

Exercise Variation or Goal-Setting – Which? By Mark Love

“I’m so bored with my workout.” “I want to do something new.” These are two variations on a common theme: the desire to vary one’s workout program. Some believe that it’s important to perform different workouts every session. Others rotate a series of workouts, performing each on a regular, but relatively infrequent basis. Still others almost never change their workouts. Such individuals focus exclusively on working intensely and performing a smaller number of exercises with extremely strict form. Is one way right, and the others wrong? Are other factors involved?

It is beyond question that nearly anything done the same way, without mental and emotional involvement, for a prolonged period will become boring. It is equally beyond question that, for many, even repeating tasks can remain interesting. Clearly, attitude counts for a lot. This is true of exercise, both in general, and with regard to specific types of exercise, and even specific workouts. If an individual understands why he/she is performing his/her workout, has a clear objective in mind, and measures progress regularly, even an “old standby” workout can be engaging and produce results. However, it remains true that many find it difficult to stay motivated to train without regular variety. How can we arrive at the best approach for long-term motivation and success?

To Hit the Target, You Need a Target to Hit

If you started out in your car without a destination, you’d end up exactly where you intended to go – everywhere and nowhere. If you set a destination, but didn’t have a plan to get you there, you’d probably end up somewhere you didn’t intend to go. The same is true of exercise; without direction, it’s unlikely any of us will get optimum results. For many, however, goals are a two-edged sword: we get excited when we set them, and disappointed if we fall short. While this is a common experience, it isn’t a good reason to give up goal-setting. It simply means that the process of choosing and working toward goals needs some modification. If the chosen goals are unrealistic, or the steps required to reach the goal in question aren’t carefully considered and congruent with the goal, success is unlikely.

Characteristics of Useful Goals

First and foremost, goals need to be *specific*. “I’d like to get in better shape and tone up” is a common goal, but it’s not a specific one. What does “better shape” mean to you? What does it mean to tone up? How will you know when you’ve reached your goal? If, on the other hand, you set a goal to lose 10 pounds in eight weeks, or to decrease by one clothing size over three months, you have a goal that you’re much more likely to achieve, because you have an actual destination, so to speak. This type of goal is a lot more likely to inspire your best performance and help you stay motivated.

Second, a good goal is *measurable*. A goal to get stronger is specific, but it’s not measurable. How much stronger do you want to be? If your goal is to increase the amount of weight you can handle on the leg press by 20 pounds in 6 months, you have a goal you can measure. If you’re getting closer to your goal, you will likely feel a surge of motivation. If you find that you’re not progressing as expected, you have the opportunity to make needed changes in training, diet, effort, etc., in order to get back on track.

Third, your goal must be *acceptable*; in other words, it must be set by you. If someone else sets your goal, it's more difficult to “buy in” and do the work necessary to achieve the goal in question. When you set a goal yourself, it's personally motivating, and it's much more probable that you will achieve your goal.

Fourth, your goal has to be *realistic*. It would be wonderful to set a goal to decrease your waist measurement by six inches in one month, but it is probably impossible to accomplish this. A weight loss goal of one pound per week for 10 weeks is much more realistic.

Fifth, and finally, good goal has a *timeline*. This is key; without a definite time by which you expect to achieve your goal, it becomes too easy to put off doing the things you need to do in order to reach your destination. If, for example, you set a goal to lose 20 pounds *sometime*, but you don't decide when that time will be, how likely is it that you will stay disciplined with your eating and exercise habits? On the other hand, if you set the same goal with a six-month deadline, each meal, workout, etc., becomes an opportunity to reaffirm your commitment to your goal.

There are many other things you can do to help achieve your goals, but these five are a good start. However, what variation in your workouts? Even if you set good goals and work hard to achieve them, you may find that you want more variety in your workouts. The key is to make sure that the variety is productive, and not merely varied for the sake of variety.

Variety with Structure

One of the potential pitfalls of varied workouts is that it becomes more difficult to measure progress. If the workout program changes at literally every workout, it's difficult, if not impossible to measure performance gains. For this reason, it may be more productive to create a limited number of alternating workouts. In this way, the exercise routine changes from one workout to the next, but each workout comes around often enough to offer comparisons to previous performances. And, as already mentioned, it's crucial to be able to measure performance in order to achieve goals.

Another means of providing variety is simply to change exercise order. If you commonly train the lower body before the upper body, you might reverse the order. Or, you might arrange exercises to provide a “pre-exhaust” effect; for instance, you might perform the pullover machine before chins, so as to provide greater work for the large muscles of the upper back. There are numerous ways to rearrange the order of exercises while providing a quality workout. If you are unsure how to go about this, consider working with a qualified trainer. He or she will be able to help you balance your desire for variety with enough structure to keep your workouts progressive and productive.

Putting it Together

A highly motivated, goal-oriented individual might workout for months or even years with little change in his or her workouts, but such a person is the exception. On the other hand, it's important not to let the desire for variety become an end in itself. If you are able to combine realistic, specific goals with well-designed, varied workouts, you will most likely find that you enjoy your workouts more, stick with your program, and achieve your health and fitness goals. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll enjoy the rewards.