

Set Your Intention

Staying focused during a workout will improve your performance and amp your results. Here, how to use your mind to sculpt a better body.

By Jayme Moyer

When boredom or fatigue strikes during a workout, you might try to distract yourself by flicking on the TV or chatting up your treadmill neighbor. But tuning in—instead of checking out—may be the smarter tactic.

Just ask yoga teachers. At the beginning of class, they often urge students to set an intention, like “feel more gratitude” or “let go of stress,” to help them stay focused and tap into the purpose of their practice.

Experts say intention setting can be a powerful tool in any fitness discipline, not just yoga. “It zeros in on something you can connect to emotionally, and unlike a long-term goal, you can make good on an intention in a single session, which is very satisfying,” says celeb trainer Brett Hoebel. In other words, you can’t, for example, lose 10 pounds during a 45-minute

Get-Fit Tricks

run, but you can feel happier or calmer by the end. So set an intention (think “be strong” or “boost energy”—it can be different every time you exercise), then follow these tips to stay centered on it.

Give Yourself a Pep Talk

Turbocharge your motivation and trigger your intention with the help of a mantra—a word or phrase you repeat to psych yourself up—that reflects the purpose of your workout.

TRY IT ▶ Hoebel says to think of a mantra like a hashtag: #strongbodystrongmind, #bestshapeofmylife, #fitfromwithin. If you’re aiming to reduce stress and anxiety, try #justbreathe as your mantra. Want to feel strong? Go with #mindovermuscle. Mentally repeat your mantra throughout your workout—especially during the really tough parts, or when you catch your mind wandering.

WHY IT WORKS ▶ Besides being inspiring, a mantra mentally hardwires your brain to enjoy exercise by acting as a cue to connect a behavior (exercise) with a reward (the positive experience of achieving your intention), says Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*.

Silence Your Inner Critic

Negative mental chatter can distract you from your workout’s purpose: It’s tough to reduce stress while thinking that you have the biggest thighs of everyone in your cycling class. You may not even be aware of it, but defeatist or negative self-talk can damage your workout and prevent you from achieving your intention, according to Chris Carr, Ph.D., a sports psychologist.

TRY IT ▶ Don’t try to clear your head or avoid thinking; just watch your thoughts. “Once they tune in to it, many women are stunned by how often they put themselves down with negative self-talk,” says Carr. Mind gone off the rails? Breathe deep and refocus.

WHY IT WORKS ▶ “Over time, critical thoughts may erode your motivation from the inside out,” says Carr. Keeping your head in the game helps give you the edge you need to continue working toward your intention—and your long-term goals.

Sync Your Workout

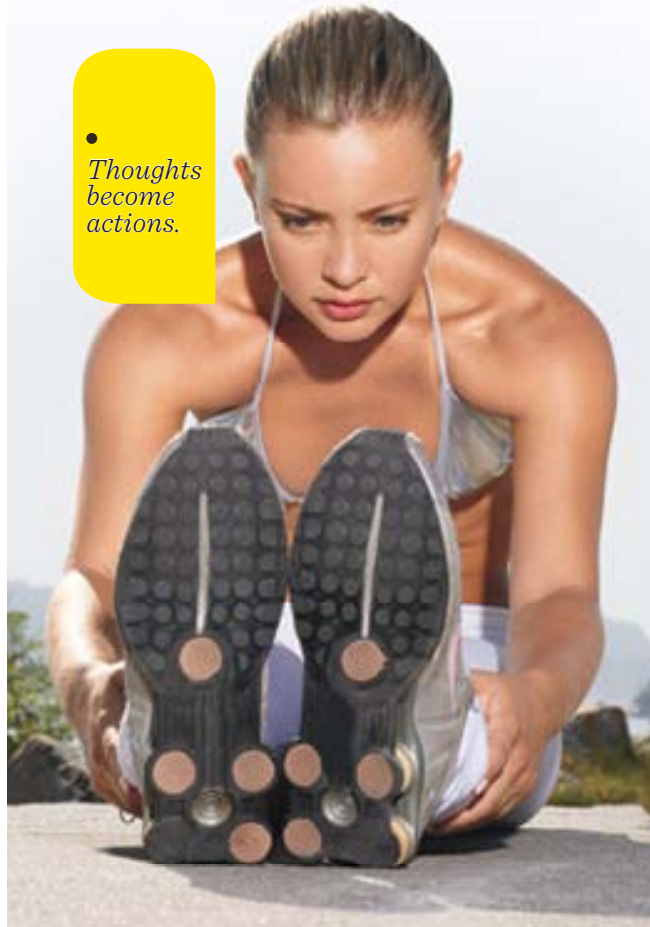
Plugging in your iPod during a workout might seem like an odd way to increase your focus—after all, plenty of us use music to mentally check out—but research shows that listening to certain types of tunes can actually help you keep your mind squarely on what you’re doing.

TRY IT ▶ Create a playlist that uses words or themes that speak to the intention that you’ve picked for that day’s workout—and crank up the volume when you feel like you’re starting to flag. If your intention is “go faster,” add

Eminem’s “Till I Collapse,” Kanye West’s “Stronger,” and Florence + the Machine’s “Dog Days Are Over” to your list. Looking to gain more happiness by the end of your workout? Crank up “I Gotta Feeling” by the Black Eyed Peas, “Beautiful Day” by U2, and “I Love It” by Icona Pop. “Choose as many songs as you need for your playlist to be effective and feed your intention,” says Hoebel.

WHY IT WORKS ▶ A study in the journal *The Sport Psychologist* found that tennis players recorded faster reaction times on the court when they listened to songs with an emotionally charged message (e.g., “Eye of the Tiger” from *Rocky III*), as compared to music with a booty-shaking rhythm but not much in the way of motivation (say, Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies”). “Songs with strong lyrical affirmations can give you a significant physical and mental boost when the going gets tough,” says study author Costas Karageorghis, Ph.D., author of *Inside Sport Psychology*. ■

• Thoughts become actions.



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WORK IT OUT

If I don’t sweat, does that mean I’m not getting a good workout?

—Nicole, Minneapolis, MN

Nope. The amount you sweat—your body’s way of cooling itself off—isn’t a reflection of the quality of your workout. Beginners often drip less; as you become more fit, you may start perspiring sooner during your workout (your body begins to link exercise with a higher body temp, so it’s quicker to activate the cool-down mechanism). In addition, some people are wired to sweat like crazy while others barely glisten. Stay hydrated and push yourself in your workouts (get your heart rate and body temp up!) and eventually you’ll start to glow!

Is it better to use a foam roller before or after a workout?

—Carly, Berwyn, PA

Before you exercise, foam rolling may release muscle tension, aid circulation, and increase your range of motion—all of which help your muscles work more efficiently during your workout. A post-routine roll may speed up muscle recovery and ward off injury by reducing soreness and easing tightness. Your best bet: three to five minutes before and after you exercise. (But if you’re short on time, it’s OK just to do it beforehand.)

Rachel Cosgrove, C.S.C.S.

Author of *The Female Body Breakthrough*. Send Rachel your questions at WomensHealthMag.com/Experts.



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