

How Your Faith Can Make You Fitter

I watched an interesting documentary a few weeks ago on a subject I cannot entirely recall. All I know for certain is that it was hosted by the illustrious Mr. Morgan Freeman and featured a fascinating study on self-control that involved scrambled sentences, a disgusting cocktail of orange juice and vinegar, and monetary rewards. (More on that in a bit.)

The findings of this experiment are truly remarkable. According to the 2012 paper published by the Queen's University researchers who conducted the study, religion replenishes self-control and increases our ability to endure discomfort, delay gratification, exert patience and refrain from responding impulsively.

As a CrossFit coach and personal trainer, I am well acquainted with myriad forms of "discomfort":

- Discomfort during 5K runs and rowing sprints that test the mind's willpower far more than the body's ability.
- Discomfort during heavy sets of back squats that pull us out of our comfort zone with every all-out rep.
- Discomfort during workout sessions in which your sole objective is to face an exercise foe—that is, a skill that needs improvement, such as overhead squats, double-unders, handstand push-ups or kipping pull-ups.
- Discomfort during deep stretches and intense foam-rolling sessions that, ironically, are encouraged because they in fact *soothe* tired muscles and *relieve* joint pain.

As both a committed CrossFitter and a follower of Christ, I was naturally intrigued by the notion that my faith could make me stronger both inside and outside of the gym, both in spiritual and physical endurance races.

In the experiment that I watched unfold in the aforementioned documentary, the psychologists asked participants (college students) to complete a scrambled-sentence task in which they were to unscramble the sentence and remove the excess word. For those in the neutral priming group, the excessive word didn't bear any religious connotations. In the religious priming group, however, the excessive words did contain religious themes and undertones, like *divine* and *spirit*.

After this priming portion of the experiment, the participants were confronted with a task that presented a bit of gustatory discomfort. On a table were 20 one-ounce cups that held a repulsive mixture of orange juice and vinegar. The psychologists told the participants that they would receive a nickel for every cup they drank. The more stomach-turning concoction that was consumed, the greater the display of endurance fueled by self-control.

Those primed with religious concepts drank significantly more than those who'd formed value-neutral sentences.

I later learned that in a follow-up experiment, researchers told the same participants that they would receive monetary compensation for their earlier participation; they could go to the lab within the next week to pick up five dollars, but if they waited a week or later, they would instead receive an additional dollar. Sure enough, there was a statistically significant difference between the religiously primed group (who waited) and the neutral group (who did not wait).

This research, as I stated earlier, got me thinking about both some very practical real-world applications, from how we as faithful followers of Christ respond graciously to the bitter orange/vinegar cups we're handed to how we persevere through tough workouts and abstain from junk food (most of the time!) knowing that the gratification of having a healthier body is well worth waiting—and fighting—for.

I'm blessed to be able to train men and women who are also spiritual brothers and sisters to me. Nearly every day, something they do or say while pushing their bodies through the "discomfort" or burpees, squats or box jumps points to their dependence on a greater Source of strength than a pre-workout shake or shot of espresso.

For example, during one rowing workout (nearly three miles worth of intervals), one of our athletes scrawled Philippians 4:13 in yellow chalk on the floor beside her rower. Every athlete who came in that day to face this particularly daunting workout had the opportunity to be motivated by the words "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

On another day, as we were working on double-unders (a jump rope movement in which the rope must pass under your feet twice with every jump), one woman looked down at the faint red lines the rope had left on her arms and began to cry. When I asked her what was wrong, she gave a shy, embarrassed smile and whispered, "I'm sorry. It's just I see these superficial lash marks on my arms and think about Jesus! The sting that I feel when the rope hits me is nothing compared to what He endured for me."

I started to tear up too.

Two weeks ago, all it took was an upbeat Mandisa song to give my class a second wind halfway through a 30-minute conditioning workout. During a CrossFit competition last Friday, it was my friend's reassuring words—"God is with you!"—that seemed to send a surge of energy up through my heels and into my back as I lifted that 185-pound barbell off the floor six more times.

I could go on and on, but I think I've made my point. There seems to be a direct correlation between faith and endurance of every sort. This is the kind of faith with which Moses,

unafraid of Pharaoh's wrath, "kept right on going because he kept his eyes on the one who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). This is the kind of faith with which the Israelites marched around Jericho for seven straight days before the walls started trembling (v. 30).

When we feel unprepared to face a day we know will be mentally taxing, emotionally draining and in every way uncomfortable, we know that praying and immersing ourselves in Scripture are two surefire ways to restore confidence to our souls and replenish peace in our minds. But what would happen if we applied these spiritual disciplines to our physical fitness?

What if, when trying to psyche up for a CrossFit workout, a cycling class, a personal training session, a half marathon or a full buffet, we prayed to God for strength, for a positive attitude, endurance and self-control, and equipped ourselves with invigorating verses to wield when our willpower begins to run low?

My unplanned personal experiences as well as research produced by academia's stringent scientific method connect faith with fortitude, confidence with capacity, and belief with breakthroughs. I challenge you to see what can happen to your fitness, your perspective, and your strength inside and out when you carry faith into the gym with you.

Diana Anderson-Tyler is the author of *Creation House's Fit for Faith: A Christian Woman's Guide to Total Fitness* and her latest book, *Perfect Fit: Weekly Wisdom and Workouts for Women of Faith and 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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