, etc.), as well as our own personal experiences with being physically active.³ Although you may rarely stop to consider what something means to you, everything in our lives does have a deeper symbolic Meaning that is unique to *us*. And our automatic decisions and reflexive responses to all sorts of things in our lives, including exercise, are determined by these Meanings. It is essential to understand our Meaning of physical activity because research shows that our Meanings powerfully influence our subsequent motivation, decisions, how we cope with challenges, and ultimately whether we sustain physically active lives.⁴

IT'S YOUR MOVE

Your History with Exercise

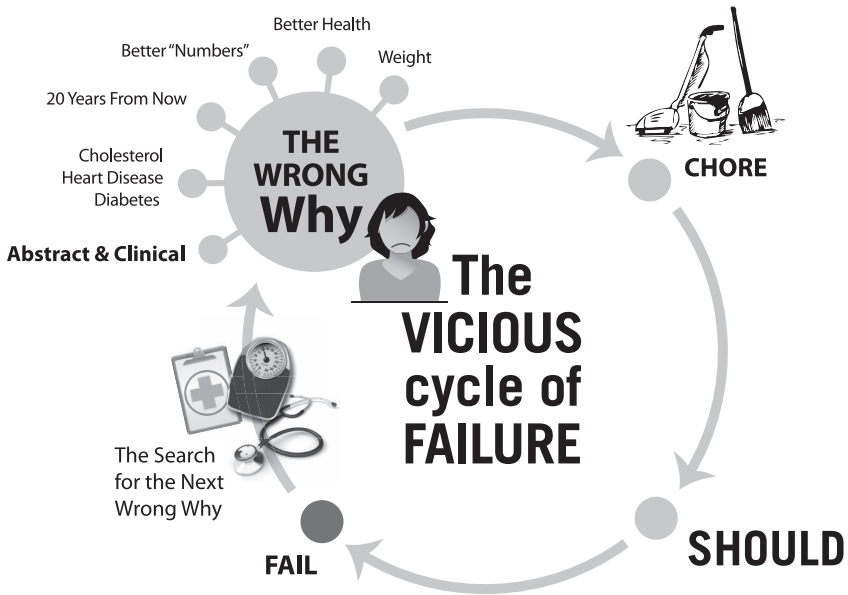
We continually get messages that influence our Meanings. Our role models, including parents, friends, and celebrities, consciously or unconsciously influence the Meanings we hold. The companies that market products to us—cars, phones, running shoes—have purposely branded them in specific ways so we develop specific messages. Take a moment now to consider what you've learned about the Meaning of being physically active and exercising from your family, friends, and the media.

1. When you were growing up, what messages (verbal or nonverbal) did you get from your family, friends, and community about exercise? (For example, who was physically active in your family? What were you told about the “right” way to exercise?)
2. What adjectives come to mind to describe the images of people exercising that you typically see in the media?
3. What do you think these images are trying to sell you?
4. How have these images made you feel about yourself? How do they make you feel about exercising?
5. What have these images motivated you to do? What do these images motivate you *not* to do?
6. Based on your answers to the questions above, what does exercise mean or symbolize to you?

The Vicious Cycle of Failure

As I said earlier, I call the cycle of try, fail, try again, fail again the Vicious Cycle of Failure. It is vicious because it sets us up to fail again and again and again—despite our best intentions. And every failure, every bad experience, reinforces the Meaning we hold for exercise. This Meaning, if you haven’t guessed it already, is bound to be negative. Figure 2-1 illustrates this cycle.

FIGURE 2-1. The Vicious Cycle of Failure.



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As you can see, the Vicious Cycle of Failure always starts on the upper left side with what I call the “Wrong Why”—an initial motivation for starting a diet or exercise program that sets us up to fail

before we start. You may “hate” the way you look or want to “look good” in a swimsuit, impress someone you desire, or follow your doctor’s orders. Whatever the impetus for change, the Wrong Why often originates outside ourselves, to meet a societal standard or please someone.

Once we have the Wrong Why, we move into the doing it or “chore” phase—vowing to cut carbs, work out intensely, eat “sensibly,” or whatever it takes to achieve our objective. It feels like a *should*. We do it anyway—until, inevitably, something gets in the way. We falter, we miss workouts, we eat something “bad.” Eventually, we throw in the towel. *Failed* again.

After some time devoted to feeling bad about ourselves and our failure, we jump back on the cycle and start all over again—ever hopeful, but poorly motivated by *the Next Wrong Why* that sooner or later dooms us to failure again.

