This paper has been created by Professor Stuart Biddle in partnership with Fitness First in order to explain the science behind motivation and how principles of behavioural psychology inform whether we will – or won’t – be successful in maintaining exercise.

The reality is that we have much less control over our motivation than we think and that means that many of us are setting ourselves up to fail. If we don’t have certain criteria in place, we simply cannot be motivated to change our behaviour for the better, no matter how much ‘willpower’ we think we have. The necessary criteria now underpin Fitness First’s fitness philosophy, from the way the clubs are designed, to the enhanced expertise among its staff, to the exercise classes on offer, and Professor Biddle explains why below.

**MIND THE GAP**

We are all familiar with ‘New Year resolution syndrome’ - where we have great intentions to change our behaviour and start exercising in January. Those good intentions show that we are willing to try. But changes in behaviour stemming from willingness alone usually tail-off quickly. After a few days or weeks, it’s all back to normal. This is known as the ‘intention-behaviour gap’, and it’s where good intentions fail to lead to changes in behaviour, and it’s most common when it comes to exercise habits.

**THE MYTH OF ‘WILLPOWER’**

There is a common misconception about what motivates us to exercise, and why we don’t maintain good behaviours. Most of us mistakenly believe that when we fail to stick to our good intentions, it’s because we lack willpower. But the reality is that we have much less control over our motivation than we think.

**START - STOP**

Research undertaken among nearly 4,000 people from across 10 studies suggest that about 36% of us intend to exercise, but don’t follow through. If you were to apply that percentage to the UK working-age population, that’s almost 13 million people who intend to exercise, but will fail to change their behaviour.

When we start, but then give up on, exercise, just as so many of us will in the first three months of 2014, it’s usually because we aren’t fulfilling crucial human needs that sit at the heart of the human psyche. These are the inescapable criteria that are necessary to ensure we can be motivated to change our behaviour for the better.

**ONLY HUMAN**

The principles of behavioural psychology tell us that in fact there are specific human needs that have to be fulfilled in order for us to stand a chance of being sufficiently motivated to form habits. If these human needs are not being met, we will not be motivated. Good intentions can only get us so far.

The human needs that have to be satisfied in order for us to be motivated are:

- **Feeling competent, seeing signs that we are doing well making progress and feeling good afterwards**

Do you do anything in your free time where you feel incompetent? The answer’s probably no. We don’t like voluntarily doing things that we think we’re rubbish at. When it comes to exercise, if we think we’re not very good at it, if we don’t see any progress, and if we don’t feel good afterwards, we won’t be motivated to carry on.

Psychologists sometimes refer to the importance of focusing on ‘affective outcomes’ to maintain exercise motivation. This is when, instead of focusing on getting thinner or stronger – or ‘instrumental outcomes’ – we think about how exercise will make us feel good, and that is a strong motivator. This is important because it’s what tends to help us maintain habits better, and it means that exercise brings mental as well as physical health benefits.

In addition, feeling like ‘I can!’ is a strong driver of behaviour. That’s why we need to keep a check on our progress and aim for small, gradual improvements: ‘baby steps’. People who think they are good at exercise are better at becoming exercisers. A great example is when a group of women who enrolled at a health club were asked to list their preferred exercise activities. The women were then put in groups according to their exercise preferences. They were then put in either a ‘choice’ or ‘no choice’ group. The choice group were told that their exercise programme was based on the choices they had made, whereas the no-choice group were told that their programme was based on a standard format, not their own preferences.

This meant that one group believed that they had no choice, and were being forced to exercise in a way that they had less control over. In reality, both groups actually received the activities that they had originally chosen. But the ‘choice’ group had a significantly better attendance record after six weeks. That means that feeling like you have a choice in what you do is a significant factor in exercise motivation.

- **Having a choice in what we do, rather than feeling pressured into doing it**

We need to feel that we chose to do something, not had it imposed on us. When it comes to exercising, that means having a range of options available to us in a way we find convenient and also not feeling forced into doing exercise by someone else. This makes us feel disempowered, and negatively impacts motivation.

A great example is when a group of children were given false feedback about their attendance record after six weeks. That means that feeling like part of a group or club is always a positive thing because it makes us feel safe and like we belong. Exercising somewhere that feels disempowered, and negatively impacts motivation.

