



**BALANCE - SIMPLICITY - ACCESSIBILITY**

## **RECOVERY STRATEGIES FOR YOUR MIND**

### **Part 3: Appearance**

#### **Let's keep some perspective**

We live in a time when we are bombarded with images of a so-called ideal aesthetic. It is often athletic, heavily muscled yet extremely lean and with very bright white teeth. If you do not fit this aesthetic, like the overwhelming majority of the population of this planet do not, then it can be a source of anxiety and insecurity.

Social media can be an incredible tool. It can bring people together that might otherwise have drifted apart and allows small businesses to extend their reach further and at a far lower cost to traditional marketing/advertising tools. Social media generally gets bad press for its emphasis on image rather than substance but let's face it, the same could be said for magazines, tv advertising, billboards etc. etc. Therefore, whilst the below does tend to focus on the effect social media can have on our emotional well-being, it is only because it is such a big part of our lives today and much of my comment could easily be said to apply to other media platforms.

Regardless of the form of media, it is important we emphasise a few points to bear in mind when we are interpreting images of this athletic ideal:

#### **1. Your bodyweight is not a static metric**

Your bodyweight as reflected on a set of scales can change on a daily and sometimes even hourly basis. Things like water retention and digestive issues can influence the numbers you see before you. It is strongly advised to take readings over an extended period rather than checking your weight every day as that can be a sure-fire way of seeing your confidence yo-yo as the numbers do.

#### **2. Weight might not even be the right metric to use**

If you are already quite lean and are simply looking to tone up, weighing yourself might not give you a very good picture of your progress because body composition changes in a naturally lean person can

affect what they see on the scales whilst they are building muscle mass. Keeping track of your bodyfat or using before and after photos might be more appropriate options but these too have their pitfalls.

Using biometric impedance scales to assess your bodyfat percentage has its limitations because variables such as hydration and tissue mineral levels can affect the results. However, monitoring bodyfat levels over time and looking for trends can be useful for indicating progress. As with weighing yourself, try not to put too much store on a single reading.

The answer, therefore, is to consider what your goals are, then decide what metrics are appropriate to track progress and take readings periodically over an extended period of time.

### **3. How to take the measurements**

To get the most out of any metric, ensure that the conditions for testing are as consistent as possible. Ensure all your assessments use the same equipment and the test is performed first thing in the morning, before breakfast and after you have been to the loo. Collect data over several weeks if not months to identify trends and you will get a reasonable assessment of whether you are making progress.

### **4. You are hormonally predisposed to put on weight in the winter**

I do not wish to over-egg the effect our hormonal disposition has but we are still cavemen at heart. Our bodies are more inclined to store fat in preparation for the winter as many animals do. Do not use it as a convenient excuse, but likewise, do not get bummed out if the winter seems particularly challenging when it comes to weight management. All you can do is get your nutrition on point, train sensibly and consistently and the numbers on the scales will come back your way eventually.

### **5. Strength training is a key component of weight loss**

Strength training will help you to build lean muscle mass and therefore increase your basal metabolic rate. This is your body's fundamental energy requirements at rest. In short, if you hit the weights a bit and build lean mass, you will burn more calories naturally to support the increased energy demands.

### **6. Strength training in isolation will not make you 'stacked'**

One of the responses I sometimes receive to the suggestion of incorporating strength training into my endurance athletes' programmes, is that they do not want to get 'big'. I am not sure where this misconception came from but hitting the beach weights will not make you big on its own. In order to build significant muscle mass, the type of mass a body builder looks to accrue, which is what I think is being imagined, an athlete needs to train in a very specific way and eat in a manner to match.

You will not puff up like Popeye after a few bicep curls. If you are looking to lose weight and tone up, this is only possible through a balance of cardiovascular training to improve your 'fitness' and weight training to build muscle mass (note I am not saying muscle bulk).

### **7. Ab work alone will not give you a six-pack**

Ignore the dodgy adverts lathered with a thick American accent and some bit of kit you need to buy to build a six-pack. To put it bluntly, you can isolate any muscle(s) you want but if it is covered in a layer of bodyfat because your nutrition is out and you do no cardiovascular training, it will never have that toned aesthetic you dream of.

Whilst we are on the subject of isolation, your body does not allow you to pick and choose which areas get toned and which you can neglect. How someone's body deposits bodyfat or builds muscle is largely driven by genetics, hormonal regulation and gender. For instance, men tend to carry more bodyfat around their stomach and women tend to accumulate fat around their hips more easily.

Therefore, take a whole-body approach to your training and everywhere will tone up!

### **8. Nutrition is 50% of the battle**

What you eat is your fuel. Put too much in the tank and it will overflow, put too little in and the vehicle will come to a halt. But before you start cutting out food groups from your diet, any changes need to be considered and incremental. Avoid sweeping change like the plague as total lifestyle change in one go will not be tenable long-term.

If you are satisfied with this logic and you need to be sure the changes are going to be made, plot the course of your changes in a calendar and you will be more likely to follow a positive trajectory. Such an approach will also provide accountability if you do not tick something off. Taking control in this way will help take the anxiety and uncertainty out of what would otherwise be a haphazard approach.