The obvious question is the same one I asked the study participants I told you about in Chapter 1: Why on earth do we keep doing the same thing again and again when it has led to failure?

We do it because of the Meaning we hold for exercise.

IT’S YOUR MOVE

Why Did You Start Exercising?

Take a moment to think about why you started exercising, either currently or at some time in the past. Then complete the following sentence:

Most of the time, my primary reason to begin exercising regularly has been because I have wanted to

_____.

Why We Choose the Wrong Reasons for Exercising

What physical activity means to us is the root of our motivation for doing it.⁵ If our Meaning is negative, the good news is that we can change it to be positive and motivating. But we can transform our Meaning only by deconstructing it to its core parts. Our Meaning for exercise is constructed out of not only our knowledge and feeling about it from our past socialization and experiences with it but also from our *primary motivation*: in other words, the Why, the underlying reason we are choosing to do it in the first place. A negative Meaning (such as “I have to exercise hard to fix my horrible body”) feels like a chore; it sets us up for negative experiences or even complete avoidance. But a positive Meaning (such as “Working out is a tool that reduces the stress I feel about my job”) is a gift we want to give to ourselves. It makes us *want* to exercise.

The most common answer to the question you just answered about the primary reason to begin exercising regularly is “to lose weight.” But sometimes people tell me they start exercising to become “healthier” or even to become healthier *and* lose weight. Those sound like reasonable answers, right? Well, maybe not.

As it turns out, research shows that even reasons that sound very sensible and important may not lead us to the results we’re seeking. Some years ago, my colleagues and I conducted a study in which we examined the impact of people’s reasons to start exercising on their actual involvement in exercise.⁶ We first asked the participants to state their reasons or goals for exercising, as I just asked you. Then, to uncover their higher-level reasons for exercising, we asked them why they cared about obtaining those particular benefits. My colleagues and I found that 75 percent of participants cited weight loss or better health (current and future) as their top reasons for exercising; the other 25 percent exercised in order to enhance the quality of their daily lives (such as to create a sense of well-being or feel centered). Then we measured how much time they actually spent exercising over the course of the next year. The answer may seem counterintuitive,

but it's true: The vast majority of the participants whose goals were weight loss and better health spent the *least* amount of time exercising overall—up to 32 percent less than those with other goals.

Think about that for a moment: Our most common and culturally accepted reasons for exercising are associated with doing the *least* amount of exercise. How can this be? These are sensible goals, the same goals our doctors and other health experts are always pushing. So why don't they work very well?

The answer lies in human nature. Human beings, it turns out, are hardwired to choose immediate gratification over long-term benefits. (We'll go into this science in more detail in the Awareness part of the book.) We like to think of ourselves as reasonable creatures, but logic doesn't motivate us nearly as much as our emotions do.⁷ We approach what feels good and avoid what feels bad.⁸ So a negative overall Meaning for exercise coupled with a payoff we have to wait years for strongly influences whether we decide to do it on a regular basis.

As motivating reasons for exercise, weight loss and better health are the Wrong Whys for many people because they do not provide the immediate rewards and feedback we need to consistently do it.⁹ The results you may have been looking for will happen only down the road, *after many weeks and months* of exercise, if at all. How is that potential, far-off reward from exercising supposed to motivate you right now, today, when you need to drag yourself off the couch and get to the gym? Or when you are managing a sick kid and a looming work deadline? More often than not, it doesn't.

These types of goals are vague, gauzy images of a possible better future. There's no hard and fast promise of a better today, a shinier right now. And yet, even though these goals don't provide the immediate payoff we crave, we keep choosing them. My contention is this: *It's time to stop choosing the wrong reasons for exercising.*

Think about it. It doesn't matter whether or not things like weight loss or better health are "good" or actual goals that we or our doctors want us to achieve. It does matter, however, that they are generally *ineffective* because they don't make physical activity explicitly relevant

to our most important daily roles and priorities. As a result, these types of goals don't imbue exercising with the type of Meaning that has the positivity and potency to consistently motivate most of us to be physically active for life.

It's easy to get stuck in the Vicious Cycle of Failure, but escaping this cycle is equally easy. When it comes to making a sustainable change in your behavior, understanding your *Meaning* is your starting place because it determines the tone of your relationship with being physically active (or any behavior). In practical terms, your Meaning for being physically active determines whether or not you will make time, day after day, to do it and ultimately whether you achieve your desired goals from physical activity.

