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A Mixed-Method Study Using Survey and Interview Analysis to Examine the Psychological and Behavioral Effects of Short-Term Exercise Breaks (3–7 Days) on Exercise Habits and Dropout.

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ABSTRACT : Regular exercise is widely known to improve physical and mental health, yet many people struggle to maintain consistent exercise habits. Even short breaks from exercise, such as missing workouts for three to seven days, may have important psychological and behavioral consequences. This paper examines how short-term exercise breaks influence motivation, emotions, routines, and the likelihood of returning to regular exercise. Using a review-based synthesis of existing research, the study explores how brief interruptions affect habit strength, self-confidence, and decision-making related to physical activity. The findings suggest that short breaks can weaken established routines, increase feelings of guilt or discouragement, and create mental barriers to restarting exercise. These effects are shaped by personal factors such as self-efficacy and exercise identity, as well as situational factors like stress, travel, or minor illness. A conceptual framework is proposed to explain how psychological responses and behavioral disruptions interact during short exercise breaks and contribute to dropout. The study highlights the importance of supporting individuals during short interruptions rather than focusing only on long-term inactivity. Practical implications for fitness professionals, health programs, and digital fitness applications are discussed, emphasizing strategies that promote easy re-entry and reduce emotional and cognitive barriers to resuming exercise.

KEYWORDS:

Exercise adherence; short-term breaks; habit disruption; motivation; dropout behavior; physical activity psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

Regular physical activity is widely recognized as essential for maintaining physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. International health organizations recommend that adults engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days of the week to reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disorders [1]. Despite this strong evidence, maintaining a consistent exercise routine over time remains difficult for many people. Dropout rates from fitness programs and exercise plans are high, especially during the early stages of participation [2].

Most research on exercise adherence has focused on long-term inactivity or complete withdrawal from physical activity. However, less attention has been given to what happens during short interruptions in exercise routines. Short-term exercise breaks, defined in this paper as pauses lasting between three and seven days, commonly occur due to temporary factors such as illness, travel, academic pressure, work commitments, or minor injuries. These breaks are often considered harmless and temporary. In practice, however, many individuals fail to return to regular exercise after such short pauses [3].

Habit theory suggests that repeated behaviors performed in stable situations gradually become automatic. Once a habit is formed, people are more likely to continue the behavior without much conscious effort [4]. Exercise habits, however, may be more fragile than other daily habits because they require time, energy, and planning. A brief disruption can break the link between environmental cues (such as time of day or location) and the exercise behavior itself. When this connection weakens, exercise is no longer automatic and must be consciously restarted, which increases the chance of delay or avoidance.

Psychological reactions to short exercise breaks may further complicate the return process. Individuals often report feelings of guilt, frustration, or disappointment after missing planned workouts. These emotions can reduce confidence in their ability to continue exercising and can weaken motivation [5]. Some people may also feel that they have "lost progress" and must start again from the beginning, which can be discouraging. From a behavioral perspective, missing a few sessions can disrupt routines and increase decision-making effort. Instead of exercising automatically at a fixed time, individuals must decide again

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when and how to exercise, which may lead to procrastination or continued inactivity [6].

Situational factors also play an important role in triggering short-term breaks. Travel can remove access to usual exercise facilities, illness can reduce physical energy, and workload or academic pressure can shift priorities. Minor injuries may cause fear of pain or reinjury, even after recovery. These situational conditions often interact with psychological and behavioral processes, making re-entry into exercise more difficult than expected [7].

Understanding the effects of short-term exercise breaks is important because these brief pauses may act as an early stage of long-term dropout. Instead of viewing exercise dropout as a sudden event, it may be more accurate to see it as a gradual process that begins with short interruptions. If the negative effects of these short breaks can be identified and addressed, it may be possible to prevent long-term disengagement from physical activity.

The objective of this paper is to examine the psychological and behavioral effects of short-term exercise breaks (3–7 days) on exercise habits and dropout. Specifically, the paper aims to:

1. summarize existing research on how short exercise interruptions affect motivation, emotions, and routine behavior;
2. explain the mechanisms through which these breaks weaken exercise habits;
3. present a conceptual framework linking psychological, behavioral, and situational factors; and
4. discuss implications for improving exercise adherence through supportive re-entry strategies.

