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→ When your workout starts to feel like all-out war on your body, it's time to ask: are you really doing yourself any good?

# SHOW YOUR SOFT SIDE

**'G**o hard or go home'. 'Pain is just weakness leaving the body'. 'Nothing hurts more than sitting on a couch'. Whether it's on a T-shirt, internet meme, or is the chosen saying of your favourite fitness class leader, we're betting you're familiar with at least one of these so-called 'positive' exercise mantras. With the ongoing rise of female participation in sports such as CrossFit and triathlon (organiser Go Tri says women aged over 55 represent its highest growth area), 'faster, harder, further' is the motto du jour. And, while we all want to see more women challenging themselves, this 'no pain, no gain' approach has its drawbacks, too.

## More harm than good?

Firstly, let's agree that high intensity training doesn't suit everyone and can, at worst, even intimidate some women back to the sofa – we all have a friend (or it might even be you) who left a too-tough class, motivation in pieces. But, by glorifying the gruelling, time-consuming fitness regimes of athletes and bikini models, we risk normalising what are really quite extreme exercise measures.

And, then there's the question of health credentials. In 2011, US researchers found that chronic, intense and sustained exercise (mostly in those repeatedly doing 'excessive' endurance events) could lead to serious heart

**“ MAKE WELLBEING, NOT FITNESS GOALS. WHAT DOES HEALTH MEAN TO YOU? ”**

problems in later life. Then last year, a Danish study suggested that those who push their bodies too hard could actually undo the positive effects of exercise – subjects who ran at a fast pace for over four hours, more than three times a week, had the same mortality rate as those who were sedentary.

Meanwhile, the body benefits of gentler, more natural movement, such as walking, dance or yoga, are often overlooked. Studies show mindful practices such as tai chi and qigong have body benefits, too – they can improve bone density, cardiovascular health, balance and quality of life; just as yoga can reduce fatigue and increase vitality in cancer survivors.

This isn't to say you should ditch the high intensity training completely – the key is balance.

## Get sport smart

Think about what your body needs. Consider that most of us live in an overhyped state, says psychologist and yoga teacher Suzy Reading (suzyreading.co.uk). 'Many of my clients are all too familiar with the sympathetic nervous system (responsible for the "fight or flight" response caused by stress). However, they are less familiar with the "rest and digest" function of the parasympathetic nervous system – and this needs activating if our bodies are to repair from the

stress incurred by modern living. A highly-charged gym workout will fire up the sympathetic ("fight or flight") nervous system. Slow-paced walking, tai chi or gentle yoga accompanied by focused breathing, will promote the parasympathetic ("rest and digest") nervous system.'

Top personal trainer Dan Roberts (danrobertsgroup.com) makes another argument. 'Fitness isn't just about hard training,' he says. 'It's about skills like agility, balance, coordination and mindfulness, too. To really embrace what your body can do, you need all types of movement. High intensity exercise is good for raising the heart rate and burning fat quickly, but you're missing out if you neglect "softer" styles of exercise.'

Slowing things down also helps us develop technique, not to mention build the mind-muscle communication. 'If you're going crazy on a treadmill, it's hard to focus on what you're feeling and doing, or to connect the mind with the body and associate yourself with that moment,' says Roberts.

And, if nothing else, remember: self-punishment doesn't get us anywhere – and certainly not to the healthy, happy place exercise can take you. 'I ask my clients to make "wellbeing" goals (rather than fitness goals) and really examine what "health" means to them,' says Reading.

## Strike a balance

So just how much is too much? 'If you're not enjoying your training and it's feeling like a chore, it's time to change things up,' advises Roberts. 'Also, if you're becoming obsessed with your exercise regime and getting angry or frustrated if you miss a session, then something needs balancing out.'

As a general rule of thumb, Roberts recommends making half your workouts intense and 'hard'; the other half skills-based and 'soft'. Alternate the two different types, but overall listen to your body and be flexible with your regime. If you're the type of person who struggles to say 'enough's enough' in the gym, set yourself an upper limit of time per week you'll spend exercising and stick to it. Fitness technology can come in helpful here.

Also remember, it's very important to allow yourself enough recovery time, especially after tougher training, but that doesn't mean you need to be static – studies have shown that, while total rest is important, 'active recovery' (ie low intensity movement) can actually speed up muscle repair by increasing blood flow. Long, relaxing walks, for example, are hugely underrated – recent research from Stanford University, USA, shows that walking outdoors doesn't merely induce a healthy glow, but that those who wander regularly in nature tend to have a lowered risk of depression.

It all goes to show: there's more to exercise than just the guts, the glory and the gluteals. Isn't it about time we all remembered that? **B**

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