IT'S YOUR MOVE

Are You Starting from the Wrong Why?

Go back and look at your response to the *It's Your Move* question "Why did you start exercising?" earlier in this chapter. If you start out by choosing the wrong reasons for beginning to exercise, you're ensuring failure before you even get going.

Based on what you wrote, do you think you've been starting from the Wrong Why?

Escaping Your Personal Vicious Cycle of Failure

Every failure at sticking to a workout program, and every bad experience you have with exercise, reinforces the way you view exercise and keeps you at war with your body:

- » You maintain a *negative* Meaning for exercise.

- » You set *unachievable* weight- or body-related exercise goals.
- » You feel *discouraged* about your ability to be physically active.
- » You come to *dislike* being physically active.

Does reading this list motivate you to be physically active? Of course it doesn't. For most of us, exercise is a means to an end sometime in the future. We do it because we want to look better or be healthier or fit back into that pair of tiny jeans we bought years ago. We do it because we are out to achieve some long-term health-related goal like decreasing our risk of heart disease or lowering our cholesterol. So please set those reasons aside for now, at least until you've finished reading this book.

You may think I'm crazy. Here I am, a professional in the health field, and I'm asking you for now to forget about health factors as your motivator. But I don't ask lightly. I ask because I don't want you to fail now, or fail again. If you fail, it doesn't matter how good your intentions were when you started. Right now, let's really pin down your personal Meaning for exercise: When you think about exercise, does it feel like a chore you *have* to do? Or like a gift you can't wait to open?

IT'S YOUR MOVE

A Chore or a Gift?

On a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 being “a chore to accomplish” and 5 being “a gift to give yourself”—circle the number that best describes how you feel about exercise:

1	2	3	4	5
Chore				Gift

If your answer to the above question landed closer to the “gift” end of the spectrum, you’re ahead of the game. The ideas and approaches you’ll learn in the rest of this book will add to your enjoyment and show you new ways to ensure that this is a gift you will continue to open for a lifetime.

But if you said that physical activity feels like a chore, then it’s something you’re doing because you feel like you *should*, not because you want to. When something feels like a chore, we tend to put off doing it and find any reason to avoid it. It’s going to be pretty hard, if not impossible, to make a chore a sustainable part of your life.

But please, don’t give up now. Instead, consider this: *Physical activity doesn’t have to feel like a chore*. We’ll dive into this startling idea in the next chapter. But before we do, you probably have a question.

Do You Just Need More Willpower?

At this point in the conversation (or even earlier!), this is what I often hear: “That’s all very interesting about meaning and motivation, Michelle, but it won’t help me. I just have to muster up more willpower.”

Well, guess what? When your exercise depends on your having “enough” willpower or self-control to consistently power through both your ambivalence and your feeling that exercise is a chore, you’ve chosen a strategy that fails most people. Two studies show the very real limitations of willpower, which is also called “ego depletion.”

Researchers in one classic study used two groups of dieters to observe the effects of using willpower, or self-control, to resist sweets while watching a video.¹⁰ One group had close access to an overflowing bowl of candy, while the other group was asked to sit far away from the candy. In addition, some participants were told they could go ahead and eat the candy, while others were asked not to eat the candy because it was needed for another study later that day. The experiment was structured to tempt some of the dieters with the candy so they would have to use willpower to resist temptation, while

the other participants did not have to exert self-control at all. But what these investigators were really interested in was how these different groups would respond in the second part of the experiment.

Following the video, both groups were allowed to have as much ice cream as they wanted in the guise of “rating” flavors. The investigators then measured how much each participant ate. Their hypothesis turned out to be correct: The dieters who had been placed close to the candy in the first part of the study and were told it was okay to eat it—thus needing to exert their self-control (they were dieters, remember)—ate significantly more ice cream compared to the dieters who sat far from the candy or were instructed not to eat it, and thus did not need to exert self-control.

This study shows that *using self-control or willpower in one situation can deplete it in a future situation*. It’s like sand running through an hourglass. We have a finite amount of self-control—and the more we use it, the less we have. In fact, using functional neuroimaging, or fMRI (technology that measures areas and relationships in the brain), scientists can now actually watch the mechanisms that underlie the depletion of willpower in the brain.