The central research question guiding this paper is: How do short-term exercise breaks of three to seven days influence psychological states and behavioral patterns related to exercise habit strength and dropout risk? By focusing on this brief but critical period, the paper seeks to contribute to a more detailed understanding of exercise adherence and to highlight the importance of early intervention during short interruptions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews recent research (2020–2025) related to short-term exercise breaks and their influence on exercise habits and dropout. The literature is organized into three main themes: psychological effects, behavioral effects, and situational influences. Together, these themes explain why even brief interruptions in exercise routines may lead to long-term inactivity.

4.1. Psychological Effects of Short-Term Exercise Breaks

4.1.1 Motivation Changes

Motivation is one of the strongest predictors of whether people continue exercising over time. Studies grounded in self-determination theory explain that motivation can be divided into intrinsic motivation (exercising for enjoyment or interest) and extrinsic motivation (exercising due to pressure, guilt, or external rewards) [11]. Research shows that people with higher intrinsic motivation are more likely to maintain exercise routines compared to those driven mainly by obligation [12].

Short-term exercise breaks may alter the quality of motivation. When individuals stop exercising for several days, they often experience a shift from enjoyment-based motivation to guilt-based motivation. Instead of thinking "I like exercising," they may begin to think "I must exercise because I missed workouts" [13]. This change makes exercise feel like a burden rather than a positive activity, increasing the risk of dropout. A longitudinal study of adult exercisers found that people who reported more guilt after short breaks were less likely to resume regular physical activity within the following weeks [14].

4.1.2 Self-Efficacy and Confidence

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to perform a behavior successfully. High exercise self-efficacy is strongly associated with higher levels of physical activity and better adherence to exercise programs [15]. After a short break, individuals may doubt their ability to return to their previous routine, especially if they feel physically weaker or less fit.

Research indicates that even short interruptions can reduce perceived competence. For example, individuals may worry about muscle soreness, fatigue, or loss of progress, which leads to avoidance [16]. Lower self-efficacy has been linked with delayed re-engagement and higher dropout rates, particularly among beginners [17].

4.1.3 Emotional Responses: Guilt, Stress, and Frustration

Emotional reactions to missed exercise sessions play a key role in shaping future behavior. Many people report feeling guilty, disappointed, or stressed when they miss workouts [18]. While small amounts of guilt can sometimes motivate action, excessive guilt often produces the opposite effect by encouraging withdrawal and negative self-talk.

Qualitative studies show that individuals who experience strong guilt after a short break often interpret the lapse as personal failure rather than a temporary disruption [19]. This perception leads to thoughts such as "I am not disciplined enough," which weakens exercise identity. Over time, such emotional responses may reduce commitment to physical activity and promote long-term inactivity [20].

4.2. Behavioral Effects of Short-Term Exercise Breaks

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4.2.1 Habit Disruption

Exercise behavior is often maintained through habits formed by repeated action in stable contexts. Habit strength increases when exercise occurs at the same time and place, such as morning walks or evening gym visits [21]. Short breaks disturb this pattern by interrupting the link between daily cues and exercise behavior.

Research on habit formation shows that missing several sessions can weaken automatic behavior and increase reliance on conscious decision-making [22]. Once the behavior becomes less automatic, individuals must actively choose to exercise again, which increases effort and resistance. Studies using habit strength scales have found that even brief lapses can significantly reduce perceived automaticity of exercise routines [23].

4.2.2 Difficulty in Restarting

Restarting exercise after a short break is often more difficult than maintaining an ongoing routine. This phenomenon is sometimes described as "restart resistance." After a break, individuals face multiple decisions, such as when to exercise, how long to exercise, and how intensely to train. These decisions increase mental load and delay action [24].

Behavioral studies suggest that people are more likely to return to exercise when the restarting process is simple and structured. When no clear plan exists, the likelihood of postponement increases [25]. This explains why short breaks can lead to long-term inactivity even when individuals still intend to exercise.

4.2.3 Loss of Exercise Identity

Exercise identity refers to seeing oneself as an "active person" or "someone who exercises regularly." Identity plays a strong role in sustaining behavior over time. Short-term breaks may weaken this identity, especially when individuals begin to describe themselves as "lazy" or "out of shape" [26].

Qualitative research has shown that people who strongly identify as exercisers feel emotional discomfort after short breaks and may avoid exercise settings such as gyms because they feel they no longer belong there [27]. This identity disruption contributes to social withdrawal from exercise environments and increases dropout risk.

