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When It Comes to Fitness, One Size Doesn't Fit All



Throughout my years as a runner, personal trainer and bootcamp class participant, I was told by my coaches and instructors, “Don’t worry, lifting weights won’t make your muscles bulk.” And despite the changes in my body that I witnessed along the way, I believed every single one of them. I thought, “This is just what it means to be athletic and strong.” That is, until I was the fit girl in my friend group who couldn’t fit into her clothes.

As an athlete with body awareness, I always knew that I carried the majority of my weight in my lower half, and that as easy as it is to tack on additional muscle (or fat) in that space, it’s equally as difficult to achieve the opposite reaction. However, only until recently did I realize that this information about one’s physical makeup is part of a science called phenotyping, and that such insight can be used to determine the types of exercise that will work with your body, not against it.

Taking advantage of an opportunity to meet and speak with Edward Jackowski, the CEO and founder of Exude Fitness who has spent the past 30 years trying to use phenotype data to create individualized programs for his clients (and is the only one to hold a patent for this body type-based exercise), I set out to learn more about why my body responded to my various workouts the way it did. It took him a matter of seconds to determine which physical profile of the four he has come to use that I matched — I’m what you’d call an hourglass.

According to Jackowski’s definition, the hourglass is wider in the shoulders and hips than in the waist. And after learning about my family history and past as an athlete of various modalities, it was also clear that not only do I carry more weight in those two spaces, but I have a propensity to bulk muscle there quickly as well — especially in the lower half. The bottom line? I was fit, but the workouts I was doing (mainly a collection of gut-busting boot camps balanced with restorative yoga sessions and a jog or two) weren’t making my body look fit.

Now this disconnect isn’t a new one. Neil Johannsen, an assistant professor in the Louisiana State University School of Kinesiology, explained to me that while recommendations for exercise from the American College of Sports Medicine and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services work for the majority of people, they surely don’t work for everyone.

“In the studies I’ve been a part of, we emphasize a program of 150 minutes per week at a moderate intensity, 75 minutes per week at vigorous intensity, a couple of days of resistance training and muscle-building activities, some flexibility training and some neuro-motor activity to help with balance,” he said. “But you tend to see a lot of people that don’t respond. When we did the combined training on people with BMIs of up to 48, which is in the severe obesity category, only about 62 percent actually improved their maximum aerobic fitness. So what’s going on with the remaining 38 percent? Why aren’t they responding? That group lost the most weight in a 9-month intervention, losing only an average of about 3 pounds.”

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So therein lies the issue. If you're one of the outliers, you then have to find another fitness structure that works for you. And most people have no idea where to start. I know I didn't. Even with a strong understanding of fitness, I didn't know how to separate the ideas of "fun" and "functional fitness." So I asked for help.

As I overhauled my weekly workout regimen with Jackowski, the first thing to go was anything that so much as resembled a boot camp. I kept my jogs, added in stationary biking quickly against little resistance, and paired both of them with super lightweight resistance training with very high repetitions (we're talking 50-100 reps with 2-pound dumbbells instead of 15-20 reps with 10-pound dumbbells), which kept me in my aerobic heart rate zone. I jumped rope with almost every workout, and I upped my amount of core work, using only my body weight for resistance. And I happily kept my yoga classes scattered throughout the week.

As an already-athletic person, I managed to lose 7.5 pounds and 13 inches across my body in a matter of four weeks by sticking to these workouts at least five days a week (well, make that three weeks because I'm human and had a week in that timeline where fitness just wasn't a priority). I was shocked when I heard the numbers, but at the same time I wasn't, because as I did the workouts, I could feel the difference. I could feel my aerobic fitness improving, I could feel my ballistic flexibility increasing, I could add 5 minutes onto my jump rope session without second thought.

I was using the strength I already had, but in a maintenance way, which was something I hadn't done in years. I was always pushing to be better, to be more competitive, to do more more more. But my body didn't actually need more, especially since I wasn't using it to push across any grueling finish lines. It really just needed more fine tuning.

The scientific data on the use of phenotyping in fitness isn't quite where it needs to be just yet, mainly because the studies utilizing it are limited to very small sample sizes and include mainly Caucasian men, according to Johannsen. But that's not to say miniature case studies like my own, or others like me, can't shed light in these areas of research that are currently still in the dark.

"This is where the novelty of Dr. Jackowski's method comes in," said Johannsen. "He's trying to phenotype people and get them to do exercises that work with their bodies instead of trying to force everybody to use a program that may work for most people but doesn't work for everybody. He's trying to look at people, determine what their phenotype is, get a glimpse at what their genotype is and try to individualize a program according to that person."

My latest fitness experiment has left me with quite a few unexpected takeaways, the first being that one size really doesn't fit all. We can't tell people, "Lifting weights won't make you bulk," or "You can't spot treat your problem areas," or "You can't actually solve your cellulite," because those are all blanketing, absolute statements about a space in which people scientifically prove that variety exists. What may work for one may not work for the other. There is no single trick that everyone can use to address the same problem, no matter how badly we may wish for one.

When it comes to physical strength, you don't need to do power moves to be a powerful (yet petite) person. Some women can grab a set of 10-pound dumbbells, crank out 20 reps of bicep curls with them, and either witness very little change or achieve the tone they desire. I'm not one of those women. Even 5-pound dumbbells encourage my muscles to hypertrophy. Yes, I can physically do it, but just because I can doesn't mean I should.

Functional fitness most definitely is not always fun. There were days that I felt bored out of my mind jogging on a flat road for an hour rather than doing butt-kicking hill sprints, and others when I thought I would scream if I had to do one more sit-up. But I didn't do it out of enjoyment — I did it because it's what my body needed. That frame of mind is something that seems to be drifting further and further from people when it comes to their physical health — and the advent of boutique gyms and classes aren't really helping matters.

Lastly, just because something isn't impossibly difficult doesn't mean it isn't serving you. Keeping all five aspects of fitness in balanced is what keeps you balanced. It's as easy as that.

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