A second study, done with a group of thirty-one chronic dieters (individuals who tried diet after diet to lose weight), examined changes in the participants’ brain activity in response to viewing desirable foods.¹¹ Before viewing the foods, half of the dieters completed a task known to deplete willpower. Compared with the dieters who did not do this task, the dieters whose willpower had been depleted exhibited a greater response to food cues in reward centers of the brain (the orbitofrontal cortex), along with decreased ability to communicate to another part of the brain implicated in self-control (the frontal gyrus). In this case, seeing is believing: Using self-control in a prior situation actually influences our brain and impacts the potential to use it later.

These findings suggest that just participating in a depleting task results in future self-control failure! Think about it. How many depleting tasks do you already perform in one day (taking care of chil-

dren, doing your job, studying for exams, taking care of your parents)? The normal stress of life may actually reduce the way your brain responds to self-control, further decreasing its capacity to resist temptation.

So please: Forget about willpower as the chief approach for achieving lasting behavior change. It's not that you can't build up your willpower because, to some extent, you can. But even though we can increase our willpower capacity through valuable activities like getting more sleep¹² and even practicing self-control,¹³ that doesn't mean that we should consider it as our primary plan for sustainability. The fact remains that willpower depletes with use. Depending on a resource that is known to deplete with use? Not a good idea for the long run. But there is a much more dependable and stable system that reflects who you are and what is most meaningful to you. Because it reflects who you are instead of depleting you, this system actually energizes you when you use it, generating a positive and renewable source of motivation that has the potency to fuel lasting results. In the next chapter, we'll start to explore this self-system that resides *inside you* and how it holds the key to converting your Meaning of exercise from a chore into a gift.

The Takeaways

- Research shows that people's most common motivations for exercising—weight loss and better health—have actually been associated with doing the least amount of exercise.
- The Vicious Cycle of Failure begins with the Wrong Why—an externally motivated (*should*), abstract, or future-oriented reason for starting a new behavior like exercise.
- The Vicious Cycle of Failure sets you up to fail at exercise and diet programs over and over again, regardless of your best intentions,

reinforcing the negative Meaning you hold for exercise and making you feel bad about yourself. But escaping the Vicious Cycle of Failure is easier than you think.

- Meaning is the root of your motivation. A negative, chore-based Meaning for exercise leads to poor motivation; a positive, gift-like Meaning for exercise leads to high-quality motivation.
- You acquire your Meaning for exercise unconsciously, through your socialization (the messages of society, family, friends, and the media) and your past experiences with it.
- Your Meaning of physical activity is determined by the primary reason you initiate it (the Why) and the past experiences you've had being physically active.
- If you want to change your relationship with being physically active, the starting place is understanding and changing your Meaning of it.
- Willpower depletes with use, so it is not the most strategic system to rely on to sustain the behavioral changes that you desire.

**Want lasting motivation for yourself or others?
— Pre-order *No Sweat*:**



A Note to Health and Wellness Professionals

IF YOU READ THIS BOOK, YOU ARE LIKELY INTERESTED IN BETTER understanding why so many of your patients fail to stick with their intentions to exercise, change their eating habits, and lose weight—and what you can do to change this. This book was designed to help you in your professional capacity as well as in your own life.

As you've seen in your work, getting people to say they want to change their health behaviors can come easily—at first. The problem is that people quickly revert to old habits, resulting in high rates of disease, lost productivity, poor mental health, and spiraling health-care costs. Most of us in health promotion and healthcare have been taught that we should promote “better health” and “disease prevention” as the valuable outcomes to motivate people to practice the lifestyle behaviors necessary for healthier living and disease management.

The problem is that what we've learned and how we've been taught to prescribe “behavior” comes out of a medical framework, one that doesn't take human decision making, motivation, and behavior into account.

Research shows that future health benefits, such as disease prevention, are too abstract to overcome people's inertia and hectic schedules. When motivation is linked to distant, clinical, or abstract goals, health behaviors are not compelling enough to trump the many other daily goals and priorities they constantly compete with. Even weight loss as

an impetus for diet and exercise, particularly for women, is often based in self-rejection; while it is great at eliciting intentions to change, in the long run it frequently fails to motivate behavior long term.

In this new era of healthcare, patient self-management and self-regulation decisions are essential for improving outcomes and decreasing costs. Yet, as a result of the many distractions and alternative choices that are a constant part of their busy daily lives, patients are at risk of self-management failure. A prescription for lifestyle change to optimize health seems like good medicine. But if most people are not motivated to sustain it over time, then the actual health benefits will be small.