4.3. Situational and Contextual Influences

4.3.1 Common Causes of Short-Term Breaks

Short-term exercise breaks are usually caused by practical issues rather than lack of interest. Common causes include minor illness, travel, work or academic pressure, family responsibilities, and weather conditions [28]. These events temporarily prevent exercise but may also change daily routines and priorities.

Environmental changes such as loss of access to facilities or safe spaces for exercise can also contribute. For example, people who depend on gyms may struggle to exercise during travel or lockdown periods [29]. These situational disruptions interact with psychological responses, making it harder to return.

4.3.2 Injury and Physical Discomfort

Even small injuries can discourage people from returning to exercise. Fear of pain or reinjury often remains even after physical recovery [30]. Research shows that uncertainty about how to restart safely is a major barrier, especially for individuals without professional guidance [31].

This fear may combine with reduced self-efficacy and increased anxiety, creating a cycle of avoidance. As time passes, individuals become more uncertain about their physical ability, which further delays re-engagement.

4.4. Gaps in Existing Literature

Although several studies touch on missed workouts and habit disruption, very few focus specifically on short-term breaks lasting three to seven days. Many studies define dropout as weeks or months of inactivity, which overlooks the early phase when disengagement begins. In addition, most research relies on self-reported physical activity rather than objective tracking.

Another limitation is the separation of psychological and behavioral approaches. Some studies focus only on motivation, while others focus on habits or environment. Few studies combine emotional experiences with behavior patterns in a single framework. This makes it difficult to fully understand how short breaks influence long-term outcomes.

Overall, the literature suggests that short-term exercise breaks can trigger important psychological and behavioral changes that increase the risk of dropout. These changes include reduced motivation quality, lower self-efficacy, habit weakening, and emotional discomfort. However, a clear model explaining how these factors interact is still missing. To address this gap, the next section presents a conceptual framework that integrates psychological, behavioral, and situational factors into a unified structure.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents a conceptual framework to explain how short-term exercise breaks (3–7 days) influence exercise habits and the risk of dropout. The framework integrates three main domains identified in the literature: psychological factors, behavioral processes, and situational conditions. These domains interact over time and shape whether an individual successfully returns to exercise or gradually disengages.

5.1. Core Components of the Framework

The proposed framework is built around three interconnected layers:

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1. Situational Triggers

These are the initial events that cause a short-term break. Common triggers include:

- Minor illness or fatigue
- Travel or schedule disruption
- Academic or work pressure
- Minor injury or discomfort
- Environmental barriers (e.g., lack of access to facilities)

These triggers are usually temporary, but they disrupt the normal exercise routine and create a gap in behavior.

2. Psychological Responses

After the break begins, individuals experience internal reactions, such as:

- Changes in motivation (from enjoyment to obligation)
- Reduced self-efficacy (doubt about ability to restart)
- Negative emotions (guilt, frustration, disappointment)
- Threats to exercise identity (feeling less like an "active person")

These psychological responses shape how the break is interpreted. Some individuals see it as a normal pause, while others see it as personal failure.

3. Behavioral Processes

These involve how the break affects daily action patterns:

- Disruption of routine and cues
- Weakening of habit strength
- Increased need for conscious decision-making
- Difficulty planning and restarting exercise

As habits weaken, exercise shifts from being automatic to requiring effortful control, making return less likely.

5.2. Interaction Between Framework Elements

The framework emphasizes that these components do not operate independently. Instead, they influence one another in a dynamic way:

- Situational triggers lead to psychological responses (e.g., missing workouts causes guilt).
- Psychological responses affect behavioral processes (e.g., guilt reduces motivation to restart).
- Behavioral disruption reinforces psychological effects (e.g., weakened habits reduce confidence).

This interaction can form a negative feedback loop:

1. A short break weakens routine.
2. The individual feels guilty or doubtful.
3. Restarting feels harder.
4. Delay continues.
5. Dropout risk increases.

However, the framework also allows for a positive recovery pathway:

- If individuals interpret the break as temporary and manageable,
- Maintain self-efficacy and flexible goals,
- And reduce decision difficulty when restarting, they are more likely to return successfully.

5.3. Pathways to Dropout and Return

The framework identifies two main outcome pathways:

Pathway A: Return to Exercise

- Break is seen as normal and acceptable
- Self-efficacy remains stable
- Emotional response is neutral or supportive
- Routine is quickly re-established
- Habit strength recovers

Pathway B: Dropout

- Break is seen as failure
- Guilt and frustration increase
- Self-efficacy decreases
- Restarting feels complex
- Identity as an exerciser weakens
- Long-term inactivity follows

The outcome depends on how quickly and effectively the individual re-engages and how the break is mentally and behaviorally managed.

