

RESEARCH HUB

CHOOSE CHALLENGE OVER COMFORT FOR RESULTS

by Phil Campbell

As workouts become more familiar, most people ease up on intensity. This tendency to favor comfort over challenge is hardwired into our physiology and can be a barrier to achieving the desired results. Fitness professionals can help their members understand the exercise intensity categories so they can continue to improve their strength and fitness.

An Exercise Paradox

Why does the body want to take it easy? At the core of this exercise paradox is the body's preference for efficiency. When presented with a choice, most will instinctively opt for the path of least resistance, conserving energy and avoiding unnecessary effort. While this trait has helped our ancestors in times of scarcity, in the context of strength and fitness, it hinders progress.

Comfort Creates Plateaus

When members unknowingly fall into this trap of comfortable workouts, they often hit a plateau. This stall in progress can be demotivating, but you can help your members by reminding them that intensity is key for continued results.

Why Training History Matters

Although all levels of intensity provide some benefits, higher intensities are a catalyst for continued physical improvements. Your members' training history influences the intensities they must attain to keep making progress.

Strength

Compared to seasoned lifters, those new to regular exercise improve their strength with much lower intensity workouts. For example, research[1] indicates that regular strength training at least twice a week allows untrained individuals to gain strength at an average intensity of just 60% of their 1 repetition maximum (RM). Yet for recreationally trained individuals (most of gym-goers), strength improvements are realized by reaching about 80% of their 1 RM. Advanced athletes have already capitalized on these gains, so they must reach about 85% of their 1 RM for further strength gains.

Fitness

Similar to strength, the minimum intensity necessary for improvement is very low for untrained individuals. This means that untrained people can improve their fitness by working at about 50%[2] of their highest achievable heart rate. In contrast, advanced athletes need to reach over 85%[3] of their highest achievable heart rate to continue to improve their fitness level.

STRENGTH

The ability of a muscle or group of muscles to generate force against resistance.

FITNESS

The efficiency of the heart, lungs, and blood vessels in delivering oxygen to the body, also known as cardiorespiratory fitness.

3 Tips to Introduce Intensity Without Intimidation:

1. **Personalized Progression:** Introduce intensity in manageable steps by setting small, achievable goals. For example, suggest adding a short jog to a walking workout or trying a slightly heavier weight for just one set. These offer signs of gradual progress that help members to feel successful, boosting confidence and showing them that intensity is a tool for growth. Celebrating these small wins keeps them motivated and open to pushing further.
2. **Share Real-life Intensity Wins:** Use stories from trainers and members to demonstrate how embracing intensity accelerates results. Sharing relatable progress stories can connect intensity to practical, everyday benefits. For instance, share how a member improved their stamina for weekend hikes or gained the strength to pick up their grandchildren with ease. These stories make higher intensities more approachable and meaningful to daily life.
3. **Create an Encouraging Culture:** Build a community where effort, not just results, is celebrated. Recognize members for their hard work, regardless of their strength or fitness level. A supportive atmosphere welcomes higher intensities and enhances camaraderie, helping members embrace intensity as part of a shared, uplifting experience.

Remind Members to Embrace Effort

Help your members see effort as the cornerstone of growth. As the exercise paradox clarifies, our bodies are inclined to conserve energy, which can make effortful exercise feel like something to avoid. This instinct, however, is exactly what makes exercise transformative.

Encourage members to reframe their effort as a pathway to progress, associating their sweat and hard work with real results. Share with them a chart of how to monitor their perceived exertion, or suggest they monitor heart rates to help them understand the levels of intensity. Just remember that higher intensities require more recovery time[4] as you help members push through plateaus. With this mindset, they're more likely to embrace the consistency needed to achieve lasting change.

WORKOUT INTENSITY CATEGORIES			
INTENSITY	**HEART RATE***	**PERCEIVED EXERTION** (0-10)**	**THE TALK TEST**
Low	50-63%	0 - 2	Can speak full sentences without needing to pause to breathe
Moderate	64-76%	3 - 5	Conversation is possible but breathing is audible
Vigorous	77-95%	6 - 8	Can only say a few words at a time due to rapid breathing
Maximal to Sprint Intensity	>95%	9 - 10	Can't catch breath enough to speak; can sustain for ~15 - 60 seconds

*Expressed as a percentage of maximum heart rate, an estimate of the highest number of heart beats per minute possible, calculated using 220 – age or 208 – 0.7(age)

**Modified Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion

References:

1. Peterson et al. Applications of the dose-response for muscular strength development: A review of meta-analytic efficacy and reliability for designing training prescription. Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research 2005; 19(4): 950-58.
2. ACSM. American College of Sports Medicine position stand. The recommended quantity and quality of exercise for developing and maintaining cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness in healthy adults. Med Sci Sports Exerc 1990; 22(2): 265-74.
3. ACSM. American College of Sports Medicine Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription. 2021; Wolters Kluwer, Philadelphia PA.
4. Lievens et al. Muscle fiber typology substantially influences time to recover from high-intensity exercise. Journal of Applied Physiology 2020; 128(3): 648-59.



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A certified trainer with the American College of Sports Medicine, Phil Campbell works with athletes to improve speed and agility. He also spent two decades of his career as a senior hospital administrator. His familiarity with the healthcare system and his access to renowned researchers and scientists enabled him to optimize the Sprint 8 workout to achieve maximum results.