### **9. A dramatic increase in exercise volume will only see you give up**

Increase the volume and frequency of your training gradually, otherwise it will not be sustainable. Your body is incredibly adaptable, but adaptations take time. Hitting it too hard too quickly is why so many of those post-Christmas gym bunnies go back into hibernation.

### **10. Genetics has a significant role to play**

Sadly, some must work harder than others to lose or maintain their weight. It is a fact. There is no point getting upset about it. Accept it and focus on what you can do rather than comparing yourself to someone else.

Something you also need to consider is that some physiques carry weight better than others. For instance, I have a cross between a mesomorphic and endomorphic physique. Which means that I find it quite easy to build muscle mass but go too far and I look short and squat like a chode (careful where you Google that one)!

## **Fitness models**

The types of people you see in adverts and fitness models on social media do not wake up one morning shredded to the max. The type of lifestyle they have chosen requires sacrifice and discipline, so they certainly deserve our respect in that regard. It is not all smiles and white teeth however, even if that is how it might appear on their carefully curated social media accounts.

Fitness models on social media have built that aesthetic over years, not months or weeks. You are getting a snapshot of their glory days. The photos you see are the very best they have to offer and have probably been through a thousand iterations before being uploaded. You are less likely to see the days they are bloated or have gone off the boil for the last month. If you do, it is normally paired with some sort of patronising motivational ramble which I think we can all do without! So, perv on these people sure, but do not compare yourself to them because if you work a normal job, it is not a fair playing field.

Finally, remember that arguably most of the individuals we are concerned with post their photos on social media either for validation or to sell products. They are just as insecure and narcissistic as the rest of us, so do not allow yourself to be duped into thinking their life in image thumbnails is real life.

## **Magazine and book cover models**

Let us next take a look at magazine and book covers. Making the front of a magazine or getting your own cook book is a pretty big deal and the model(s) are likely to have trained single-mindedly for that shoot. This includes potentially abstaining from water in the 24-hours prior to the shoot to enhance the contouring of their muscles. It is important to remember that being a cover model is generally a full-time job. If they were not good at it, they would not make a living. Just the same as you and I would not make a living doing whatever it is we do if we were not half decent. It is their job to look good!

The models you see in magazines are very unlikely to look like that all the time. Do not get me wrong, they might still look pretty damn good, but generally speaking they are portraying an untenable paradigm for the normal person that is at work for 8-10 hours a day and does not have 12 clear weeks to train twice a day and meal prep. You made your choice of career, they made theirs. There are pros

and definitely cons to both types of lifestyle, so make your peace with it and focus on what you can achieve.

## **Fitness studies in magazines**

You might see articles referring to 'studies' that came to some awe-inspiring conclusion regarding some new product, supplement or foodstuff. Studies presented in magazines or newspapers, however, can often have been oversimplified or their conclusions based on tiny datasets. Have you ever read some of them critically? Some claim absolutely ridiculous things in the tag line in order to grab your attention. "A study paid for by this lobbying group found for 7 out of a 10 test subjects, this 'superfruit' gave them bigger muscles and heightened virility." Really?

Obviously not every article covering exercise and health studies is b@llocks and you will sometimes find that when you read deeper into the article, the headline is often so incredibly qualified as to be meaningless. The message, therefore, is to be critical before deciding whether the underlying product, and there generally is one, warrants your further consideration. Small scale studies conducted over a few days or weeks are rarely conclusive.

## **How you look when you train**

Treat your training how some men (that are definitely not me) approach sex. Prepare, focus and then get the job done as efficiently as possible. If everyone else is happy then great but focus on yourself. I am obviously joking...but this mantra can certainly be applied to your training sessions to help with any anxiety regarding how you look when exercising.

When you are slammed at work, do you really care what you look like sitting at your desk trying desperately to get an email out or a project finished? I would doubt it. I bet you are focused on getting the job done. I strongly believe the same approach should be taken with your training. Having a plan for your session will give you confidence and give your mind something to focus on rather than whether your bum is jiggling (or as I have recently discovered in the gym, I need to wear tighter boxers)!

You should have a plan for what you want to achieve every time you set off on a run or head to the gym. If you do not, your mind is going to wander. If you do have a plan, then you have your job to do. Get it done!

## **Being female in a gym environment**

I am unquestionably not qualified to be giving my thoughts on this subject. I am less definitively, a man...I believe.

However, I have several female clients and female friends that have told me this is an issue and so I have done my best to investigate as to why gym environments can be intimidating. Firstly, I do not think this feeling is unique to women. I believe everyone has similar insecurities to a greater or lesser extent, but it seems more pertinent for women from what I have been able to garner. Many gyms offer women only zones after all.

Traditionally, a gym has been seen as a male dominated arena and women are not made to feel welcome, particularly in the free-weights zone. I really wish I could destroy this facade comprehensively and immediately because if it is preventing people from getting the most out of their training then that is an absolute travesty.