5.4. Visual Representation of the Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Short-Term Exercise Break Effects

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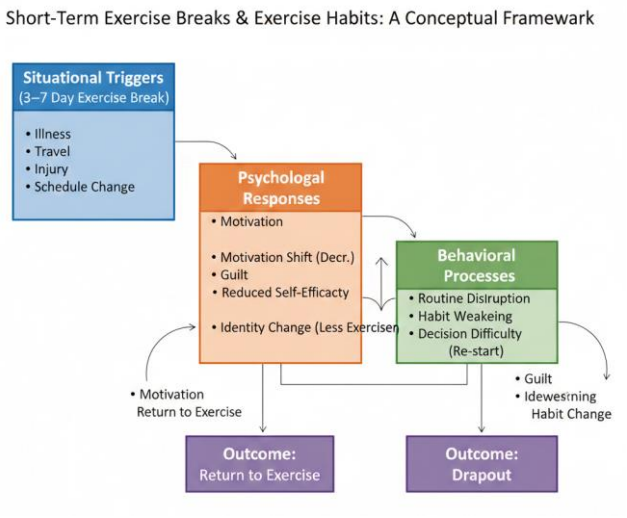

Figure 1 shows a flow diagram beginning with "Short-Term Exercise Break (3–7 days)" at the center. On the left, situational triggers (illness, travel, schedule change, injury) lead into psychological responses (motivation shift, guilt, reduced self-efficacy, identity threat). These psychological responses then influence behavioral processes (habit weakening, routine disruption, decision difficulty). The behavioral processes lead to two outcome paths: "Return to Exercise" or "Exercise Dropout." Arrows connect all components, showing feedback loops between psychological and behavioral factors.

5.5. Role of Moderating Factors

The framework also includes moderating variables that influence the strength of effects:

- Previous habit strength (stronger habits resist disruption better)
- Exercise experience level (beginners are more vulnerable)
- Social support (training partners and encouragement reduce dropout)
- Flexibility of routine (home-based exercise reduces situational barriers)
- Coping strategies (self-compassion and planning help recovery)

These moderators explain why some individuals recover quickly from short breaks while others do not.

5.6. Purpose of the Framework

The purpose of this conceptual framework is to:

- Integrate psychological, behavioral, and situational perspectives
- Explain why short breaks can lead to dropout
- Provide a structure for organizing research findings
- Guide the design of interventions aimed at re-engagement

By treating short-term exercise breaks as a distinct and important phase in behavior change, this framework shifts focus from long-term inactivity to early disengagement processes.

6. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a review-based and synthesis-oriented methodology to examine the psychological and behavioral effects of short-term exercise breaks (3–7 days) on exercise habits and dropout. The approach combines findings from recent empirical studies with theoretical models of behavior change and habit formation. The goal is not to test a single hypothesis but to organize and integrate existing evidence into a clear and meaningful structure.

6.1. Research Design

The research follows a narrative integrative review design. This design was chosen because the topic involves multiple dimensions, including emotions, motivation, habits, and situational factors, which are studied using different methods in existing literature. An integrative review allows both quantitative and qualitative findings to be combined into a unified explanation.

Rather than focusing on one population group or one specific intervention, the review includes studies involving general adult populations, recreational exercisers, and non-athletes. This broad scope helps capture common patterns related to short-term exercise breaks across different contexts.

6.2 Data Sources

Relevant studies were identified from established academic databases commonly used in health and behavioral research, including:

- Google Scholar
- PubMed
- Scopus
- IEEE Xplore
- ResearchGate (for accessing published journal versions)

These sources were selected because they provide access to peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers in psychology, physical activity, and health behavior research.

6.3. Search Strategy

A structured keyword-based search strategy was used to locate studies published between 2020 and 2025. The main search terms included combinations of:

- "short-term exercise break"
- "exercise lapse"

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- "physical activity dropout"
- "exercise habit"
- "motivation and exercise"
- "self-efficacy and physical activity"
- "routine disruption"
- "exercise adherence"

Boolean operators such as AND and OR were applied to refine results (e.g., "exercise adherence AND short-term break"). Reference lists of selected articles were also reviewed to identify additional relevant studies.

