

10 things personal trainers won't tell you

By [Daniel Goldstein](#)

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If you get stuck with a bad personal trainer, your workout goals will be even harder to achieve



Oscar Ramos

1. You don't need me; you need a lifestyle change

Joining a gym after holiday gluttony is a time-honored exercise in pain, sweat and spandex—gyms typically see membership volume spike by 30% or more each January. But for many, just joining a gym sometimes doesn't melt the pounds fast enough, or they may need added motivation to get through that one last rep—and that's where personal trainers come in.

About 6.5 million Americans use personal trainers, according to the International Health Racquet and Sportsclub Association. And the number of trainers is expected to grow about 8%, to 302,500, between now and 2022, [according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), as the boomer population ages and employers and insurers take more steps to combat obesity.

All told, personal training is nearly a \$10 billion business, according to research firm IBISWorld.

The best trainers excel at introducing sedentary clients to basic exercise activities, and in getting more experienced ones to try new exercises, eliminate inefficient ones or perform better.

Where they often fall short is in getting clients to make changes to lifestyle and diet that complement the work they're doing at the gym. "The industry has created a model that doesn't work for 99% of people," said Anthony Wall, a personal-trainer instructor and the director of professional education for the American Council on Exercise, an industry trade group.

(More than one-third of Americans, or 79 million, are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention, at a medical cost of \$147 billion a year. And 69% of Americans are overweight, according to the CDC.)

Also read: [10 things your health insurance won't tell you.](#)



Trainers don't necessarily have to study hard to earn their credentials.

2. My certifications may not mean much

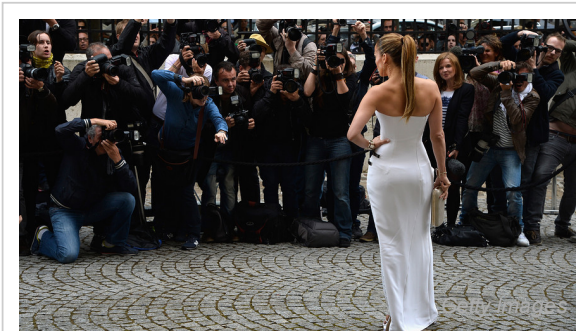
A blizzard of organizations offer personal training certifications, but for the public, the credentials may just create confusion, says Bryce Turner, the co-owner of Beach Fitness in Seal Beach, Calif.: "There is no measurement in the industry that says this guy is better than the next."

Some fitness experts recommend seeking trainers with credentials from the National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM), the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) or the International Sports Sciences Association;

those organizations require better knowledge of anatomy and exercise as well as continuing education. The NSCA also requires a four-year college degree (though it can be in any field).

Turner says he'd prefer to hire a trainer who has a four-year degree in physical education or kinesiology, which is the study of body movements. "I'd rather have a trainer with a college degree and no certification than the other way around where they come to me with bad habits," he said. "I've had trainers come in with all sorts of certifications who couldn't name four muscles in your back," he said.

Turner says clients should always ask for the trainer's certifications and ensure they are current, as well as asking what the trainer does for continuing education. In addition, Turner says, clients should ask that trainers show proof that they have liability insurance.



What worked for J.Lo may not work for you.

3. Don't be impressed by the athletes and stars I trained

Training A-list stars and pro athletes can help a trainer become a "brand." Michael George, who has trained Reese Witherspoon and Julianne Moore, and Tracy Anderson, who has trained Madonna, Jennifer Lopez and Gwyneth Paltrow, are among the [trainers who have built business empires around their celebrity resumes.](#)

But average exercisers may not benefit much from hiring a trainer to the stars, says Ruben Andujo, a personal trainer in Manteca, Calif. Star trainers tend to charge much higher fees

than the average pro—and many may delegate your training to a less famous colleague. "What matters most are referrals from people who have similar goals as you," Andujo says.



4. You don't have to show up in shape

Andrew Wyant, president of the NASM, says many people who would benefit from working with a trainer are too embarrassed to start. They think: "I have to lose some weight before I go see a trainer," he says. In fact, Wyant says, nothing makes a trainer happier than working with a person who's out of shape and makes steady improvement.

You're not 'out of shape'; you're a trainer's opportunity for personal growth.

Still, he does warn people to stay away from boot-camp style workouts or intense competitions like Tough Mudder unless they are already very fit. "These are really dangerous

programs for individuals who are not in shape," he says.



Don't expect to pump iron on day one.

5. The muscle comes later

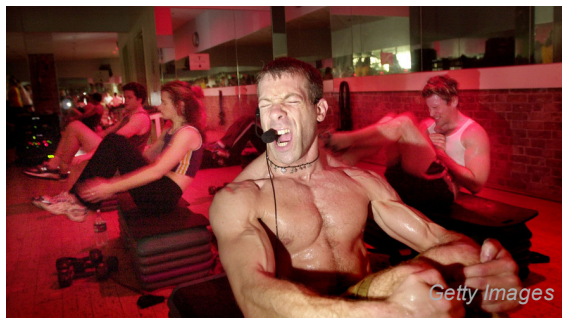
Don't be surprised if your first sessions with a trainer involve fairly little exercise. "Your first workout with a personal trainer shouldn't even be a workout," says Wyant; instead "your first session should be boring," as your trainer discovers areas of physical limitation, muscle imbalances, flexibility and instability.

