Your Workout Responds to The Placebo Effect

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What you believe about your body and your effort can shift how hard movement feels.

Let’s start with a simple truth: how hard something feels isn’t always how hard it is. And that holds true for your workout, too.

A study published in ***PLOS ONE*** reveals that what you believe about a workout before you even break a sweat can significantly influence how difficult it feels. This isn’t about pretending or pushing through. It’s about the subtle, measurable power of placebo-like expectations to alter physical perception in real time.

And here’s where it gets personal: the effect depends on how you see yourself.

Expectations, Effort, and Identity

In the study, 78 mostly sedentary adults were asked to cycle at moderate intensity for 30 minutes. Before they began, each person watched a short video designed to subtly shift their expectations.

Some videos framed the workout as scientifically proven to improve mental and physical well-being. Others said the compression shirt they were told to wear would enhance breathing and cardiovascular function. Still others delivered neutral or discouraging messages, suggesting the exercise was too short or too weak to do much of anything.

What happened? People who were primed with positive expectations reported lower perceived exertion than those given no specific framing, though the effect was

inconsistent across the study's two control groups (a caveat the researchers flagged themselves).

But that effect wasn't uniform. One key variable stood out: physical self-concept, or how athletic and physically capable people believed themselves to be.

- **Those who felt confident in their bodies** were most influenced by positive messages about the exercise itself.
- **Those who felt unsure about their fitness** responded more strongly when told their gear would help them perform better.

In other words: belief changed perception. And that belief worked differently depending on identity.

Shift the Way You Experience Effort

Let's be honest: starting or restarting a fitness routine, especially as we get older, can be daunting. Your energy may not be what it was. Your knees might be louder than your playlist. And if you've never seen yourself as "sporty," the barrier to entry can feel higher.

This study offers something powerful: a mindset lever. If you can shift your beliefs about your body, your tools, and your effort, you can literally change how hard something feels.

It's not a gimmick. It's a neuropsychological response. Your brain filters sensation based on expectations. Just like a placebo can alter pain, belief can modulate effort.

And for anyone trying to stick to a movement habit for healthspan, that matters. Because if a workout feels easier, you're more likely to keep showing up.

The Mindful Reframe Practice (for Any Workout)

Reframing is a cognitive tool that helps you **shift unhelpful thought patterns** into more effective ones. It's not about denying your experience; it's about seeing it with more clarity and possibility. When it comes to movement, that means choosing beliefs that support your long-term well-being.

STEP 1: CATCH THE THOUGHT

Before (or during) your workout, notice any automatic thoughts that make the activity feel harder.
Examples:

- "I'm not in shape enough to do this."
- "This is going to be miserable."
- "Other people are naturally better at this."

STEP 2: CHECK THE EVIDENCE

Ask yourself: Is this thought based on fact or fear?

- What's actually happening in my body right now?
- Have I done something like this before?
- What would I tell a friend in this moment?

STEP 3: TRY A REFRAME

Replace the thought with one that feels grounded, supportive, and realistic.
Examples:

- "I've moved through hard things before—I can do this, too."

- “This might feel uncomfortable, but it’s also strengthening me.”
- “I’m here to grow, not to prove anything.”

STEP 4: REINFORCE WITH RITUAL

Choose a small external cue, like a favorite shirt, water bottle, or playlist, that reminds you of your intention. Let it serve as a physical anchor for your reframed mindset. *This is my strength cue. This is me showing up.*

Like any new skill, reframing takes practice. But the more you do it, the more natural it becomes. And eventually, that voice of self-doubt gets replaced by one that knows: You’re stronger than the story you inherited.

Want to take it further? Try keeping a small “movement mindset journal” for a week. Before and after each session, jot down:

- The automatic thought you noticed
- The reframe you tried
- How your workout felt

Over time, you may notice patterns shift in your beliefs and in your body.

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