6.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Studies published between 2020 and 2025
- Peer-reviewed journal articles or conference papers
- Studies focusing on physical activity, exercise behavior, or habit formation
- Studies discussing lapses, interruptions, or dropout
- Studies reporting psychological or behavioral outcomes

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies focusing only on elite athletes
- Studies dealing exclusively with long-term inactivity (several months or years)
- Opinion articles or non-peer-reviewed sources
- Studies unrelated to exercise behavior (e.g., nutrition-only studies)

6.5. Data Extraction

From each selected study, the following information was extracted:

- Author(s) and year
- Study design (survey, experiment, interview, or mixed method)
- Sample characteristics
- Main psychological variables (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy, emotions)
- Main behavioral variables (e.g., habit strength, routine stability, dropout)
- Key findings related to short-term breaks or lapses

This information was organized into thematic categories for synthesis.

6.6. Data Analysis and Synthesis

A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyze the collected literature. Findings were grouped into three main themes:

1. Psychological effects
2. Behavioral effects
3. Situational influences

Quantitative findings were summarized in terms of direction and consistency of effects, rather than statistical pooling. Qualitative findings were examined for recurring patterns in participant experiences, such as emotional reactions to missed workouts and difficulties in restarting.

The results were then mapped onto the conceptual framework presented earlier. This step helped identify how situational triggers lead to psychological responses and behavioral outcomes.

6.7. Reliability and Validity Considerations

To enhance reliability, only studies from recognized academic journals and conferences were included. Preference was given to studies using validated instruments for measuring motivation, habit strength, and physical activity behavior.

Validity was supported by comparing findings across multiple studies and research methods. When similar results appeared in surveys, experiments, and interviews, confidence in those patterns increased.

6.8. Ethical Considerations

Since this study is based on previously published research, no direct data collection from human participants was conducted. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. However, all sources were properly cited, and the synthesis aimed to present findings fairly and accurately without misrepresentation.

6.9. Methodological Limitations

This review has some limitations. First, many studies do not define short-term exercise breaks explicitly as 3–7 days, requiring interpretation based on missed sessions or brief lapses. Second, most research relies on self-reported physical activity, which may be affected by memory or social desirability bias. Third, the review does not include a statistical meta-analysis, so conclusions are descriptive rather than predictive.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a structured and meaningful overview of current evidence and supports the development of an integrated explanation of how short-term breaks influence exercise habits and dropout.

7. RESULTS / SYNTHESIS

This section presents the synthesized findings from the reviewed literature on short-term exercise breaks (3–7 days). The results are organized into three main domains:

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psychological outcomes, behavioral outcomes, and situational outcomes. Together, these findings explain how short breaks influence exercise habits and increase the risk of dropout.

7.1. Psychological Outcomes

7.1.1. Changes in Motivation

Across multiple studies, short-term exercise breaks were associated with changes in motivational quality rather than complete loss of motivation. Individuals often retained the intention to exercise but reported reduced enjoyment and increased feelings of obligation. This shift from interest-based motivation to pressure-based motivation made exercise feel more like a duty than a personal choice.

Several studies reported that people who experienced a break of a few days were more likely to describe exercise as "hard to restart" and "mentally tiring." This suggests that the break alters how exercise is perceived, from a rewarding activity to a demanding task. As a result, the probability of returning to regular exercise decreases with each additional day of inactivity.

7.1.2. Emotional Reactions

Emotional responses were one of the most consistent findings across qualitative and survey-based studies. Common emotions reported after short exercise breaks included:

- Guilt about missing sessions
- Frustration over lost progress
- Disappointment in oneself
- Anxiety about restarting

These emotions did not always motivate action. In many cases, they led to avoidance behaviors. Participants reported delaying their return to exercise because they felt uncomfortable facing the effort required to restart. Negative emotions also contributed to negative self-talk, such as believing they lacked discipline or ability.

7.1.3. Self-Efficacy and Perceived Control

Short breaks were linked with reduced confidence in the ability to resume exercise. Individuals often doubted whether they could perform at the same level as before. This was especially common among beginners and those who had recently started an exercise routine.

Lower self-efficacy was associated with longer delays in restarting and higher likelihood of dropping out completely. Participants who believed they could return easily were more likely to resume exercise, even after a break.

7.2. Behavioral Outcomes

7.2.1. Habit Weakening

One of the most important behavioral findings was the weakening of exercise habits after short-term breaks. Exercise that had become part of a daily or weekly routine lost its automatic character after several missed sessions.