I cannot give anyone the confidence to dominate the gym floor, but I do think there are a few points I can make that might help.

## **Worried about not knowing what you are doing?**

A common cause of anxiety seems to be a worry that you do not know what you are doing. As a personal trainer and someone that generally likes to think they know their stuff, my assessment of the typical gym environment is that very few people there truly know what they are doing. This is not a

criticism. If you are not a personal trainer, strength and conditioning coach or really really experienced, you are not expected to be an expert!

The ridiculous thing is that pretty much every exercise you can think of or have seen in the gym is a derivative of the most basic exercises possible. For example, squats, lunges, push ups, pull ups, shoulder press and rowing are all extremely simple exercises that we probably perform in some guise every day. A squat is getting on and off the loo for example. It is easier on some days than others but a squat all the same.

With any of these exercises, once you understand the basic mechanics behind them, you can pretty much understand what good form should look like for the majority of derivative exercises. For instance, a squat is about sinking into your heels, keeping your chest up and straight, knees tracking in-line with your toes and then driving through the heels to extend at the hips and knees. The good form from a bodyweight squat correctly performed can then be applied to any exercise requiring a squatting motion e.g. deadlifts, cleans and other seemingly complex powerlifting techniques.

The point is, do not be put off just because an exercise looks fancy and the performer is making a lot of noise. If you lack confidence, focus on getting the simple exercises right and then you will instinctively know what feels and looks right when it comes to progressing to more complex and weight bearing exercises.

Finally, if you are not sure of anything, ask one of the gym trainers for help. It is quite literally their job! I do not work in a gym environment, so I do not wish to criticise, but I have trained in a number of different gyms and am always quite saddened by the lack of trainer accessibility. It is my view that there should be at least one trainer on hand, not training a client, who has made it known to any newcomers that they are there specifically to help, not to give a free PT session but to answer questions and correct form. Otherwise, people are reliant on their own interpretation of a training plan they might have acquired from the internet, which is not necessarily appropriate for them.

### **Groups of leering blokes**

Something I have been told on numerous occasions is that gyms can be intimidating because of groups of guys crowding around and monopolising equipment. What I would suggest is that these guys are probably very nice for a start and they are there in a group because they like to have others around for affirmation. This might not help you with the confidence to venture into their domain as they all stare at you, but my point is that they are there for the exact same reason as you and they may well not know very much more than you. Acknowledge their inability to train alone, what is intimidating about that?!

The point above regarding having a plan in place to distract you from your insecurities whilst you train is very applicable in this instance. If you have a focused plan to perform, then you should not really have time to care what others are doing.

### **Afraid of cocking up**

Have you ever seen anyone cock up in the gym? Drop a weight or forget to secure the seat on a machine? Can you remember what they look like? Did you laugh out loud at them or even inwardly? I would suggest that you probably do not remember them and probably did not laugh. In fact, I reckon you felt sorry for them or thought, "poor person, I've done that". When you cock up in any other aspect of life it is put down as a learning point, not necessarily a failure. The same is true in the gym environment. If you get it wrong, do not worry about it no one is likely to have given a sh\*t. Or if they do, they probably lack stimulation in the rest of their day and should be pitied.

Gyms are peculiar in the feelings they provoke in people. Which is strange if you think about it. Everyone is there for a singular purpose. They have acknowledged that they are not naturally an aesthetic paradigm and so are there to get fit! How can there possibly be a hierarchy or culture of judgment? True experts do not judge the less experienced, they look to build them up and pass on their knowledge. Anything less than this from someone purporting to be knowledgeable is fraud, ignore them.

## Have a few PT sessions

If the above has not convinced you to leave your worries at the door when you enter a gym, I would highly recommend booking yourself a few personal training sessions. This is not a plug for RIAK Fitness' services (although we really are rather good!). PT sessions for those new to the gym or lacking in confidence are like someone showing you how to use the IT systems on your first day of work. You could probably figure it out yourself, but it is a hell of a lot easier if someone with experience walks you through it!

Gyms are expensive. Paying for a PT on top of that can see the whole thing become exorbitant. However, I would encourage you to see PT sessions as an investment and something you are perfectly at liberty to dictate the terms of. If you want to know how to do certain exercises with good form, then tell them! Get as much advice and coaching from them as you can so that you can eventually become your own PT.

At RIAK Fitness, one of our primary goals with our personal training sessions is to educate and coach. The logic for this is simple: the more educated you become on training methods and correct form, the easier our job is! We are lazy like that. Whether you are a RIAK Fitness client or not, we would advise that you seek an education from your PT rather than letting them hit you with a seemingly random set of exercises each week. It will do wonders for your confidence levels the next time you see a bunch of blokes half-repping the crap out of a bench press and squealing like abattoir victims.

## Coming up in this series:

**Part 4: Losing or maintaining bodyweight** – Every man and his dog claims to have the secret. In reality, the principles of healthy weight loss are really rather simple. It takes small changes and an extended period of time...sorry!

**Part 5: Time Pressure** - The training and recovery killer – How do we fight back? We rethink our priorities and preconceptions of what time we have available.