Turner of Beach Fitness says that the best personal training efforts have to start with detailed written assessments known as the Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire or the PAR-

Q as well as a medical history, a body fat measurement, and evaluation of your posture and diet, among other things. "Don't hire anybody who doesn't offer you an assessment," he says. "Without having a good idea about how you function with weight and your body weight, there is no way a personal trainer can design a specific program catered to you," he says.

Early sessions may also cover learning proper stretches and massaging and kneading tight muscles. If a trainer skips these initial steps to jump into pumping iron, it's probably not a good sign.

Even if you primarily hire a trainer to help you drop some pounds or improve your cardio fitness, building up muscle through weight training also helps you lose weight as well. And weight training becomes increasingly critical as you get older. "Without muscle, you are more susceptible to bruising and fractures from falls," Wyant says, as your bones don't have the muscle cushion to protect them.



High-end instructor plus high-end gym equals a \$1,500 monthly training tab.

6. It could take a lot of money to get results...

Most fitness pros say it takes three to five months to get enduring benefits from personal training; they also say it's best to start with at least three one-hour sessions a week, though clients can reduce their number of sessions once they're confident enough to work on their own.

As a result, "Personal training is not cheap," says Wyant. Given that in-demand private trainers and high-end gyms in some major cities can charge as much as \$200 an hour, the cost of training can easily hit \$1,500 a month.

How long people will need that three-times-a-week attention will vary from client to client. "I tell clients that right off the bat," says Andujo. "What I can say is that you will see a difference in 30 days"; he says he then encourages clients to go another month.

"If you ultimately want to learn all the facets of designing your own routines so you don't need to use a personal trainer, going for a few months may be all you need," says Turner. Fitness pros also note that such routines go beyond exercise: You have to change eating habits and other traits, such as getting more rest, drinking more water, and continuing to stretch during your recovery days. Bottom line, says Andujo: "You cannot out-exercise a bad nutrition plan."



A big chunk of your training fee may go to your trainer's gym.

7. But I'm probably not getting rich

While consumers may shell out big bucks for training, the trainers themselves don't always earn much. The median annual income for fitness trainers and instructors was \$34,980 in 2014, or about \$17 an hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Why the gap? Many personal trainers are employed by "big-box" gyms, where they may also teach fitness classes. There, their own wages are low—and even those paid directly by their clients typically fork over 40% to 60% of their pay to the

gym that employs them, according to Wyant. Just 10% of personal trainers were self-employed in 2012, but fully self-employed trainers have overhead costs, including the cost of liability insurance.

And even if personal trainers have the money to open up their own gym, many are doing the grunt work, wiping down the floors and machines after they're used and keeping the locker rooms and bathrooms clean. "Sweat" equity, indeed.



Some trainers' achievements are, shall we say, artificially enhanced.

8. Some of us still use steroids

The use of steroids and growth hormones has sparked major controversies in professional sports, most of which ban their use. And in some of the most high-profile cases, athletes obtained the drugs from their trainers. (Among those cases: The BALCO doping scandal, which ensnared several prominent baseball and football players.)

Some fitness pros say that steroid use remains a serious issue among trainers, particularly those who focus on bodybuilding. "It's definitely out there," said Turner. Use of

steroids and growth hormone isn't illegal when they're prescribed by a doctor, but any trainer who makes them part of their sales pitch or client testimonials is someone to avoid.



The drill-sergeant treatment doesn't work for everybody.

9. We might be a bad fit

Often it's the difficulty of the relationship, not the difficulty of the exercise, that sours a client's experience with a trainer. Common pet peeves include trainers who make or take phone calls during their clients' sessions, and low-energy trainers who seem to just go through the motions. "Your trainer needs to have a lot of energy," said Turner. "If they don't have any energy, how can they possibly get you to work out and sweat?"

The drill-sergeant, screamer form of attention is also the wrong fit for many clients. Trainers "should offer an appropriate balance between motivation and compassion," says Turner.

10. It's OK to fire me

Anthony Wall of the American Council on Exercise says that about half of the people who join a gym in December or



If you're frustrated with your trainer, take it out on your trainer.

January quit by Valentine's Day. The retention level with personal trainers is slightly better for various reasons—among other things, they help newbies avoid discouraging injuries—but unsatisfying experiences with trainers still fuel some of the churn.

Wyant of the NASM says picking a personal trainer is a lot like dating, and personality matters. “Do you work better with somebody who yells in your ear or says ‘nice try?’” he says. “You are entering a long-term relationship and there’s no Match.com for this.” Bottom line: “If you listen to your trainer and follow their advice and you are still not happy with your

results or the way you feel, fire them and hire another trainer,” says Turner.

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