

Why Does My Workout Have to be So Hard? **by Mark Love**

Nearly every day at Vertex Fitness, I am asked questions such as: Can't we make the weight lighter? Why do you make me do so many repetitions? Can I stop the set yet? These and many other questions are really variations on one question – Why does working out have to be so hard? The simple answer is that nothing worthwhile comes without hard work. However, that answer doesn't really motivate most of us to give 100 percent during our workouts. If you understand why exercise needs to be intense, you'll find it easier to put forth the level of effort that is necessary to reach your health and fitness goals.

The reason exercise must be hard work is found by examining how the body deals with stress. For instance, you could expose your skin to the sun in February in Pennsylvania for hours without any noticeable effect at all. On the other hand, if you tried the same thing in Pennsylvania in July, you'd likely end up with a severe burn. The difference between the two settings is the intensity of the sunlight. The sunlight in February isn't nearly intense enough to cause any change in the color or condition of your skin. The sunlight in July is more than intense enough to cause a change – and in far less time than most other months of the year.

The same is true in the formation of a callous. For example, if you brushed your skin lightly with a feather, no callous would ever form. But if you were to repeatedly grip the knurled metal of a barbell, a callous would form quickly. Again, the difference in the two situations is that of intensity.

What exactly do the previous examples have to do with exercise? Since exercise is a form of stress – everything. Our bodies prefer to remain in a state of homeostasis, or status quo. It takes a lot of energy and resources to build strong muscles and bones and lose body fat. The body would prefer not to use up these resources, since it's stressful to do so. Thus, if the exercise stress isn't sufficiently intense, the body has no reason to change, or get in better shape. In other words, if the workout you perform is well within what you're capable of performing, your body is already in good enough shape to perform that workout, and therefore has no reason to get in better shape. If you don't give your body a reason – in the form of an intense workout – to get in better shape, then you're in the same situation as the sunbather in February. You're literally wasting your time.

The next logical question is how do I know if I'm working out hard enough? This is a difficult question to answer for two reasons. First, just as each person requires different amounts of sunlight to cause a change in skin color, each person has different requirements with regard to the amount of exercise necessary to cause his or her body to change for the better.

Second, there is no way to measure intensity, with the exception of zero intensity and 100 percent intensity. Therefore, it only makes sense to work as hard as you can, each and every time you work out. This level of intensity has been called training to failure, or fatigue. What is important is putting forth your best effort each time you exercise, and doing as many repetitions as possible (while maintaining good form at all times), on each exercise.

The benefits of training as hard as you can go beyond simply knowing that you've worked hard enough to change your body. Training in such a fashion is also time efficient. Just as the sun in Pennsylvania in July is intense enough to produce a tan with a relatively small amount of exposure, a truly intense workout changes your body quickly. Many who train intensely need only two workouts per week, and often train for less than 30 minutes per workout. This not only helps you realize the value of a fit, healthy body, but it helps you to realize the value of getting the most out of your time, which means that you spend less time training your body, and more time enjoying the fruits of your labor.

To summarize, everyone's body would prefer to remain more or less as they are. If you really want to get in great shape and be healthy, you have to give your body a reason to change, which means that your workouts have to be intense. Since intensity is very difficult to measure, and each person requires somewhat different amounts of it to produce improvements, the best way to be sure that you'll get in shape is to train as hard as you possibly can, each and every time you exercise. By doing so, you'll not only get to where you want to go more quickly than you would by exercising less intensely, but you'll also have a lot more time to spend doing all the other things that make your life worthwhile. So whether you are just starting an exercise program at Vertex Fitness or have been working out for a long time, make sure you are working at a high level of intensity. And if you have any questions about intensity or anything else, be sure to ask your personal trainer.