

# 5 things

“This isn’t working...  
(just quietly)”

# PTs won’t tell you

We pushed fitness pros to spill their hidden secrets.

Words: Rebecca Long

## 1 “This won’t make you lose weight.”

“A quirky little ‘secret’ I wouldn’t normally tell clients is that their exercise routines are doing way less for them to lose weight than their nutrition program,” says exercise physiologist Nalisha Patel (lookforever30.com). “I used to personal train clients, spending 30 to 60 minutes with them in a session, purely working out, but the truth is that nutrition accounts for 70 to 90 per cent of their results.” Patel now coaches clients in implementing complementary practices that favour weight loss – think chowing down on superfoods, sleep hygiene, stress management and exercise,

says Patel, who leverages her psychology degree in email coaching. Celebrity master trainer Ricardo Riskalla (rawfit.com.au) agrees that you need to sort your diet before enlisting a PT (think laying a cement slab before building a house). He also warns against one-eyed weight loss goals. The program a PT will write to get you into a wedding frock may not be the one that keeps you flaunting short shorts in the long term. “There is no point in starting an exercise routine based on something that feels like torture. It needs to be pleasant, to create a sense of achievement.”



## 2 “You shouldn’t know where I surf.”

If you know the finer details of your PT’s private life, you’ve been going too long. While a trainer can be great for teaching you the ropes and revving you up in the early stages, weekly sessions can turn into a kind of crutch, or comfort zone, where you turn up (and train) by rote. While talking about *Breaking Bad*, of course. “Get a personal trainer for a couple of sessions to ‘show you the ropes’ and then go it on your own,” says PT Joshua Zampech from His & Her Health. Long-term training clients can also become dependent on a coach for motivation – meaning they fall in a hole if their doting PT takes two weeks’ holiday. “The biggest reason people fail is a lack of motivation. Their ‘reason why’ isn’t big enough to self-motivate,” says Zampech, who lets new clients know the training relationship is finite. He aims for between four and eight weeks. “After this they are on their own unless they feel they ‘need’ me.” Patel also starts with the end in mind. “I use specific cognitive techniques in the program to help people stick at their new habits, so it helps boost all the practical stuff taught on the program.”



### 3 “You might do better with a shrink.”

It's not *all* in your mind, but the psychological aspects of fitness are often underrated. Principles borrowed from brain science can boost physical training, and there's no doubt getting – and staying – motivated is more mind than matter. Brain studies have shown that regular practice activates and alters neural pathways encouraging certain behaviours, which is why it's commonly spruiked as component of motivation. Rather than trying to override your brain's program with brute force – affectionately known as ‘willpower’ – you're changing the conditions so the desired behaviour syncs with your brain's program. You can also accelerate physical progress with your noggin. Sports psychologist and high performance coach Stephanie Kakris says the notion of thinking yourself fit, using visualisation, or creative imagery, isn't as off-the-wall as it sounds. “Visualisation definitely works to increase fitness performance,” she says, explaining that creative imagery activates the subconscious brain. Evoking a cerebral Polaroid effectively ‘tricks’ your brain into believing what you tell it. “The body doesn't know the difference between what is real and what is imagined,” she says. Which means you can accelerate progress with your noggin. A study by Ohio's Cleveland Clinic revealed that mental exercises caused significant strength gains – despite lack of gym time. Study subjects who visualised doing bicep exercises for 15 minutes a day, five days a week, gained an average of 35 per cent muscle strength by the end of the 12-week study period, while a control group experienced no strength increases. The magic of imagining isn't news to elite sports people; Tiger Woods is said to swear by strategic daydreaming.

### 4 “This workout's not right for you.”

There are two types of trainers: those who push you until you're regurgitating your protein shake, and those who pussyfoot around to avoid pissing you (and your hard-earned) off. “Excessive exercise is not the way to go,” says Riskalla. While exercise is important for muscle toning, muscle growth and body reshaping, days off are critical. “I would put resting on the same level as exercising itself,” says Riskalla, who counts eight hours' sleep a night in the rest quota. While more may seem better, a pain hangover ultimately means longer recovery and fewer workouts. If you do push through the pain barrier, intensity is often compromised, meaning results will take longer. The other side of the coin is that some trainers mightn't push you hard enough (you don't want a ‘yes’ man), meaning you need 60 minutes to achieve what you could in 30. “The right intensity means pushing yourself above the comfortable zone,” Riskalla says. “If there is no challenge, there is no result.” Even rests scheduled to give your body a break, which is often done in a bid to break a plateau, can be active. In PT lingo, ‘active rest’ involves continuing your exercise routine but lightening resistance to between 30 and 50 per cent of your one rep max (1RM) for a week, while inactive rest involves backing off entirely. To take the guesswork (and, possibly, locker room chunder) out of pushing just hard enough, Riskalla created an app that creates a new session each time you turn it on. “You must mix up your exercise routines so your body doesn't get used to the same exercise stress, so it is recommended to change your workouts every two days.” PT James Mani (myfitnessguide.com.au) says it takes as little as 20 minutes a day twice a week to help tone the entire body. “Get into a habit of creating the change you want to see and it will happen, but always start small,” he says.

### 5 “Maybe you're not out of shape after all.”

At this time of year, it's easy to be seduced by the idea that you need to change your body – even if you're a healthy weight. But do you really need to bend it like Bundchen? “Acceptance of your own body is important on your health and exercise journey,” Riskalla says. “Don't try to be Angelina Jolie or Gisele Bundchen – every curve on your body is unique.” If you do have excess body fat – particularly the dangerous visceral fat – a PT or gym program may benefit your short- and long-term health. “Be honest with yourself, but not self-obsessed,” Riskalla says. But fellow PT Timo Topp says it's important to also clue up on what is healthy. “Lots of perfectly fit and healthy women have an unhealthy obsession with constantly wanting to lose one, two or a few kilos when they are actually in great shape,” he says. “Body fat below 14 per cent for women is considered unhealthy as a minimum level of body fat is essential to normal and essential physiological function.” It's not uncommon for fitness competitors and models to hover around 10 per cent. “A woman with 24 per cent should not aim to lose eight per cent as this would take them close to the unhealthy zone,” he says. But how do you know whether your jeans are being held up by fat or muscle? Zampech recommends checking in with a BioScan, which is conducted by a fitness professional and calculates the proportion of your body mass comprising muscle, fat and water and suggests the amount of body fat loss or muscle gain that would make your body ‘healthy’ – at least on paper. ■