

Another hurdle to exercise: embarrassment

Fear of looking fat, silly prevents many people from breaking a sweat



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MSNBC

Updated: 9:58 a.m. PT Nov 14, 2006

Tripping and falling off the treadmill at the gym has made Debbie Holman self-conscious about working out in public. She's afraid she'll humiliate herself again by flubbing up on the equipment.

But her greatest worry is what other gym-goers might think about her weight.

"My big old tree-trunk legs are [an] embarrassment," says Holman, 28, of Lockport, Ill.

"When I go to a kickboxing class or aerobics class where there are walls of mirrors, I just want to be sick, especially when I am hiding in the back of the class and the skinny little girls up front, who are not afraid of the mirrors, look at me with disgust."

Lack of time, motivation and money are frequently cited reasons for not exercising. Embarrassment is another that seems to be increasingly common, especially as the nation's waistline expands, fitness experts say.

Like Lockport, overweight people may not feel their jiggy curves have a place in a gym or other fitness setting filled with half-naked hard bodies.

"That's intimidating for them," says Brian Housle, an exercise physiologist at the Duke Diet and Fitness Center in Durham, N.C., which caters to an overweight clientele. "They may not like the way they look or the way they think they look when doing exercise."

Some even fear they'll destroy the equipment. "Most of the women I work with run in fear of whether they'll break a machine," says Rochelle Rice, president of In Fitness and In Health, a fitness company in New York City that specializes in classes for overweight women.

A nationwide survey released earlier this year by the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association in Boston found that about a third of the 1,700 respondents said they were too intimidated to work out at a gym, and most of them were female and overweight.

Besides concerns about body size, there are other reasons people find gyms unpalatable. Some simply may not like the environment or they may feel they are too old, flabby, unhip or unskilled to fit in with a younger, buffer crowd that navigates the machines with ease.

'I just felt foolish'

Gretchen LeFever, 46, of Virginia Beach, Va., jogs each week, but not at a gym. She'd like to hit the weights at the club to firm up her thighs, hips and arms, but she can't bring herself to go.

"I have been paying my membership dues for over a year, but I am too intimidated to work out," she says. "I went a few times and did not know exactly how to use the machines. Incredibly fit women were there and I just felt foolish."

People of all sizes can be intimidated by equipment, and humiliated if they can't figure out how to work the elliptical machine, for instance, or they accidentally wobble right off the BOSU.

In a vicious cycle, fear of exercise embarrassment is contributing to our couch-potato culture, and many of the people who need to exercise more are the ones likely to feel uncomfortable doing it, says strength and conditioning coach Todd Durkin, owner of Fitness Quest 10, a personal training studio in San Diego, and a spokesperson for the IDEA Health and Fitness Association.

"It's important to feel relaxed and comfortable when exercising," he says.

Around the country, some mainstream gyms are making an effort to help overweight exercisers feel more comfortable. For example, some offer fitness classes with slower music and simpler choreography that allow bigger bodies to move more easily and safely, with less risk of joint injury. Others employ personal trainers with education on the biomechanics of plus-size people. And places like Curves were built for those who aren't model perfect.

Is the gym 'size-friendly'?

If you're anxious about going to a health club or other fitness facility, experts recommend the following steps to ease embarrassment:

- Do some research in advance to find out if a gym is a good fit for you. If you're overweight, for instance, call and ask the front desk if the facility is "size-friendly," advises Rice. If it is, it will have, for example, weight limits posted on the machines and a staff with experience working with overweight clients, and there will be just a short distance between the dressing room and the pool. If the front desk has no idea what "size-friendly" means, look elsewhere.
- Before you take a class or lesson, observe one first to see if you would be comfortable doing it and to become familiar with what's involved.
- Consider a smaller setting. Big health clubs just aren't the answer for many people, at least not initially, Durkin says. An alternative is to choose a smaller gym or studio and sign up for six to 12 sessions with a trainer who can show you the ropes and design a tailored fitness program.
- Skip the gym altogether. Work out at a home gym or outside, where fewer people can gawk. Housle says the Duke program encourages clients who dislike gyms to try walking or recreational activities such as tennis or golf. There still may be an element of embarrassment but it's probably not as big of an issue. "We encourage people to assess what it is that they like to do that gets them out and moving," he says.
- Pair up with a buddy for moral support and motivation.

- Focus on the task at hand. Wherever you work out — and whatever your hang-ups about doing so might be — try to ignore what other exercisers think or do and focus on how important physical activity is to your health, says Housle. "We reinforce the idea that you're just comparing yourself to yourself," he says.

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