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Fitness Is ... Identity and Personal

Greg Glassman asked the question, "What is fitness?" Blair Morrison offers some of his own thoughts to help you discover what fitness means to you.

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What is fitness?

That question is one of the foundations of the CrossFit program, and asking it will make you question just about everything you know about training. In answering it, Greg Glassman created a new way of training and a new way of thinking about health and human performance. He also got people thinking and answering the question for themselves.

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In this multi-part series, CrossFit Games competitor Blair Morrison talks about what fitness is to him.

Make a New You

Identity.

It is recognizable not just in an individual's stature or beauty but in his or her attitude and behavior as well.

Take the person who gets winded on the walk from his house to his car or has to brace himself every time he sits down on the couch. He does not lead a confident life, I promise you. He will avoid activities that expose his physical limitations and withdraw from interaction with people who engage in them. Psychologically, he is stunted because his mentality is always governed by what he cannot do.

Instead, observe the individual who actively trains and reaches physical goals. He is buttressed by a history of overcoming obstacles, a past filled with things he once could not do but now can. This person is far more willing to take risks. He entertains ideas that push his limits and remains open to experiences a fearful person might never consider possible.

This type of confidence infects people. The first time someone does Fran, he walks a little taller. When he PRs her deadlift by 20 lb., she's made of steel all week. If he's just run 5 kilometers faster than ever, meeting a deadline for a worrisome client isn't so insurmountable. Everything gets easier when you believe in yourself, and that's what fitness does. It re-shapes your identity into one of confidence and self-belief.

This can easily be observed in people who go from being deconditioned to physically active. If you've ever had a relative or friend who has lost a lot of weight, you'll know what I mean. The person suddenly becomes more outgoing, more fun and more self-assured. He or she dresses differently, walks differently. Really, the person is different. It's like he or she has become a new person. But such transformations have very little to do with gravity's reduced strain on a person's bones. Rather, they are the result of tangible physical successes and the psychological reinforcement such successes solicit from the outside world. Clothes fitting differently, less fatigue during the course of the day, more attention from co-workers—these things add up quickly and contribute to the shaping of a new, confident identity.



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Now, I'm not claiming this is foolproof or that by simply running a few miles each day every person will suddenly feel invincible. I wish it were that easy. But even just running those few miles is a step in the right direction. Taking control of your body gives you a foothold with which to tackle the rest, and believe me, the process is accelerative.

I had a client who looked at me crooked when I told her she would have to lie down and get up 10 times in a row. Now she's writing me e-mails about doing burpees and double-unders on a city street corner because she was waiting for a tow truck and needed to get a workout in. My mother has gone from walking the treadmill for 45 minutes two days a week to doing kettlebell progressions and overhead squats without difficulty. The conversations we have now are just as often about what new ways she can challenge herself in the gym as they are about anything else.

Newsflash: No one is naturally a “gym person.” No one is inherently disciplined. Some have simply been conditioned to become so because they have seen success and decided they want more.

And such stories are the rule, not the exception.

Really, this is a very logical progression. When people see themselves succeed, they feel good. Naturally, they want more. Slowly, they grow less inhibited and more daring in pursuit of this success. As they push their limits further and further, they are able to accomplish more and more, thus, inevitably, they become more successful. Because this train of improvement is so rewarding, it remolds their self-image from one of limitation and self-doubt into one of confidence and potential. This, to varying degrees, colors their new identity with curiosity and determination—powerful drugs in combination.



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Being fit simply makes you feel good, inside and outside.

Knowing this progression to work as it does, I find it incredibly painful, almost nauseating, when I hear people say, “I’m not a gym person. It’s not in my DNA. I’m not that disciplined. I’m too busy.” Really? It’s not in your DNA to move properly or to feel good about yourself? Too busy to grab hold of one thing in your life so that you’ll become better at all the rest? I’d hate to be so presumptuous as to conclude that you are not the only person in the world dealing with such problems.

Newsflash: No one is naturally a “gym person.” No one is inherently disciplined. Some have simply been conditioned to become so because they have seen success and decided they want more. Get on board and find a foothold.

A positive self-image is one of the most powerful effects of training, yet it is far too often misunderstood as a cause. Effort, motivation and dedication are all learned skills we pick up throughout the course of our lives in response to positive or negative outcomes. This means everyone’s past is necessarily different and has shaped his or her identity to this point in a decidedly unique way. This is unavoidable, but too many use it as a justification to fail, to continue to see themselves as unfit, obese or physically unable. It’s as if God had given them low self-esteem and massive insecurity, and it’s their duty to accept it.

