

How to Not Be Intimidated in the Gym

Overcoming Gym and Health Club Anxiety

By Frank Trejo



Most gym employees will help you get acquainted with the gym or allay your concerns, so don't let a lack of familiarity hold you back. - Jupiterimages/Comstock/Getty Images

For some, the hardest part of working out is not the cardio, the leg presses or even the spinning classes -- it's walking into the gym.

People may think health clubs are filled with incredible hulks and smiling supermodels, surrounded by mysterious, sinister-looking weights and machines. In other words, the gym can be intimidating.

But don't let it stop you. Five fitness experts offer surefire suggestions on how to better understand and enjoy the gym and make it a welcome part of your fitness program.

Where to Start?

The atmosphere of the gym can contribute to intimidation.

"The open spaces can be intimidating, the cardio machines may feel too close together and, of course, the aggressive salespeople can send anyone packing," says Cindy Whitmarsh, a San Diego-based fitness and nutrition expert.

Jackie Warner, celebrity trainer and Beverly Hills gym owner, adds that a lack of familiarity with the equipment and "gym etiquette" can scare many people away from health clubs. But a good staff and well-established club rules can ease concerns.

"If someone doesn't know how to operate a piece of equipment, they need to ask the training staff. They should always be willing to help. And if they don't, leave that gym immediately," Warner said. "You also need to be willing to go up to someone and ask if you can work in. They will be more than willing to let you. And if they don't, they are breaking gym etiquette."

The Shape of Things

One of the biggest causes of gym intimidation is the mistaken belief that everyone there is already in shape.

"Many of my clients have said they were not 'in shape enough' to go to the gym," said Karyn M. Gallivan, personal trainer and instructor in Human Performance and sports sciences at Tennessee State University. "When folks are out of shape, especially when they are overweight, they feel self-conscious."

The truth is, no one's perfect. And everyone is at the gym for the same reason -- to improve.

The marketing of most gyms and health clubs often seems to perpetuate the notion that they are for the built and the beautiful. You almost never see overweight people sweating hard to lose a pound or two in gym ads. They usually show six-pack hunks and size-zero beauty queens.

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Choosing the Right Gym

Finding the right health club could mean the difference between lasting happiness or a quickie divorce that costs you money.

Gregory Florez, national spokesman for the American Council on Exercise, says the search should begin with you. Write down what you want from a gym, what has worked for you in the past and what you are likely to stick with.

"At that point you can start to look for a gym with the particular activities [you want]," Florez said.

"Beautiful people always sell. And with rare exceptions, that's what you are going to see in the ads; you're going to see the ideal. Most people, no matter how hard they try, are not going to be ideal, and they know it," said Gregory Florez, the owner of a fitness and training consulting company and a national spokesman for the American Council on Exercise.

But things are changing as the industry recognizes the need to address different customers. That has led to the emergence of clubs targeting specific groups. Curves, for example, focuses on the needs of women gym-goers. And the increase in the number of smaller, boutique gyms, as well as Pilates and yoga studios, attest to a need for different sorts of gyms.

Getting Over It

While intimidation can affect anyone who's out of shape or overweight, experts say women, particularly those over 40, are the ones most likely to fear going to the gym. That, says Gallivan, goes back to the misconception that gyms are the domain of the muscular and the perfect.

Warner notes that many women also did not participate in the sorts of school team sports that required gym workouts. More men, she says, are at least familiar with the atmosphere and the experience of being in a gym.

Those unfamiliar with the workings of a gym should consider investing in a personal trainer, even if it's only for a few sessions. But make certain you know what your goals are and that you state these goals to your trainer. Also be sure the trainer knows you want to be able to work out on your own as well.

Whitmarsh says working out with a friend or in a group also helps some people gain confidence at the gym. And it's another way to motivate you to show up for your workout.

The No. 1 tip on most experts' lists, though, is "Don't be afraid to ask for help."

Trent David, a personal trainer at Gold's Gym in Hollywood, California, says he constantly reminds people that each member at the gym is focusing on his own goals and workout.

"Check with your friends and family and your co-workers about where they work out. References are the best way to find what you're looking for."

And don't forget the budget. Make sure the gym you're contemplating is affordable to you.

Cindy Whitmarsh, fitness and nutrition expert in San Diego, says it's a good idea to visit the gym toward the end of the month, when health clubs may be trying to meet their monthly membership goals. You should also get an orientation from any gym you're considering.

"You may have to ask for an orientation, but almost every good gym starts out each member with a complete orientation of goal setting, body-fat testing, flexibility testing, and some even have nutrition information," Whitmarsh said.

The International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association recommends that you bring a checklist of important items with you on your first visit, confirming such provisions as personal training, childcare, group exercise classes, changing facilities, parking and cardio equipment.

Celebrity trainer Jackie Warner says it's also wise to choose a gym that's not too busy. This is particularly important if you intend to do any circuit training and would rather not wait for a machine.

Gyms have every kind of person -- young, old, skinny, heavy, male and female.

"Everyone at the gym is in the same situation, and not everyone is a 20-year-old bodybuilder," David said. "Going to the gym for the first time is like the first day of school. You may not like it, it may seem strange and lots of people hate it. But you get through it and you do fine."

With that in mind, you can start to move past your intimidation. And one day soon, you just might find yourself completely at home in the gym, wondering what all that anxiety was about.

Even if you don't want to use a personal trainer or can't afford one, it's vital to find a gym that has a good training staff, says Warner.

"You can pick up a lot just by watching a good trainer work with a client," she said. "That's one of the things I did when I was starting out."

April 29, 2011

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