

Pain and Pleasure: Instruments of Success

By Michael Lipowski, CFP

“I conceive that pleasures are to be avoided if greater pains be the consequence, and pains to be coveted that will terminate in greater pleasures.”

—Michel De Montaigne

The motto, *No pain, no gain*, has been around about as long as the barbell. You’ve undoubtedly heard these words shouted, either to yourself or someone else, as inspiration to work through the excruciating discomfort of lactic acid building in the muscles during an intense set. But this saying has an even greater implication when it comes to developing your ‘best-body’ than that of exercise alone. Actually, the saying should be more like, “No pain, No pleasure, No gain”. Why? Because, *everything you and I do, we do either out of our need to avoid pain or our desire to gain pleasure*.¹ When it comes to developing your physique there are a multitude of things you must do or for that matter stop doing if you are to be successful. Your ability to take the necessary actions depends on whether those actions—or the intended results of those actions—bring you pleasure or pain.

Think about it! Those who frequent the gym on a daily basis, eat nutritiously and live a healthy lifestyle do so for at least one of two reasons, if not both. They either (a) get tremendous satisfaction from looking their best, feeling healthy and having lots of energy or (b) they do these things in an effort to avoid the unhappiness and frustration they feel when they *don’t* look their best, *don’t* feel healthy and are lacking energy.

We can all agree that, “when we look good—we feel good”, and “when we don’t look good—we usually don’t feel good either”. Those individuals with outstanding physiques derive such tremendous *pleasure* from looking their best that they will take whatever action is necessary to ensure that they always look their best (or at least within reach of it). At the same time, they derive so much *pain* from not looking their best that they again will, take whatever actions are necessary to ensure that they look their best. This is the mind set of anyone who

¹ Robbins, Anthony *Awaken the Giant Within*, Ch. 3, p. 53, Free Press, New York 1991

has successfully achieved his or her “dream body” and has upheld this standard over the course of time.

“Though a taste of pleasure may quicken the relish of life, an unrestrained indulgence leads to inevitable destruction.” —Robert Dodsley

A common dilemma faced by many people undertaking a new diet or exercise regimen to ‘get-in-shape’ is that they typically have one or more “pleasures” (a.k.a. habits or behaviors) that are conflicting with their training and nutrition efforts. I’m not talking about the occasional or infrequent indulgence as this typically will not negatively affect your development to a large degree or over the long term. But rather, “pleasures” that individuals feel compelled to satisfy on a daily basis. It’s one thing to have a Krispy Kreme donut once every few weeks, but it is quite another to have one every morning for breakfast. When a behavior or habit is thwarting your efforts to develop your physique beyond its current condition then the behavior must be eliminated.

Likewise, when you procrastinate and fail to introduce new behaviors or habits that are crucial to your development, you are in effect hampering your development. Not taking a specific action simply because you “don’t want to” or you “don’t like doing that” or “it’s too hard” can be just as damaging to your development as any negative behaviors. In other words, the results of choosing not to take action can be just as painful as taking the wrong action. To be successful you have to break this pattern and begin doing those things that are essential to your development though you may prefer not to.

Most times we know precisely what behaviors in which we *should* and *should not* be engaging in. The problem is we fail to follow through with our ‘should’ behaviors and avoid the ‘should not’ behaviors. From an intellectual standpoint we know what we are supposed to do but, our problem has nothing to do with intellect. It doesn’t take a nutritionist to tell us that that we should eat more nutritiously and in smaller portions; we already know this for ourselves.

We also know that to build muscle we constantly need to place greater demands on our muscles so that they have a *reason* to grow. We know that in order to improve continually we have to regularly raise our standards and push the envelope by training harder, eating healthier and living more congruent with our desires. We know much about what to do, we just don’t do it. Why? Because we don’t know how to get ourselves to do it...that is until now.

Changing Behaviors 101

To change a behavior you must change what that behavior means to you. As stated earlier: “*everything you and I do, we do either out of our need to avoid pain or our desire to gain pleasure*”. With that said, if you are to eliminate a negative behavior you must link a great deal of pain to that behavior—so much as to make you *not want* to engage in it any longer. The same principle applies for introducing a new behavior—you must link enough pleasure to the behavior so that you willfully engage in it consistently and with 100% effort.

Right now you might be thinking that it can not possibly be this simple, in which case you would be both right and wrong. Wrong, because changing your behaviors only requires that you 1) make a definite choice to change them and 2) find the incentive to do so. That part is simple.

