

Ten Tips to Building Work Intensity

There you sit, totally confused about why your muscles aren't responding the way you expected. You've read tons of articles, you eat right, sleep enough, take supplements and train like a warrior. Still, you aren't getting your intended results. You start to give in to frustration and wonder if all the effort is worth it.

But what if I tell you that you just think you're training as hard as you can? Consider the following factors that could hold you back, and the secrets to surmounting them.

Secret #1: Applied intensity for success

The secret for most successful athletes is to develop highly refined competitive skills and to perform them with intensity. Especially for those who weight train, mastering intensity is a key ingredient toward fulfilling the goal of training for size and muscularity. But you need to build up to full intensity by first developing the physical skills and strength needed.

Intensity is defined as the application of maximum physical effort systematically applied to a technically developed motor skill. This means you must be experienced in technique before intensity is applied. Therefore, if you're inexperienced and attempt a maximum deadlift with bad form, you may get injured. But performing a maximum deadlift with expert skill and good form will aid in the prevention of training accidents.

Secret #2: Going for the gold

Before you can be the best that you can be, you must first master the physical discomfort associated with intense physical activity. "No pain, no gain" refers to the mental development of pain tolerance to push your muscular endurance to the absolute limits of failure - thereby stimulating muscle growth.

Strength and endurance athletes use such terms as "pushing it to the limit", "to the max", and "hitting the wall" to describe these upper limits of performance. However, these don't imply reckless and dangerous techniques for maximum performance at any cost. Just the opposite. With regard to exercise, the terms refer to the skilled use of weight training techniques systematically applied to a working muscle group sufficient to cause temporary failure - without causing muscular injury. Therefore, you need to distinguish muscle burn and muscle fatigue from the pain of injury. The burn from muscle fatigue subsides within 20-30 seconds, whereas injury pain is pronounced, sharp and continuous. Know your physical limitations and learn to read your body's signal.

Secret #3: Breaking the pain barrier

The next step is to break through the pain barrier. To do so, you must first develop pain tolerance. This is developed by progressively increasing intensity so your body gradually adjusts to sensory overload. Eventually, the same weight, pressure, endurance and muscle fatigue experience will feel less intense. To a beginner, a 20 pound dumbbell curl would feel heavy and cause considerable muscle burn and fatigue. After 3-4 workouts, those same dumbbells would feel much lighter. In a month, 30 pound dumbbells would feel the same as 20 pounders. In other words, your muscles adapt to the increased weight and respond as if the same weight was lighter.

Secret #4: Be mentally prepared

Expect some pain. This prepares you emotionally for increased physical intensity. Unfortunately, pain has become a four letter word in our culture. All manner of media messages condition us to view pain as undesirable, something to be avoided. Television commercials direct us to treat pain with an ever growing arsenal of painkillers. We're often admonished not to strain ourselves, not to overdo it. Such statements program us to become pleasure seekers without first developing the discipline or the ability to work through pain or difficulties.

To combat this trend, you can psychologically alter the perception of pain as something to tolerate, even strive for. As time progresses, the same pain level feels lessened, and your brain reinterprets the pain as acceptable. Surprisingly, with continued physical work in the pain zone, your muscular responses of increased size and strength will be mentally perceived as pure pleasure. This is the very point where your brain begins to transform these pain sensations into feelings of euphoria. As well, continued neurological exposure to pain stimuli produces a diminished response to the same level of pain.

Secret #5: Brains over brawn

To get your brain to reinterpret pain as pleasure isn't difficult. It requires three elements: 1) constant effort, 2) repetitive exposure and 3) absolute determination to succeed. Getting used to non-injurious pain is similar to gradual immersion into a hot Jacuzzi - you slowly allow your body to adjust to the intensity of the heat. In the same manner, if you gradually increase your training intensity over a month, your brain won't experience abrupt feelings of physical discomfort. As time passes, muscle fatigue, muscle burn and the burden of weight become commonplace and expected. Once you've attained this upper limit of pain tolerance, it becomes your future barometer of intensity.

Secret #6: Pleasure in the pain zone

What turns intense physical effort into pure ecstasy is the victory over your feelings, fears and self doubts. When you achieve that next big step by piling on more weights and grinding out those extra reps - continuing to strive beyond your previous limits - you've reached the benchmark of a true athlete. Those of you who can achieve this level will enjoy the sheer pleasure of victory over your past limitations. The next time you reach 12 reps on a set of squats, challenge yourself, and be confident that you can increase your poundage by at least 10% to the amount required to perform 8 - 10 reps safely. (Make sure that a skilled spotter helps you.)

Secret #7: Conquer or be conquered

Fear of pain, stress and failure may be grounded more in emotion than in your physical inability to succeed. If you're motivated by "fear reduction," you'll do anything to avoid fear rather than confront it and achieve a victory. Suppose that you can bench press 250 pounds, but you tremble at the prospect of pushing 275. This is precisely where you need to develop your confidence by moving forward and taking that next big step.

You get out of weight training what you put into it. Big, muscular gains are the visible signs of victory, but the emotional payoff motivated you to continue to training with intensity.

Secret #8: Memories

Old experiences of pain may teach you to avoid pain rather than confront it and work through it. A curious human phenomenon is that we cannot fully appreciate pleasure until we've fully experienced some sense of pain.

These days, we Americans are conditioned by television, technology and automation to reduce effort, avoid discomfort and seek immediate gratification. Consequently, we overemphasize pleasure, which weakens the discipline needed for achievement that requires intense and prolonged effort. Giving up is so much easier that pursuing a difficult task. This is why so few becomes superstars while millions remain wanna-bes. Take note: Prolonged effort is the chief ingredient for athletic success (not to mention riches and fame). If you're serious about making improvements, you must keep moving forward and challenge your fears of failure. Be confident that each attempt you will make will improve your skills and increase your strength.

Secret #9: Survival of the fittest

While waging the internal battle between pleasure and pain, you must decide your long term goals. If you pleasure seek for only what feels good, you'll probably avoid most of the experiences that feel bad. The danger therein is that even a little bit of effort begins to feel bad, with the consequence that you avoid doing anything that requires any intense work whatsoever.

The work ethic may seem like an unpleasant choice, but in the long run, the rewards from your efforts are felt as a pure victory. Great achievements demand great efforts, and nothing worth having comes easy. If it did, then everyone would have it at no cost.

Secret #10: To the victor go the spoils

You must sacrifice laziness, pain avoidance, and pleasure seeking to develop the pain tolerance for hard work. Hard work helps ensure that your sustained efforts will lead you in the direction of achievement. Realistically, you must battle against fear, apathy and pain avoidance to defeat your worst enemy - most likely yourself.

Your mind is the strongest "muscle" in your body. If you believe the molly coddling bromides such as "Don't strain yourself", "You can't do this", and "Pain isn't good", you'll be imprisoned by your fears as long as they remain unconscious and unchallenged. The choice is yours: Be guided by your fears or be self directed by your own free will.

If you're intimidated by the thought of adding more weight to the bar when you can in fact safely handle it, you aren't tapping into your true physical potential. Now is the time to reconsider your options. Remember, to defeat your fears, you must face them with the conviction and courage that you'll ultimately succeed