

There has been a lot of talk about *change* these days, and I am happy about this new focus. In terms of our health and fitness, change is a key component to getting results, staying injury free, and stopping the dreaded haze of boredom from settling in. Change can be a powerful nudge to address the factors of our physical lives that often get stuck. This may be one reason why, when we vacation, we get away from our normal environment, employ a new daily schedule, find a new view, and wear flip flops instead of loafers. This is also why when we hit a plateau in our weight loss, or strength gains, or our ability to finish that cross-word puzzle, that a little change in place or thought can recharge us and accelerate our progress. The great thing about change is that it doesn't have to be very big to have a big impact. In fact, often making too big a change can be counterproductive to our goals.

As a physical therapist, I often am asked to evaluate the work-stations of people who are in discomfort, often from neck, back, and/or shoulder pain. We work together to arrange the work environment so that the body is not put in stressful positions for long periods of time. We frequently address good computer-to-eye level ratio, chair height, keyboard and phone placement, and foot positions. Since every person's needs will vary depending on how their physical body responds to their working position, we try different adjustments and then "wait and see."

Surprisingly, my best suggestion is to "change the position of all your furniture within the room." The basic theory is that our body develops "movement programs" that help us get through our day without too much thought (e.g., tying your shoes, walking, writing, or playing an instrument). These programs save us a lot of energy by allowing us do things automatically, without thinking of every single movement we make. If movement programs are compromised by poor posture, excessive use of the pattern or injury, the pattern is disrupted, and pain can develop. By simply changing the environment where the pattern takes place, e.g., the computer workstation, the body begins to reassess and adjust the pattern, ridding itself of the movement glitch for at least a while, so that the body can relearn how to work in its new environment. This may seem difficult or unusual, yet it happens all the time in our daily lives. For example, look at what happens when you change to a different car after having driven the same car for several years. Initially you are adjusting your seat and mirrors, reaching for knobs that are not there, feeling the changed pressure of gas and brake pedals and even pulling up for gas on the wrong side of the car! When you rearrange something in your home or office, how many times do you find yourself going to the old drawers/cabinets/etc. before you finally get the new pattern?

Most movement patterns are built up over long periods because we have found a very efficient way to move and there is no reason to change. However, if we need to change, our systems are usually very flexible and the adjustments can be made within a few days at most.

Exercise is usually not a place we look to change our patterns, and this is why we often hit a plateau, stop losing weight, get bored, or get injured. Change is vital to our body because we acclimate to movement so quickly. We get the biggest benefits from exercise programs in the first month, because our body is using a lot of effort to learn new patterns. After that month, our gains in fitness decline until they become neutral, or we move into maintenance and begin to experience the plateau in our goals. I use the first month of exercise to establish confidence, routine, accomplishment over time, and success. Once these goals are met, I move on to teaching the importance of change—often not what a person wants to hear.

There are three changes that are key to successful fitness programs. The biggest change in a fitness program is understanding **that intensity is more important than time**, i.e., it is better to do ten minutes running than thirty minutes walking or better to lift twenty pounds five times than five pounds twenty times. The hardest change to teach is the **value of feeling awkward**. Everyone wants to feel good when they exercise. However, the best workouts I have ever had have been in classes where I felt the least coordinated and the silliest. In those instances, I knew every single muscle in my body was working at 100% trying to figure out how to do the job right. When your body is learning, it is working hard. I also work to change **how we measure our success**. Most of us begin to measure our fitness by the dreaded weight scale, the slow, "maddening, lying scale." Success needs to be measured by gains: moments of activity, successful sleep, feeling positive energy, or how strong and healthy we feel.

Finally, I emphasize how change must be a built-in parameter to any exercise program. Here are some easy ways to incorporate change: buy new shoes, walk on treadmill backwards, skip or hop, exercise outside, or exercise inside, change your music, turn off the TV, do the exercise on one foot/kneeling/or on an exercise ball, reverse the order of your workout, use a new piece of equipment, bring a friend, run a race, and do not forget to STRETCH. It is important to believe that every single movement is making you healthier and to **embrace change**, because as we all know, it is one constant that we can count on.

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