

JUST- RIGHT FITNESS

When it comes to exercise,
the more, the better ... right?
Not necessarily.

Finding your own
fitness sweet spot
is a balancing act.



By JOE HART

As Paula Grenier prepared for her freshman year at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, she experienced the typical anxieties and excitements about grades, boyfriends and roommates. But most of all, she worried about the “Freshman 15” — the proverbial 15 pounds that “frosch” gain during the first year away from home as a result of dorm food, late hours and school stress. It didn’t help matters when the doc at her precollege physical told her she was “too big.”

“I decided I’d be a run-every-morning girl. I became obsessed with weighing 128 pounds, so I started running *twice* a day,” recalls Grenier, now 41. But that goal was unrealistic. The tall, sturdy athlete was trying to retrofit her body to petite size. Eventually, she burned out on running and even flirted with depression and eating disorders while chasing her elusive “magic” weight.

A surprising number of us are like Grenier: We get caught up in arbitrary goals and ideals, and we totally lose track of whether our fitness routine is delivering both the experience and the results we’re after. We also lose track of whether our fitness ambitions support or degrade our larger life.

There are two chief dangers in this: 1) We may joylessly accept a force-fed fitness routine, working out harder and longer than we really need to and largely ignoring “softer” points, like balance, flexibility and recovery; and 2) we may wind up feeling overwhelmed by a too-ambitious fitness program and quit fitness activities entirely.

In both cases, you get the same lackluster result: An ill-fitting fitness endeavor that’s unsustainable for the long haul and that doesn’t deliver the full-spectrum fitness results you deserve.

Now, the good news: According to fitness experts, it doesn’t have to be that way. “You hear it all the time: ‘If you want to get in shape, eat less and exercise more,’” says Jonathan Ross, the American Council on Exercise’s 2006 personal trainer of the year and owner of Aion

Fitness, a personal-training business. “But that’s the worst thing you can tell someone, because it underscores this assumption that more exercise is always better. More is *not* always better. *Better* is always better.”

So what would a “better” routine look like? Well, that depends on you. Does your current program have the right mix of intensity and recovery, challenge and ease, comfort and variety for your current fitness level and fitness appetite? Does your fitness program suit your personality? And what about the rest of your life — your reality, right here and now? You might also investigate whether you’re currently working harder or spending more time than necessary to achieve your primary goals.

This article will help you conduct this sort of evaluation and equip you with insights to fine-tune your approach, if you choose.

If you’re one who tends to scoff at the very idea of backing off or branching out, or if you’ve been doing the same program for years and just can’t imagine changing it now, reconsider. Look at it this way: You can always go back to doing it “the old way,” if you like.

In the meantime, any new fitness tricks you happen to pick up are yours to keep. And even if you aren’t called to incorporate them now, you might find them handy if you decide to reassess your fitness routine in the future. Which, if you have kids, or get a new job, or get older, or hit a health challenge or encounter any other sort of major life change, you very well might.

BALANCE INTENSITY WITH RECOVERY

First, a lesson in fitness philosophy. If you still subscribe to the “no pain, no gain” school of training, you might be better off thinking “no rest, no reward.”

True, the latter slogan may not show up on a T-shirt any time soon, but without adequate recovery, all your intense exertions are unlikely to do you much good. →

Plus, too much intensity can actually work against you. "It's true that you want to go outside your comfort level, but you also don't want to beat your head against the wall," says Ross. "The right amount of challenge will lead to positive results, but too much will lead to injury and breakdown." It can also lead to burnout, frustration and emotional resistance.

Finding the right amount of intensity, rest and recovery depends on your physiology and personal fitness goals. It also depends on your state of mind. Generally, the harder you push physically, the more assiduous you need to be about giving your body time and resources (including good nutrition and sleep) to rebuild. And when you're stressed out, that goes double. If you're already maxed-out energywise, a low-key outdoor Nordic-walking program or regimen of restorative yoga or tai chi may wind up doing you far more good than an extreme-fitness class.