In fact, we might even consider that promoting the wrong reasons for a behavior change as being a very costly strategy, expensive for everyone. It's expensive for our organizations because they are investing their resources in promoting future reasons for change that tend to drive short-term results (not a very good ROI). It's expensive for us professionals because when the people we counsel don't follow through we feel discouraged and ineffective, and maybe even stop enjoying our work (a recipe for burnout). It's expensive for our patients and clients because they *really do* want to change, so when they are not successful sustaining their desired behavioral changes, their hopes are dashed and they often become ambivalent about and resistant to investing again in their own self-care.

The health-related reasons for making lifestyle changes that we health professionals care about are irrelevant to which reasons will be most relevant and compelling to patients' lives. It doesn't matter whether or not things like weight loss or better health are "good" or actual goals that we want our patients to achieve from behaviors like physical activity. It does matter, however, that these goals may be ineffective for many because they don't make physical activity explicitly relevant to our most important daily roles and priorities. As a result, these types of goals don't imbue exercising with the type of significance that has the positivity and potency to *consistently* motivate most people to prioritize and sustain physical activity and other self-care behaviors in their lives. My research and other science suggest that

people are more likely to sustain behaviors that are essential to their daily lives *in immediate and noticeable ways*.^{*} This simple idea is also supported by the tried and true methods that marketers use to promote ongoing customer behavior.

No Sweat is written for individuals looking for real and sustainable ways to feel better, live better, and become happier, healthier, and fit. Because most people who intend to get healthy or who start exercising drop out within six months, professionals who work with patients, businesses that promote exercise to their employees, and the government, which funds Medicaid and Medicare, are all desperate for new behavioral solutions that are grounded in research and that can actually work long term.

No Sweat provides a scientifically supported, simple, and time-tested health-and-fitness solution that can fill this need for a very large market. *However, the approach I teach should not replace medically necessary behaviors.* My approach, though, can be used as a strategic ally—as an “in”—to enhance motivation even when there is a very real and compelling medical need. This philosophy and approach is inherently patient-centered. I hope *No Sweat* can help you identify new ways to help your patients discover the reasons that will truly motivate them, and that you will recommend the book to your clients and patients, especially those who are ambivalent or lack the motivation to stick with self-care behaviors, like physical activity, sleep, or dietary changes for the long term. *No Sweat* is also a resource for people who don’t feel comfortable or confident prioritizing time for their own self-care. For more information, please go to www.michellesegar.com.

Learn how to help others stay motivated to sustain their lifestyle goals. Pre-order *No Sweat*:



^{*} Michelle L. Segar and Caroline R. Richardson, “Prescribing Pleasure and Meaning: Cultivating Walking Motivation and Maintenance,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 47(6), December 2014, 838–841.



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“Michelle Segar has cracked the elusive code of behavior change in health. The science behind *No Sweat* helps us break free from the frustrating vicious cycle of failure when most of us embark on a behavior change, and inevitably revert. Michelle shows us how to see and feel movement, fitness, and vitality as gifts we give to ourselves, inspiring a sustainable model for sticking with healthy behaviors.”

—**Jane Sarasohn-Kahn, MA, MHSA, Health Economist and Advisor, THINK-Health and Health Populi blog**

“*No Sweat* is a passionate, practical guide to improving health and fitness. Michelle Segar, a world-class expert, brings us the best of science and coaching. This book is the ultimate resource for motivating others and ourselves to exercise more—and enjoy it more.”

—**Adam Grant, Ph.D., Wharton Professor of Management and Psychology; and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Give and Take***

“As I read *No Sweat*, I kept thinking ‘that’s right’—physical activity has become ritualized and institutionalized to the point that if we aren’t exercising in a gym, in a class, or in a structured setting then it *does not count*. Segar takes an alternative approach to reframe the notion of exercise, suggesting that we need to choose to move in meaningful ways as much and as often as we can, whenever and wherever we like. The message that all movement counts is right on. *No Sweat* is theoretically grounded, engaging, and personal. A better approach to thinking about physical activity, *No Sweat* should be on the reading list for health promotion students and persons seeking a better way to approach a physically active lifestyle.”

—**Barbara Ainsworth, Ph.D., Past President of the American College of Sports Medicine; and Professor, Exercise Science and Health Promotion, Arizona State University**

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No Sweat is designed to provide helpful information on creating sustainable motivation and behavior change. This book does not make any medical recommendations and is not meant to be used to prevent or treat any medical condition.

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