**• Feeling connected to other people helps us feel welcome, and gives us a sense of belonging.**

Feeling like part of a group or club is always a positive thing because it makes us feel safe and like we belong. Exercising somewhere that makes you feel nervous, out of place, unsafe or simply a bit alone goes against this basic human need, and therefore negatively impacts motivation. Whereas feeling connected to other people helps us feel welcome, and gives us a sense of belonging.

When it comes to exercising, this can be as simple as being made to feel welcome when you arrive at wherever you’re exercising: someone greeting you by name or asking you how you’re doing. So, if we undertake exercise that doesn’t make us feel good afterwards, that we think we’re not very good at and have little choice in, in surroundings that do not feel right for us, this undermines our motivation and capacity to form good habits.

These factors sit at the heart of motivation, not ‘willpower’. If we fall foul of these principles, we don’t stand much chance of being motivated to form habits.
**DECEPTION, DECEPTIONS**

In addition to the need to satisfy these human needs, motivation is also affected by decisions we make about how we change our behaviour, and what activity we do and how we do it. Here are the stages of decision-making for behaviour change:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Stage</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Is there an intention to change?</th>
<th>Is there any action taken (change in behaviour)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-contemplation</td>
<td>Not really thinking about change</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Thinking about change</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Making small, initial changes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Made a start</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>Maintain involvement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

People only make changes to their behaviour by moving through a series of stages. But many of us will decide to move from little or no exercise, to undertaking a difficult exercise regime. Because this presents a huge step-change in our lifestyle and is simply too hard to maintain, we don’t form a habit because we have tried to jump too far ahead in one go.

**EXERCISE CONFIDENCE**

Principles evidenced by behavioural psychology also tell us that the way to form good habits and increase motivation are linked to confidence. Confidence to exercise comes from several external influences as well as our own behaviour - again, not personal 'willpower' - and is driven by four key stimuli:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of confidence</th>
<th>What this means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Your own behaviour</td>
<td>Confidence is gained by seeing small, gradual steps of improvement in exercise, whether it be through performing some exercises better or with measurable changes. Self-monitoring, alongside goals and feedback, can be very important here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Watching others</td>
<td>Confidence is gained by seeing other people similar to you be successful and sometimes overcome barriers. If they can do it, so can I!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Being encouraged</td>
<td>Confidence is gained by receiving support and encouragement from others, particularly those either important to us (e.g., spouse) or those we respect in exercise (e.g., your doctor or personal trainer).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feeling relaxed and positive</td>
<td>Confidence is gained by being in an environment that produces a relaxed yet positive and upbeat mood. We do not want exercise to be associated with anxiety.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once more, all too easily we assume that high levels of personal willpower are needed to exercise, when the fact is we have much less control over our motivation than we think, so many of us are setting ourselves up to fail. We are significantly influenced by external factors and more likely to stick to a regime if these are in place.

If we don't address these, we simply cannot be motivated to change our behaviour for the better, no matter how much 'willpower' we think we have. The work of Professor Biddle and the science behind motivation now underpin Fitness First's fitness philosophy, from the way clubs are designed, to the enhanced fitness expertise among its staff, to the exercise classes on offer.

To talk to Prof Biddle or Fitness First, please contact Philippa Williamson, Jayne Crooks or Laura Gainsford at Blue Rubicon on behalf of Fitness First on 020 7260 2700 or fitnessfirst@bluerubicon.com

2 12,526,251 based on 36% of a working age (20-60) population of 34,795,142 which is based on ONS data: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-for-uk--england-and-wales--scotland-and-northern-ireland/mid-2011-and-mid-2012/index.html
3 Almost a third (32%) of people in the UK have planned to take up exercise this year, but nearly two thirds (62%) admit that last time they tried this, they stopped by the end of February. An even greater majority (71%) have revealed that they stopped by the end of March. (A total sample size of 2,106 adults were asked which types of New Year’s resolutions they plan to make for 2014 and when, the last time they didn’t succeed at their New Year’s exercise resolutions, they stopped partaking in it. Survey data collected and analysed by YouGov plc. Fieldwork was undertaken between 24th - 29th December 2013. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the male and female UK adult population aged 18-74.)
4 A study of nearly 2,000 people showed that “successful adopters” and “successful maintainers” of exercise felt that exercise would improve their health and gave them a positive outlook on life. They also saw more ‘positives’ and fewer ‘negatives’ or barriers to exercise than those who did not exercise. Both groups were high in exercise confidence. Confidence to exercise comes from several external influences as well as our own behaviour - again, not personal ‘willpower’ - and is driven by four key stimuli.