MAKE YOUR MIX

The three basic forms of training — cardiovascular, resistance and flexibility — form an important triumvirate for health — and the intensity-recovery cycle is a little different with each. By blending these different types of activities, you can find a balance of high- and low-intensity exercise that makes good use of your time *and* allows your body to recover efficiently.

In fine-tuning your cardio approach, one key measure you'll want to consider is your anaerobic threshold (AT), says Ray Browning, PhD, a researcher in obesity treatment and prevention at the University of Colorado at Denver's Health Sciences Center. That threshold, which is different for everyone and changes as your fitness level improves, is the

intensity at which your body gets more energy from anaerobic metabolism (which means it begins to burn its glucose reserves) than from aerobic (when it's burning mostly fat). Think of it as the moment when you switch from using steady, sustainable energy (during a slow jog, for instance) to high-powered turbo reserves of energy (sprinting).

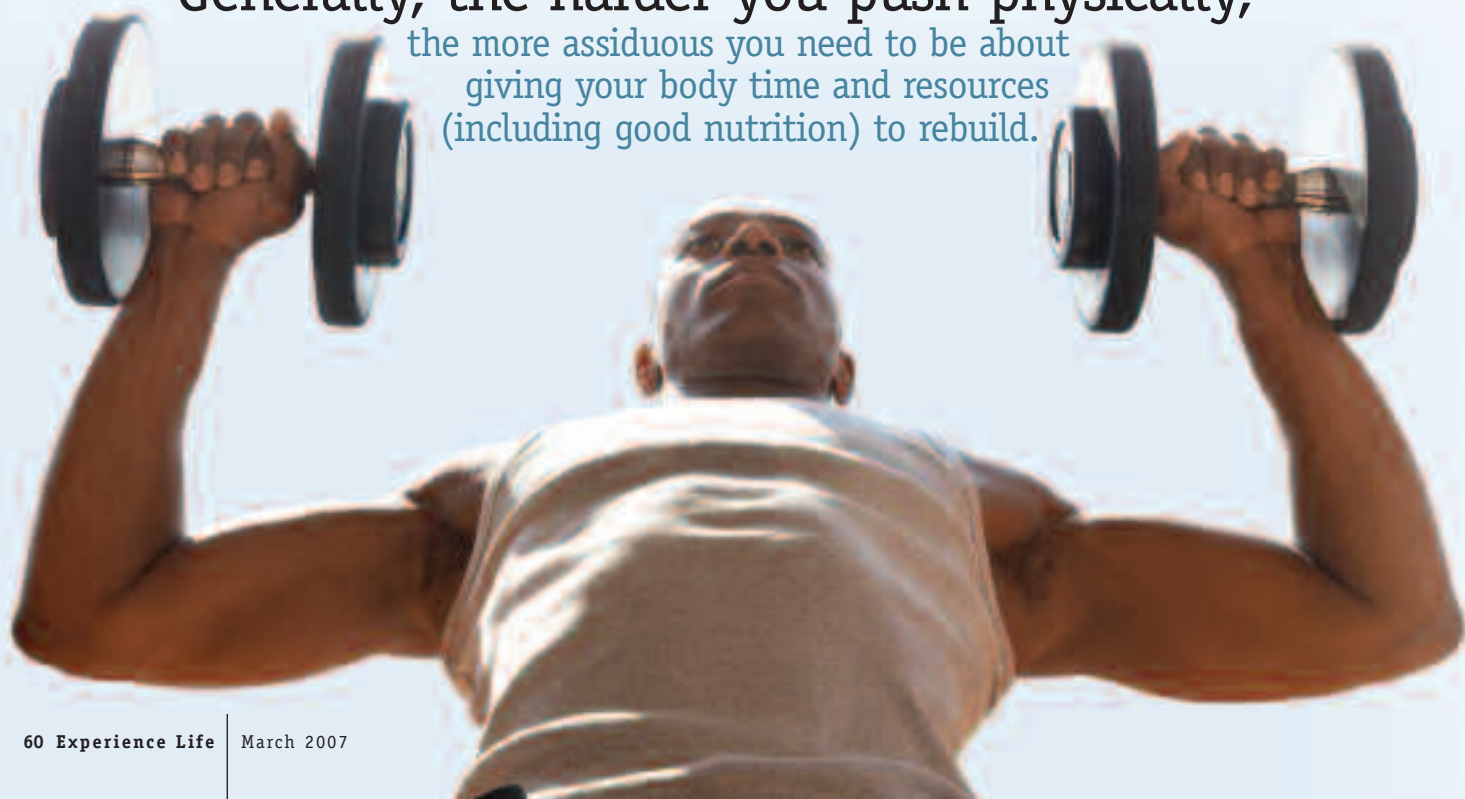
By exercising at or just below your AT, says Browning, you can net dramatic cardiovascular fitness gains in minimal time. By interval training so that your heart rate repeatedly approaches and crosses your AT during the course of a workout, then returns to a lower, more sustainable pace, you can also achieve dramatic fat-burning results — both while you're exercising and for hours afterward. (For more on that, see "A Better Way to Burn Fat" in the January/February 2007 archives at experiencelifemag.com.)

