

## Don't reward yourself with food. You are not a Dog.

"Don't reward yourself with food. You are not a dog."  
That's what my friend's personal trainer told her. I was, honestly, a little astounded. "What does she say to reward yourself with, then?" Her answer: "Exercise." My first thought was this: That's stupid. Reward yourself with exercise? What kind of a reward is that? And then how do you reward yourself for exercising?



But that conversation stuck with me for the next few days, and I'll be darned if it didn't start to shift the way I thought about my physical activity. Somewhat surprisingly to me, I began focusing more on, and then actually feeling the positive, or... er... rewarding, aspects of exercise.

This little personal experience highlighted a few things for me about physical activity specifically, but also about healthy changes in general:

1. Your mindset and what you focus on is really important. It's not just all about avoiding the unhealthy things, and feeling deprived of wonderful, lovely things in the name of health. Focusing instead on what you get out of physical activity or eating more healthily can change the experience, making it about getting good stuff out of it. And this makes healthy habits more sustainable. It has been proven that the experience of exercise is better when the end goal is kept firmly in view. Thinking about how good I would feel after, even visualizing it a bit, worked to get me to the gym more often. When I actually began thinking about exercise as a reward, and started focusing on the positive things, sure enough, I started seeing it as not so much the chore that I used to, actually started looking forward to it, and was more firm about scheduling it into my day.
2. When it comes to benefits, exercise really can be, and truly is its own reward. There are real, honest-to-goodness rewards for moving your body. Of course, there are the long-term, harder-to-feel-in-the-moment benefits, such as reducing overall risk for the things that kills us (heart disease, diabetes, cancer and stroke—30 minutes of walking each day cut stroke risk by a minimum of 20%.) But there are also recognizable, instantaneous rewards. After taking a positive, self-improving step toward a goal, there are strong feelings of accomplishment, self-confidence and a boost in self-esteem. Mental clarity and concentration go up immediately. And activity has been proven to improve mood and sleep, decrease depression, ease stress and anxiety; perhaps as effectively as medications. One study found that mood lifts in direct correlation with increasing the number of steps per day. In other words, you feel good!
3. Common triggers for unhealthy eating are emotions. Many of our less-than-optimal eating habits are caused, not by hunger, but by feelings and social circumstances. Utilizing food as reward for accomplishments is actually one example of emotionally-triggered eating. Once you start rewarding big accomplishments with food, it is easy to continue to do so for things that aren't "big" or exceptions, but more common, regular things. And this can lead right into

emotional eating. There are plenty of non-food things to reward yourself with if getting and “earning” rewards is motivating for you.

So, here’s a challenge: see if you are able to move a little more and focus in on the good things you feel. See if you can’t view physical activity as a reward and a good part of life. Because, truthfully, the more you move, the more alive you feel. (Alive as a human, not a puppy.)