Habit weakening was reflected in:

- Reduced consistency
- Increased need for planning
- Greater effort required to initiate activity

Individuals who had stronger habits before the break were more likely to recover quickly, while those with weaker habits experienced larger disruptions.

7.2.2. Routine Disruption

Short breaks interrupted daily schedules and removed time-based or place-based cues for exercise. For example, individuals who exercised every morning found that their mornings were filled with other activities during the break. When they tried to return, exercise no longer felt like a natural part of their day.

Routine disruption increased the number of decisions needed to restart exercise, such as selecting workout type, time, and intensity. This increased mental effort reduced the likelihood of immediate re-engagement.

7.2.3. Difficulty in Restarting

Restarting exercise after a short break was described as more difficult than continuing an existing routine. This difficulty was both physical and psychological. Physically, individuals reported stiffness and fatigue. Psychologically, they experienced resistance and hesitation.

The lack of a clear restart plan was a major barrier. When individuals did not have a simple and structured way to return, they were more likely to postpone exercise. This delay increased the chance that the break would become long-term inactivity.

7.3. Situational Outcomes

7.3.1. Common Triggers of Short Breaks

Short-term exercise breaks were most often caused by:

- Minor illness or fatigue
- Academic or work pressure
- Travel and schedule changes
- Family responsibilities
- Temporary lack of facilities

These triggers were usually temporary but created disruption in normal routines.

7.3.2. Interaction with Psychological and Behavioral Factors

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Situational factors did not operate alone. Instead, they interacted with psychological and behavioral processes. For example:

- A busy work week (situational) reduced exercise time.
- This led to guilt and frustration (psychological).
- Routine was lost and habits weakened (behavioral).
- Restarting felt difficult, increasing dropout risk (outcome).

This interaction explains why short breaks often lead to longer inactivity even when external barriers are removed.

7.4. Integrated Model of Effects

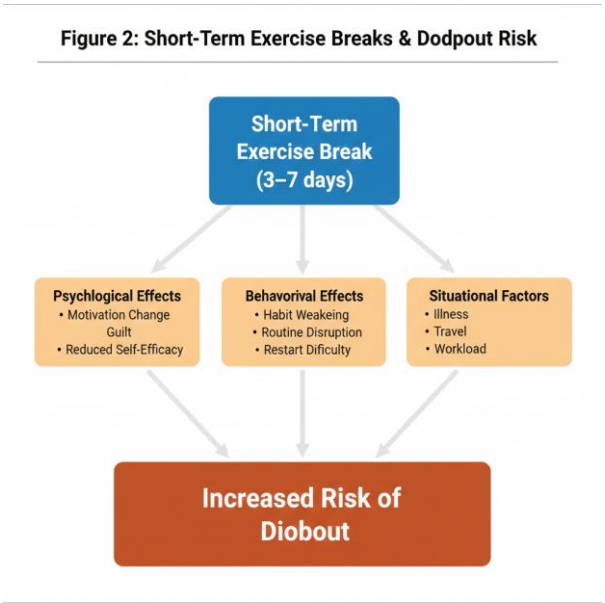
The synthesis supports a process model in which short-term exercise breaks initiate a chain reaction:

1. A break disrupts routine.
2. Psychological responses emerge (guilt, reduced confidence).
3. Habits weaken and decision difficulty increases.
4. Restarting becomes mentally and physically challenging.
5. Dropout risk rises over time.

This process model aligns with the conceptual framework presented earlier and highlights that dropout is not sudden but develops through small and early changes.