While you can get a lot of bang for your fitness buck by exercising at or above this level of intensity, you'll also need to figure in some time for recovery. As a general rule, you'll want to cycle between hard-push cardio days and easier ones. So on a day following high-intensity intervals or sprints, you'll want to recover with something like a lower-zone jog or walk — or focus on resistance training and flexibility instead.

Resistance training involves a different set of physiological responses. When you lift a weight, you activate a variety of hormones that signal to the relevant muscle group that it's undergoing stress. "The body is basically saying, 'What are we going to do to adapt to this stress?'" says Browning. Our bodies first activate an increased percentage of muscle fibers. Then the hormones and neural inputs trigger anabolic growth of the muscles.

This muscle growth occurs only during periods of rest. "The body doesn't get stronger during training," explains

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the more assiduous you need to be about
giving your body time and resources
(including good nutrition) to rebuild.





NEW MOVES

Are you pushing yourself too hard, or boring yourself silly? Seeing fewer results from your old routine? When you need a new approach, try some of these ideas from the experts.

ALTERNATE

If you repeatedly do the same 30-minute midintensity run, followed by a paltry 5 minutes of stretching, try running intervals for 20 minutes and adding 10 minutes of flexibility, strength and balance work — say, with a short yoga or Pilates routine. Or swap an indoor cardio workout for a bike ride with your spouse — or a wrestling match with your kids.

If you currently focus solely on repetitive tasks like running or weight training, look for new ways to move yourself. Try rock climbing, dance or martial arts. Take up boxing or Nordic walking. Above all, strive for variety. It gives you a broader, more interesting workout. And reserve one day a week for rest. Always.

RESPIRATE

The way you're breathing can indicate how effective your training is. If you're soaked with sweat and panting for breath every minute of your workout, you're probably overtaxing your body. Shallow panting can actually make your body more stressed, says John Douillard, PhD, author of *Body, Mind and Sport* (Three Rivers Press, 2001). "When you gasp through your mouth, you're triggering your fight-or-flight stress receptors," he explains. "When you breathe through your nose, your lungs and rib cage work in a more efficient manner." Douillard's book describes nasal breathing techniques that can improve your workout.

INTEGRATE

If exercise feels stressful, or like just another chore in your too-busy day, it's likely to get dropped altogether when more pressing matters arise — or when you just plain don't feel like it. Instead, try to integrate activity into your regular life, suggests Charlie Brown, PhD, a clinical sports psychologist. "You can build fitness into everything you do in your daily life," he says. "Use the stairway instead of elevators, and park farther away from the shopping mall." Or look for ways to integrate activity and pleasure. Play a game of catch with your kids; invite friends for chat-walks; consider an activity-based class you'll actually enjoy — like ballroom, salsa or belly dancing. The point is, seek out opportunities to move that *don't* feel like work and obligation.

Charlie Brown, PhD, a clinical sports psychologist and director of Charlotte, N.C.-based FPS Performance, a consulting firm that helps people perform at peak levels. "Your body gets stronger when it rebuilds *after* the exercise. If you don't rest, you're in a progressive state of degeneration."

