

Conquering Your *Gym Phobia*

By Katie Rickel, PhD

“Me?!” My therapy client rolled her eyes and sighed. “Oh, I can’t work out in a gym! Gyms are only for fit people. Not for people *like me.*”

Really? So being in great shape is a prerequisite for exercising? As strange as that might sound, I hear this sentiment from my clients every day. I take their angst seriously, because I appreciate that walking into a fitness center for the first time can be a daunting endeavor. If you’ve ever felt something similar, I can imagine the source of your trepidation: you walk in through the doors, and a huge spotlight comes on, shining directly on you, as you pass the treadmills. Because you feel that your body is unacceptable, so, you think, will everyone around you. You imagine they’ll fixate on all of your flaws—and newbie moves—for the next hour. (It is worth bearing in mind that although there exists a possibility that someone might notice you for a nanosecond, most people go to a gym because they are concerned about their own bodies. The buff bodybuilders and the lithe marathoners alike are likely looking in the same place you are: in the mirror, at themselves.)

Given all of that, many folks discount the gym as a viable option for their health, because of anxieties that are largely unfounded, however understandable. If you struggle with “gym phobia,” try the following strategies:

GET EDUCATED. You’d be uncomfortable jumping into a game of bridge without knowing the rules, so it makes perfect sense that you’d also be lost if you entered a gym with no prior knowledge about the equipment or activities. Arming yourself with some basic information can go a long way to calming your nerves. Most gyms



offer free orientation sessions to teach you how to use the equipment, and some people find it helpful to meet with a personal trainer for a few sessions to develop a personalized routine.

BECOME A “REGULAR.” Get into the routine of going to the gym at a specific time on the same days each week. Even if you don’t interact with others, you’ll begin to see the same faces; this will enhance your feelings of familiarity, and eventually, your sense of belonging. Often, this strategy will help reduce the number of “unknowns” that may be contributing to your anxiety, because the people around you will no longer seem so different and unpredictable—quite the opposite!

USE THE BUDDY SYSTEM. Perhaps a friend or partner has expressed some interest in getting in shape or finding ways to de-stress. Ask them to join you! If your buddy has gym experience, they may be able to show you the ropes; otherwise, perhaps you could sign up for a class or a training session together. There is certainly safety in numbers as you are getting started. As an added bonus, you and your

gym buddy can hold one another accountable down the line, if your motivation begins to waver.

CONSIDER A GYM THAT CATERS SPECIFICALLY TO YOU. As you might suspect, your angst about walking into the neighborhood gym is fairly common. Thus, the fitness industry has started to develop facilities to attract members with similar backgrounds and goals. Further, there exist several franchises around the country that only accept members who are working toward a significant weight loss so that individuals are assured that they will be sweating judgment-free among folks with similar goals.

Of course, going to a gym is not your only option for exercise. However, fitness centers do provide some unique advantages, such as a variety of equipment, engaging classes, and the opportunity to be around other health-minded individuals. So, don’t assume that it’s not the right venue for you. Use these strategies to get started, and you just might find that you feel right at home. **h&h**

Dr. Rickel treats ages 18 and up in the CPMH Affiliate office in Durham, NC, and specializes in anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, weight management, bariatric surgery evaluations, and OCD.

For more information or to schedule an initial evaluation with Dr. Rickel, contact:
CAROLINA PARTNERS IN MENTAL HEALTHCARE, PLLC
Telephone: (919) 354-0834
www.carolinapartners.com