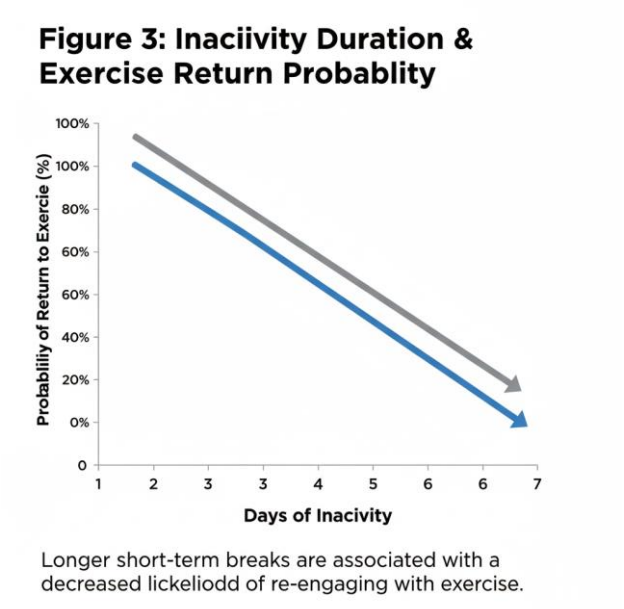
7.5. Visual Representation of Results

Figure 2: Psychological and Behavioral Effects of Short-Term Exercise Breaks



7.6. Chart Representation

Figure 3: Relationship Between Length of Break and Likelihood of Return



Overall, the synthesized results indicate that short-term exercise breaks have meaningful psychological and behavioral consequences. These consequences weaken habits, increase emotional resistance, and reduce confidence, which together raise the risk of exercise dropout. The findings emphasize that the early days of inactivity are a crucial period for supporting re-engagement.

8. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine how short-term exercise breaks lasting three to seven days influence exercise habits and the likelihood of dropout. The synthesized findings show that even brief interruptions can have meaningful psychological and behavioral consequences. Rather than acting as harmless pauses, short breaks often mark the beginning of disengagement from regular physical activity. The discussion below interprets these findings in relation to existing theories, practical implications, and research limitations.

8.1. Short-Term Breaks as a Critical Risk Period

One of the most important insights from this review is that short-term exercise breaks represent a critical risk period rather than a neutral stage in behavior change. Traditional research has focused on long-term inactivity, usually measured over weeks or months. However, the current synthesis suggests that early disruption, even over a few days, can weaken the foundation of an exercise routine.

This finding supports habit-based theories, which emphasize the importance of consistency and stable cues in

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maintaining behavior. When exercise is repeated in the same context, it becomes automatic and requires less mental effort. A short break interrupts this automatic process, forcing individuals to rely again on conscious decision-making. This shift increases the effort needed to resume exercise and raises the probability of delay and dropout.

8.2. Psychological Mechanisms Behind Dropout

The psychological processes identified in this review help explain why short breaks are so influential. Many individuals experience guilt, frustration, and self-criticism after missing workouts. While guilt is sometimes viewed as a motivating emotion, the evidence suggests that strong guilt often produces avoidance rather than action. People may delay returning to exercise because they feel uncomfortable confronting the effort or perceived failure.

Self-efficacy also plays a key role. After a short break, individuals may doubt their physical ability or fear discomfort when restarting. This reduced confidence lowers the likelihood of re-engagement, especially among beginners who have not yet built strong habits. These findings are consistent with social-cognitive models of behavior, which emphasize confidence and outcome expectations as central drivers of action.

Motivation quality further shapes this process. When exercise motivation shifts from enjoyment to obligation, the activity feels less personally meaningful. Over time, this shift weakens commitment and increases the chance of dropout. Thus, the psychological impact of a short break is not only emotional but also motivational.

8.3. Behavioral Processes and Routine Disruption

From a behavioral perspective, the review highlights the importance of routine stability. Exercise routines depend on time-based and place-based cues, such as exercising every morning or visiting the gym after work. Short-term breaks remove these cues and replace them with other activities. When the individual attempts to return, exercise must compete with newly formed routines.

This explains why restarting exercise often feels harder than continuing an existing routine. The break creates a gap in the behavioral sequence, and the person must rebuild planning, timing, and effort. This restart difficulty contributes to prolonged inactivity even when situational barriers are removed.

The loss of exercise identity also contributes to this problem. When people stop exercising for several days, they may no longer see themselves as active individuals. This identity shift can reduce motivation and increase discomfort in exercise environments, such as gyms or sports groups. Over time, social withdrawal from these environments reinforces inactivity.

8.4. Interaction of Situational and Internal Factors

The findings show that situational factors, such as illness, travel, or work pressure, usually trigger short-term breaks. However, these factors alone do not fully explain dropout. Instead, dropout occurs when situational barriers interact with psychological and behavioral responses.

For example, a busy work schedule may cause missed workouts. This leads to guilt and reduced confidence, which weakens the habit and delays restarting. Even when work pressure decreases, the individual may not return to exercise because internal resistance has developed. This interaction helps explain why people do not automatically resume exercise once external obstacles disappear.

8.5. Implications for Exercise Promotion and Practice

The results of this review suggest several practical implications. First, short-term exercise breaks should be treated as warning signals rather than ignored. Trainers, health professionals, and fitness programs should pay attention to early lapses and provide support quickly.

