

4 Foolproof Tips for a Fun, Effective Workout

I wrote recently on the 4 Signs Your Workout Needs a Facelift. In brief summary, the signs are:

1. You're bored. If your mind is wandering during your workout, it's a sure sign you need to crank up the intensity or switch fitness activities.

2. You talk too much. If you can carry on conversation with the runner or lifter beside you, you're likely not challenging yourself well enough. And challenging workouts are what make us look fitter, feel stronger and become healthier all the way around.

3. You're sitting too much. Seated exercises generally only target one muscle group at a time. Compound, multijoint exercises, such as squats and pull-ups, engage several muscle groups at once, thereby burning more calories and building more muscle, all in much less time.

4. You're not getting stronger or looking fitter. A fitness plateau is a discouraging place to be. If you're not seeing improvements in your strength or your physique, it's time to make some changes to continue your journey upward!

Before I began implementing more advice, I was on the brink of throwing in my gym towel. I was bored, I was frustrated and my enthusiasm was running out faster than you could say "whey protein." The four forthcoming tips helped me renovate my workout, transforming it from dull and fruitless to fun and fulfilling. It's my belief that with a few tweaks, you too—regardless of whether you're a cantankerous couch potato or an on again/off again gym goer—can not only commit to, but genuinely enjoy exercise.

Tip No. 1: Keep It Simple

Late-night infomercials and a few highly caffeinated personal trainers may endorse “state-of-the-art” gadgets that claim to give you buns of steel and rock-hard abs by the Fourth of July, but the truth is, simple “old school” exercises leave BOSU-ball balancing acts and Shake Weight gesticulations in the dust.

Multijoint, compound movements that require just your body and some weights (when you’re ready for them) are *classic* for a reason: They work! Exercises like squats, lunges, push-ups, pull-ups and—my favorite total-body movement—the burpee, activate multiple muscles simultaneously, which means you’re burning more calories and building more muscles in less time.

Another wonderful perk of keeping it simple is that you can get a terrific workout in practically anywhere. Do push-ups and sit-ups with your kids during *American Idol*. Perform burpees while you wait for lunch to microwave. Install a pull-up bar in a doorway or in your garage and commit to practicing chin-ups three days a week. (You can even buy resistance bands that assist you if you’re unable to do a standard pull-up.) As you grow stronger, slowly adding exercise equipment like a barbell and a few dumbbells to your home gym will make the simple stuff just a bit more challenging.

Tip No. 2: Step Away From the Treadmill

Many people are quick to join a gym for the sole purpose of camping out on the cardio deck until the cows come home or the pounds fall off—whichever comes first. Yes, cardio does help you burn calories, but wouldn’t you love it if your body burned calories even while you were reading this article? If you lift weights, then it can, thanks to a little thing called “excess post-exercise oxygen demand,” or EPOC. The greater the EPOC effect, the higher your metabolism is increased and the more calories you burn hours after exercise.

Scientists have coined this recovery period “EPOC” to describe the time it takes for our body to return to its resting state and have identified those exercises that place the greatest recovery demands for this process to occur. Research has demonstrated that EPOC is the greatest as a result of resistance training and interval training. The prolonged elevation of the body’s demands and increased metabolism after weight training can last up to three hours after your workout. Why spend another monotonous hour on the elliptical machine?

Tip No. 3: Get Your Sweat On!

I’ve spent enough time in the gym to know that making exercise a social event can be hugely beneficial and highly motivating. As a CrossFit coach, I celebrate this notion of community, of nurturing friendships and holding one another accountable to a consistently fit lifestyle. What’s not okay is when the social aspect begins to overshadow the workout itself. Who can argue that it’s not difficult to focus on correct form and proper breathing or give a 110-percent effort when you’re chatting about last weekend’s concert or tomorrow’s beach day?

As I mentioned earlier, resistance and interval training garner fat-burning, muscle-building, calorie-blasting, long-lasting results. If you’re working out at the intensity you should be, your heart rate should be elevated and you should be sweating and “feeling the burn.” Completely transforming your body does not take a lot of time, but it does take a lot of effort.

If you’d like an example of what an all-out effort feels like, try this simple three-exercise sequence. Set a timer and perform the following as fast as you can, being sure to maintain proper form:

15 push-ups

10 lunges each leg

15 sit-ups

Repeat five times.

Tip No. 4: Accept a Challenge

If you plan to do the workout prescribed along with Tip #3, then you're already well on your way to jumpstarting your fitness because accepting challenges is a surefire way to prevent workout burnout.

T.S. Eliot famously said, "If you aren't in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?"

Feeling the exhilaration of learning a new skill, taking up a new sport you thought you were too old or out of shape for, running your first mile nonstop—these are victories won after we've taken a leap of faith, a plunge, if you will, into murky waters that threaten to rise above our heads. But when we tell fear and panic to disappear and summon our strength and courage, we will likely find that the water isn't so deep after all. Bidding farewell to the safe harbor of one's comfort zone is often the toughest part of a new adventure.

Whether it's embarking upon an entirely new fitness program—such as CrossFit, in my case—or making your way to the squat rack for the very first time, keep your ears and eyes open for new ways to challenge yourself both mentally and physically. Doing so will ensure that your routine doesn't become, well, routine. Remember: Variety is the spice of life—and of your fitness!

Stay fit and stay faithful.

Diana Anderson-Tyler is the author of *Creation House's Fit for Faith: A Christian Woman's Guide to Total Fitness*. Her popular website can be found at www.creationhousefitness.com, and she is the owner and a coach at CrossFit 925. Diana can be reached on Twitter.

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