

How to Keep Your Workout from Hurting You

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PART THREE: YOUR EYES

This month's guideline, the third in a series of seven, will help you tune into the role your eyes play in working out. The mechanistic view of exercise--that our bodies are like machines, that exercise is a mechanical, repetitive act involving just your body, and that interacting with machines such as treadmills is the best way to exercise--cuts perception and intention out of the picture, making it seem like where you look doesn't matter. Consequently, you can't access your full movement potential, your basic movement skills may even diminish, and you risk short-term acute and long-term over-use injuries. Your vision is key if you want not only a safe workout, but also the *full* benefits of exercise.

When you do things in your daily life, you continuously perceive the world around you and focus your attention on what you wish to do. Of course, perception involves more than just your eyesight--you actually knit your sense of reality from what you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and internally sense about yourself. But for sighted people vision is generally a dominant sense, and that's why I've chosen to address it.

Perceiving helps you create an idea of what you want to do, guides you in doing it, and helps you continually adjust and refine what you're doing. When these processes aren't seamlessly integrated, you'd probably describe yourself as distracted. What causes you to notice you're distracted? Usually, it's that something has gone wrong. You've tripped on the sidewalk, made a poor business choice, or digressed in conversation.

To see how distraction affects exercise, let's look at a common gym scenario: a person running on a treadmill while watching TV and reading the subtitles on the screen. To begin with, I've never seen a TV mounted in a truly ergonomic position in a gym. Usually there are a few TVs mounted up high in front of a phalanx of assorted cardio machines. You probably have to turn and tilt your head to watch.

In light of the millennia of human evolution, this is not a good scenario. Seeing has such a crucial survival value--it's the difference between life and death whether you're hunting and gathering, fighting, or crossing the street--that we have evolved an intimate connection between the movement of our eyes and the entire rest of our selves. Your whole body follows your eyes because you will most likely need to respond to what you see. If you look down you will find that you bend forward. If you turn or shift your head to one side or the other, you will find you have shifted your weight. If you lie

on your back and move only your eyes right and left as you gently touch the back of your neck, you will feel your neck muscles activate in response.

A person whose act of seeing is not coordinated through their whole self has a great deal of difficulty functioning. Picture a person in a neck brace at a cocktail party. Unable to turn his head, he's limited to moving his eyes alone or lumbering around in a circle to see the room. He feels uncomfortable, seems slow-witted regardless of his intelligence, and before long has gone to stand against a wall so he won't have to worry about what's behind him.

By contrast, a basketball superstar's seeing is superbly integrated with moving; he acts instantaneously and precisely on what he perceives. In general, the easier your connection between seeing and moving, the more comfortable, capable, and balanced you will feel in your daily life.

Since most people fall somewhere on the spectrum between whiplash victim and sports star, we can assume your seeing and moving are more or less integrated. So if your head is turned to see the TV in the gym, you've shifted your weight and are probably running asymmetrically, landing more heavily on one foot than the other. This might cause a short-term problem like a stiff neck, back, or hip, and will certainly cause uneven wear-and-tear on your joints in the long run. And, in making the effort to balance yourself against the orientation of your eyes and head, you're also training yourself to reduce the integration of looking and moving, which is obviously not a healthy project.

If you're looking downward at a screen on the control panel of your treadmill, the consequences are a little different. You'll involuntarily bend forward a bit, and your running will be less efficient and harder on all your joints, especially your knees and lower back. If your gaze is fixed above eye level you'll probably arch backwards a bit, with similar consequences for your joints.

And then there are those subtitles. To read the text of the show you're watching, you need to hold your head relatively still. This is also true if you're reading a magazine (which certainly means you're looking down as well). Reading while running requires a lot of extra muscular effort to damp down the rhythmic movements of your body to reduce their effect on your head. So, again, you're interrupting the connection between seeing and moving. And, again, you're running much less efficiently, which always means slower or more effortful running and more wear and tear on your joints.

All of this holds true for other exercise as well; whether you're on the Stairmaster or lifting weights, your body follows your eyes, and disconnecting your seeing from your doing is harmful. There's always the possibility of injury due to distraction--pulling a muscle, spraining an ankle--which seems too obvious to require much discussion here. But whether you're hurt due to a misstep or due to years of literally disoriented movement, the consequences of consistently distracting yourself while exercising will likely catch up with you.

There's more to all of this than just avoiding injury, though. We were born to move through space--walking, running, maybe even rollerblading. We can do it easily and elegantly at our full height with our attention free to engage with our action and our surroundings. Honing the integration of looking and moving makes it increasingly possible to move responsively through complex terrain--running, say, through a field or through the woods, or playing basketball. Or walking briskly through Midtown at rush hour.

When you move through space and your perception is involved in your action, you see differently. Instead of focussing your eyes hard at the TV screen, you rely on your peripheral vision more. This is a very healthy break for your eyes, especially if you spend a lot of time looking at screens or at close quarters. It also relaxes you, and thus enhances the stress-relieving effects of exercise.

Moving through space with a relaxed, open gaze enhances your ability to notice and respond to your environment. As you run, you notice something and shift to respond to it simultaneously, springing up onto the curb or skirting a puddle. Did you move to see or see to move? It's impossible to say. When what you see is connected to what you do, perception/action and environment/self cycle into each other so it's hard to find the line between them. This is a very nearly meditative state.

That's all well and good, you say, but exercise is so *boring*. I have three responses to this. First, try going without your usual distractions a few times and see. It may be less boring than you think. I particularly recommend trying this outdoors where the environment affords richer interaction. Fitness equipment, after all, is designed to prevent you from varying your movement so that you won't sprain your ankle while watching TV. Which is another way of saying it's designed to be boring. Say what you will about the sidewalks and parks of New York--they're never boring. Nor are any number of more beautiful options.

Second, just because you leave your attention free to perceive and direct your movement doesn't mean your mind *never* wanders. It almost certainly will. And that's one of the best things about exercise. Aside from dreaming, I don't know any better way to process and integrate my experiences than working out. It's as though the ground I traverse is a metaphor for the distance I travel in my understanding. I always arrive at a different place than I departed from, and it's always a calmer, clearer, more balanced one. And at the same time, my mind is available to engage with my movement to whatever degree is necessary in each moment. In a sense, it's thinking from inside your body--a rarer and rarer experience in our increasingly virtual world.

But finally, you shouldn't do exercise you find boring. The cure for boredom isn't distracting yourself with TV or a magazine--it's finding something interesting to do. Choose an activity that requires skill, that you're good enough at to get some satisfaction while really stretching your abilities, and that you can improve at. Do something that gives you a sense of accomplishment. Options abound: T'ai Chi, jujitsu, Tae Kwon Do, capoeira, ballet, modern dance, African dance, tango, swing dancing, salsa, belly dance, soccer, basketball, ultimate frisbee, hiking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, kayaking, yoga... There is certainly something out there you'd love that would enrich your life.

Now, it's crucial that you be physically active on a regular basis in order to be healthy. If you truly love your 20 minutes of cardio and CNN every day and can't face changing your routine, well, stick with your routine. I'm glad you're exercising. Just try to get the TV in front of you and right at eye level. It'll help. But I hope I've persuaded most of you to try something new, something that's really an *activity* that you can involve your whole self in, and that will bring you benefits in how you feel that go far beyond the effects of working out your heart and muscles. Work out your *self*.

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