Second, re-entry strategies should focus on reducing psychological pressure. Encouraging individuals to resume with low-intensity or short sessions may help restore confidence and rebuild routine. Emphasizing flexibility rather than perfection may also reduce guilt and fear of failure.

Third, digital fitness platforms could use inactivity data to identify short breaks and provide supportive reminders. Instead of messages that highlight missed goals, systems could promote easy return options and normalize brief interruptions.

8.6. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this paper support the integration of habit theory, motivational theory, and social-cognitive theory into a unified explanation of exercise dropout. No single theory fully accounts for the effects of short-term breaks. Habit theory explains routine disruption, motivation theory explains changes in meaning and enjoyment, and self-efficacy theory explains confidence loss.

By focusing on the early stages of disengagement, this paper expands existing models of exercise adherence. It suggests that dropout is not a sudden decision but a gradual process that often begins with small and common disruptions. Recognizing this process can improve both theoretical understanding and intervention design.

8.7. Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, few studies define short-term exercise breaks precisely as three to seven days. As a result, conclusions are based on research examining missed sessions or brief inactivity periods more generally. Second, most studies rely on self-reported physical activity, which may be influenced by memory or social desirability bias. Third, the review did not use a formal meta-analytic

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approach, so findings are descriptive rather than statistically predictive.

In addition, cultural and demographic differences were not examined in detail. Future research should explore whether short breaks have different effects across age groups, genders, and cultural contexts.

8.8. Directions for Further Interpretation

Despite these limitations, the consistency of findings across different study designs strengthens confidence in the conclusions. The convergence of psychological, behavioral, and situational evidence suggests that short-term exercise breaks represent a meaningful point of intervention. Future studies could test this idea more directly by tracking individuals across brief breaks and measuring emotional and behavioral changes in real time.

9. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

This paper examined how short-term exercise breaks lasting three to seven days affect exercise habits and the risk of dropout. The findings show that these brief interruptions are not harmless pauses but important moments that can shape long-term behavior. Psychological reactions such as guilt, reduced motivation quality, and lower self-confidence combine with behavioral changes such as routine disruption and habit weakening. Together, these effects make restarting exercise feel difficult and increase the chance of long-term inactivity.

The review highlights that short breaks often begin with practical reasons such as illness, travel, or work pressure. However, dropout usually occurs because these external triggers interact with internal processes. When individuals interpret the break as failure, they experience negative emotions and lose confidence in their ability to return. At the same time, the loss of routine removes the automatic nature of exercise, forcing individuals to make more effortful decisions. Over time, these small changes create a pathway from a short pause to complete disengagement.

From a theoretical perspective, this paper suggests that exercise adherence should be understood as a continuous process rather than a simple choice between activity and inactivity. Short-term breaks represent an early stage of disengagement that deserves more attention in behavior change models. Integrating habit theory, motivation theory, and self-efficacy theory provides a clearer explanation of how and why exercise routines break down after brief interruptions.

In practical terms, the findings point to the importance of early support. Trainers, health professionals, and fitness programs should focus not only on preventing long-term dropout but also on helping individuals return after short breaks. Encouraging gradual re-entry, normalizing brief interruptions, and reducing emotional pressure may help protect exercise habits. Digital health tools can also play a role by detecting short inactivity periods and offering supportive messages or simple restart plans.

9.1. Future Work

Future research should focus more directly on short-term exercise breaks rather than treating them as minor lapses. Longitudinal studies that track individuals before, during, and after three-to-seven-day breaks would help clarify how psychological and behavioral changes unfold over time. Experimental studies could test whether specific re-entry strategies, such as low-intensity workouts or self-compassion messages, improve return rates.

More work is also needed to understand individual differences. Factors such as age, prior exercise experience, social support, and cultural background may influence how people respond to short breaks. Objective measures such as wearable activity trackers could provide more accurate data than self-reports and allow researchers to observe real-world behavior patterns.

Finally, future studies should explore how technology can be used to support recovery after breaks. Fitness apps and wearable devices have the ability to identify inactivity quickly and respond in real time. Designing and testing these digital interventions could offer scalable solutions to reduce exercise dropout and promote long-term physical activity.

In summary, short-term exercise breaks are small events with large consequences. Recognizing their psychological and behavioral impact can improve both scientific understanding and practical efforts to help people maintain active lifestyles.

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