You would be right because making an everlasting change takes time. It does not happen overnight and it needs to be worked at on a daily basis. That part is also simple...in theory...but very difficult in practice. It calls for a considerable desire to change and the patience and resolve to see it through to the end, no matter how long that might be.

In order to make changes in behavior last, you have to condition them until they become a part of your routine, until they are simply “what-you-do”. Just like you condition your heart and lungs to work at a greater capacity through aerobic exercise you must condition your mind, body and emotions to experience *pain or pleasure* in response to your behaviors. These sensations need to be woven into your *nervous system* so that the moment a behavior is acted upon the conditioned response is felt—it must become automatic.

Conditioning, however, takes time, but once these feelings are imbedded into your subconscious it will become easy to steer clear of those behaviors that had been impeding your progress (i.e., unhealthy foods, overeating, binge drinking, etc.) without feeling deprived or unfulfilled. It will also become easy to follow through with those actions (i.e., intense weight training and aerobic exercise) that will ensure your progress, and do so with greater effort and enthusiasm.

Most people find that there probably is no pain greater than self-disappointment and no pleasure greater than self-fulfillment. These are the types of feelings you must condition in response to your behaviors. Next time you act on a negative behavior, acknowledge the disappointment, guilt, discontent or anger you feel.

Do not try to minimize or downplay the effect of these emotions—maximize them! Use them to make the pain so great that you will do anything to avoid it happening again. If self-disappointment or shame is not enough to encourage change then establish some form of punishment that will. Again, make the pain of the punishment so immense that you'll work hard to avoid it. When you do something positive and productive acknowledge the good and celebrate it! Make yourself want to do it again and again and again. Reward your good actions; just be sure not to reward with a bad behavior!

Conditioning is the key to long lasting results and so you must work at it diligently but, most important, consistently. When a marathoner stops running for an extensive period he/she loses cardiovascular capacity, and if a bodybuilder stops weight training he/she loses muscle. Unless you consistently work at connecting pain and pleasure to specific behaviors you, too, will lose benefits. Soon you will find yourself reverting back to old habits because you no longer recognize the pain or pleasure associated with them.

For anyone who has ever tried kicking a habit only to return soon after, there is a logical explanation for this result and it has nothing to do with a lack of will power. In fact, when breaking a habit or trying to start a new one, sheer will power almost never works—at least over the long run. Few people truly possess it and even fewer know how to effectively harness it over an extensive period. The real reason why people return to their old habit is because they have not effectively linked enough pain to the behavior they're trying to remove or enough pleasure to the one they are trying to institute. They lack the emotional incentive necessary to remove completely the old habit and start the new one. If no such incentive and emotion exists, or is too weak, then you continually will revert back to that which brings more pleasure or less pain.

Proof of the Effects of Pain and Pleasure

As it relates to health and fitness it's not difficult to find a real life example of how our perception of what brings us pleasure and what brings us pain, affects our choices and behaviors. At the time of this writing (2004) people are on a major low-carb kick. They are giving up their breads, cakes, cookies, ice creams, fruit drinks, pastas, and more, and they're giving them up almost overnight! People who have been eating bagels and doughnuts for breakfast every morning for the past 20 years suddenly are eating egg omelets instead. How did this happen? Well, as I mentioned before, **to remove a behavior you must change what that behavior means to you.**

Due to the abundance of negative information circulating concerning carbohydrates, particularly sugars, people have become literally frightened of them and are avoiding them at all costs. Apparently, the pain associated with eating carbs has become much greater than the pleasure normally attached to them. Chocolate cake no longer means *“hmmm...dessert”*; it now means *“oh no—I’m going to be fat, have diabetes, suffer a heart attack and the end of the world is near”*. For the record, not all carbohydrates are bad, not even all sugars.² Whether rightfully or wrongly, people dramatically have changed what carbohydrates mean to them and what has resulted has been amazing...they’re not eating them! They are turning away the comfort foods they have lived with for 10, 20, 30 years or more because someone said that those foods would make you fatter and kill you faster. Now how’s that for incentive!

In Closing

As stated in opening of this article, to take your physique to the next level you will likely need to make some dramatic changes. This can be a daunting, and often frustrating task. But with the right mind set and proper employment of pleasure and pain, change is right around the corner and a new and better body will be awaiting you.

² To learn more about the different types of carbohydrates and their effect on your health read, *The Glucose Revolution* by Brand-Miller, Colagiuri, Foster-Powell, and Wolever.