No identity is etched in stone. No one is fundamentally governed by anything except what he or she can or cannot do. Decide which version of yourself you’d rather be and go get it.



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Even in a group setting like a CrossFit class, fitness is ultimately up to each individual.

You Are Responsible

Personal.

Take fitness personally.

Your fitness is not the gym you join or the site you follow. It's not the shoes you wear, the weights you lift or the nutrition book you read. Fitness is not your yoga mat. It's not the workout of the day.

An individual's fitness is, essentially, his decision. And it goes beyond deciding to surround himself with the various tools mentioned above. They help, certainly. If I want to cut down a tree, I'm better off using an ax than an ice pick. But I still have to go out and hack my way through the wood.

Sadly, we can't hire someone to chop this tree down for us. Fitness depends on two things: agency and ownership, and they span disciplines. Look at any sport and compare athletes of similar natural ability. The engaged athlete following an average program will outperform the dispassionate athlete following an exceptional program. Every time.

I was at a gym recently, and I watched a guy do 25 minutes of triceps extensions, proudly flexing in the mirror between sets to evaluate his work. While most of me was screaming objections based on my belief in functional training, useable strength, etc., another part of me was humbly acknowledging his right to train his way and respecting his effectiveness in doing so. He had pretty big triceps.

Most people who consistently do step class, spin or body sculpt either don't know what to do for their fitness or they can't motivate themselves to do it on their own.

Now, if I were to go up to this individual and say, "Listen, I know a better way to train. It focuses on the whole body, both structurally and in terms of cardiovascular fitness. It will produce measurable gains in strength, endurance, recovery, flexibility, coordination and balance, and it will contribute to you living a longer and healthier life." He might say, "Wow, that sounds great. How do I do it?" Or, he might say, "What'll it do for my triceps?"

This is an example of agency. I decide what is important to my fitness. I can be told a million times the best way to train my heart and lungs, I can over and over see the correct technique for a deadlift, I can listen to lecture upon lecture about the right food to eat, but if I don't choose to put those ideas into practice, they will remain just that: ideas, and nothing more.

The second part is ownership. Gym classes, as a culture, have largely been created to avoid this very concept. Most people who consistently do step class, spin or body sculpt either don't know what to do for their fitness or they can't motivate themselves to do it on their own. So, rather than taking ownership of the problem, finding the answers and implementing them, they schedule and attend a series of weekly classes to diffuse the responsibility. Watch any one of these classes and it will become quite evident who is truly engaged and who is just there to punch the clock.

This, of course, is not true for all cases. Some people have found they perform better in group situations and have actively chosen class settings as the best way to facilitate this performance. These people, however, are in the minority. Most do it because they don't want to face the fact that fitness is hard and no one will do it for them.

You can find examples of this in CrossFit as well. Consider the individual who shows up once a week, never executes a full range of motion and sees little to no improvement in any measurable area. This person does not own his fitness. He's showing up to "check the box" and get his T-shirt. Granted, ownership is a process, and people need to learn skills somehow. Just be wary of the chronic user who shows up each week without fail, blindly following the leader and offloading the responsibility for his fitness to a series of instructors and classmates.

Fitness, in the end, is a result. It's the byproduct of the interaction between me (my physical tools, my mental capacity, my personal creativity) and the resources at my disposal (information, food, weights, etc.). As should be now be

clear, the *me* is integral to this equation. As soon as I lose agency or ownership over this process, fitness ceases to be personal, and it is no longer mine. This is when training starts to feel like a chore. It's when you burn out, resent the program or lose interest all together.

The truly fit individuals stay conscious of their motivations and are actively involved in and take ownership of their programs. They relish the fact that no one can do it for them and use this fact to push themselves harder. Zoning out, getting into a routine or going to a class for class' sake doesn't make sense to these people. For them, "just doing it" just isn't good enough.



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

About the Author

Blair Morrison is 28 years old. He was born and raised in Sacramento, Calif., where his family still lives. He received his undergraduate history degree from Princeton University and his master's degree at Universiteit Leiden, the Sorbonne and Oxford. Formerly a personal trainer from Balance Gym in Washington, D.C., Blair placed seventh in the 2009 CrossFit Games and 23rd in 2010. He now owns and operates CrossFit Anywhere out of Sacramento. He is dedicated to the pursuit of physical challenges and the mental fortitude that comes from the ability to overcome them.