

# Uncoordinated? You Can Still Be an Athlete.

Many people avoid physical activity because they see themselves as clumsy. But, with practice, there are ways to fix that.

By Jenny Marder

July 6, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET

**Sign up for the Well newsletter, for Times subscribers only.** Essential news and guidance to live your healthiest life. [Try it for 4 weeks.](#)

Carmen Chavez spent much of her life avoiding sports. Her aversion, she said, stemmed from the embarrassment of middle school gym class. As more athletic girls slammed volleyballs across the net, she worried about tripping or being hit by a ball. In order to avoid playing, she often sat on the sidelines and acted as the announcer.

For years after, she told herself she was simply too clumsy for ball games. But a year ago, Ms. Chavez, now 26, began playing basketball with a friend and discovered she's pretty good at shooting and dribbling. Perhaps more important, she enjoys it.

"Being afraid, being avoidant, did me more harm than good," said Ms. Chavez, who said she still is so clumsy that she has the occasional accident. "I'm trying to stop letting my clumsiness intimidate me from being active."

About 6 percent of school-age kids have a developmental coordination disorder, also known as "clumsy child syndrome," which can persist into adulthood. Jill Zwicker, a researcher and occupational therapist at the University of British Columbia, said the disorder may be why many people develop a longstanding dislike of sports and exercise.

This is important because even just feeling a little uncoordinated can have tangible effects on people's lives. Kids who avoid physical activities are at a higher risk of anxiety and depression, Dr. Zwicker said. A study of thousands of British children also found that kids whose teachers described as uncoordinated were more likely to become obese as adults.

But feeling uncoordinated, either as a kid or an adult, doesn't mean you can't still be an athlete.

## Clumsiness starts in the brain.

There's no question that some of us — pro-athletes and dancers — are inherently more coordinated than others, said Gary Wilkerson, a sports injury researcher and professor at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga.

The ability to spin a basketball on your finger or return a fast tennis serve comes from how efficiently the brain can communicate across nodes and networks controlling things like vision, motor control and decision-making, as well as between the brain's right and left hemispheres, Dr. Wilkerson said.

"If those don't sync well, you're clumsy," he said.

The good news is that nervous tissue in the brain and spinal cord is very good at adapting and changing. In the same way that some stroke patients can relearn to walk, uncoordinated people can learn new sports and activities with focus and practice. In other words, clumsiness, Dr. Wilkerson said, is "very correctable."

## Question beliefs about yourself.

The first step to moving past clumsiness is to question the story you've been telling yourself, said Justin Ross, a clinical psychologist who specializes in human performance.

Like with Ms. Chavez, most people's beliefs about athletic abilities crystallize in the teenage years, and that dictates how they engage with athletics in their lives, he said. People lock in this identity early on that they're not capable, "usually because gym class in middle school or high school was so embarrassing"

Believing you're incapable or clumsy can create a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads people to disengage. To reframe these beliefs, think of your abilities as an experience rather than an identity: "I can be athletic," for example, instead of "I am not an athlete."

Then summon the will to try something new that holds your interest. Remind yourself that you are not who you once were.

"If you can't challenge your beliefs, you're not going to have the courage to begin and then you're not giving your brain the opportunity for change," Dr. Ross said.

## Prioritize sleep and calm the mind.

It might seem simple, but a good night's sleep, or even a nap before a workout can improve performance, regardless of how klutzy you are. In fact, one small study suggests that lack of sleep is as bad as drinking just beforehand when it comes to coordination. Another found that the less sleep university students got, the less control they had while walking on a treadmill.

Stress, too, is a factor. It makes us distracted, which slows the brain's information processing speed, said Charles Swanik, an athletic trainer and professor of kinesiology and applied psychology at the University of Delaware.

Under stress, the brain can become too excitable, he said, causing tension in the muscles. When muscles get tense, normally smooth movements are replaced with exaggerated ones. To reduce this, Dr. Swanik said, before physical activity, focus on calming your mind and body, through music, deep breathing or mindfulness.

## Seek out clear instructions.

Say you want to take up pickleball or a martial art. Every time you serve or throw a punch, the connections in your brain are getting strengthened. But if you are less coordinated, it's especially important that you are practicing the correct, precise movements.

People with coordination problems often also benefit from explicit instructions in steps, because motor learning doesn't come as naturally, Dr. Zwicker said. For example, first balance on the bike, then put the left foot on the pedal. A rote script to repeat to yourself can be helpful, she said. If you're learning to swim: "Stroke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke, breathe," she said.

People who struggle with coordination also tend to do better with less competitive, team-based sports like martial arts, Dr. Zwicker said. "You're still with other people, but you are your own yardstick. You're working on your own set of skills and progressions."

Lastly, when it comes to new sports, choose one with fewer distractions, where you can focus. Instead of soccer or football, which can feel chaotic, try tennis or running, Dr. Swanik said.

Transforming clumsiness into smoothness isn't easy, and there are limits. But while the klutzes of the world might not become Olympic athletes, they can get all the fun and benefits of a good workout.

Jenny Marder is a senior science writer for NASA and a freelance journalist.