Most experts recommend a lifting schedule that allows at least two days of recovery between resistance workouts for major muscle groups — meaning you can either alternate between upper- and lower-body groups with a day off in between, or simply get on a one-day-on, two-days-off cycle. Abdominal and core work, on the other hand, you can do every day.

Flexibility work, too, can be an everyday affair — and most of us would benefit by doing more of it. By expanding your muscles' range of motion, you lessen your chance of injury and increase your functional strength, which means replacing a punishing weight session with a restorative yoga or Pilates class may not just feel better, it may also yield better results.

GETTING TO JUST-RIGHT

OK, so now we know something about avoiding the "too much of a good thing" syndrome. But how much activity do we require to achieve and maintain a reasonably good level of fitness? Again, it depends.

For most people, Browning notes, it takes four to six weeks to see significant results from any new form of exercise. Then, after eight to 10 weeks, many people hit a plateau. "The body has adapted," Browning explains. →

Now, there are two ways to look at this. On the one hand, if you've reached your plateau and want to *improve* your level of fitness, you must either ramp up the intensity or the duration of your workout. For most people, duration is the easiest variable to play with, Browning says. If you work out three days a week for half an hour, after six or seven weeks, plan to add 10 minutes to two of your sessions.

Or, you can look at it a different way: After six weeks, it's relatively easy to *maintain* your fitness level. "The levels required for maintaining are much less than what's needed to increase fitness," says Browning. Highly trained athletes will lose some ground if they back off their routines for long, he notes. But the rest of us can hold steady pretty easily: "The general rule of thumb is that a reasonably fit person could do two days a week of moderate exercise and not see significant declines," Browning says.

In other words, one person's plateau is another's sustainable exercise routine. If you've been working out for years, steadily increasing duration and intensity, there's a good chance you could back off of your routine a bit — or at least rebalance it with more variety and recreational activity — without losing much of your general fitness or ability. True, you might not be *increasing* your level of fitness with this strategy, but if you're not competing, you may not need to. Or want to.

It may sound obvious, but fitness should be "first and foremost, fulfilling," explains Rob Sleamaker, MS, an exercise physiologist, designer of high-level swim-specific training machines and coauthor with Browning of *SERIOUS Training for Endurance Athletes* (Human Kinetics, 1996).

As a matter of fact, one of the most important factors in a successful, balanced fitness program is whether you *like* what you're doing. And whether you like it depends, in part, on how well it fits within the larger context of your priorities.

Psychologists like Brown consider lack of enjoyment a sign that you might be overtraining. "When you're pushing your body too hard, you stop enjoying the workout, and, instead, you *have* to work out. It becomes a gotta-do instead of a wanna-do," says Brown.

If your body is keeping pace with your workouts, but you're still feeling out of sorts, it may mean that your workouts just aren't in sync with your current reality. While a solid health and fitness program deserves a position of importance in any well-balanced life, the motivations that drove your fitness ambitions in college may be very different than your ambitions now. And if your fitness schedule and pursuits don't reflect that shift, a certain amount of fitness ennui is likely to result (for more on this, see "Where Fitness Fits In," in the January/February 2007 archives at experiencelifemag.com).

FIND WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

Ultimately, finding the right routine requires some honest self-assessment. What are your goals? Your capabilities? And, most important, what makes you feel great?

By most measures, Paula Grenier is still a fitness enthusiast. She has competed in triathlons and marathons, runs and cycles regularly, works out with a personal trainer, and practices yoga. But she's not trying to keep her weight down anymore — she's having fun.

And perhaps it's this sense of equilibrium that's the best barometer of fitness success. It's the not-too-punishing, not-too-paltry, not-too-anything sense of having landed in a fitness approach that feels "just right" to you.

Joseph Hart is a freelance writer and editor in Viroqua, Wis.

WEB EXTRA!

For help with recognizing the signs of overtraining, see the online version of this article at experiencelifemag.com.

