

November 1, 2007

FITNESS

I'm Sorry but You're Spinning on My Machine

By **ABBY ELLIN**

IF bike 28 is not available, Susan Koeppen's entire spinning routine is ruined. If any of the mats in Eva Barash's yoga class are crooked, she cannot continue teaching. And if Pamela Drucker does not find a treadmill on the fourth floor of her gym, then her exercise regimen is pretty well shot.

"There's a certain feeling of being safe if you have the same spot," explained Ms. Drucker, 51, a dental hygienist in Manhattan who describes herself as having "garden variety compulsions."

All of us have our little quirks, a set of routines that govern our lives: making the morning coffee just so, or taking the same number of steps from the apartment to the elevator.

But working out inspires a whole other set of peccadilloes, which come into full relief on the public stage of the gym. While most people are not as rigid as [Jack Nicholson](#)'s character in "As Good as It Gets," experts say fitness rituals are actually quite common. And, as people who have spent any length of time at gyms or in exercise classes can attest, they can get pretty odd.

Tamilee Webb, a fitness instructor in San Diego, teaches three to four times a week. One of her students repeats this mantra before each workout: "It's hard body time — 1, 2, 3 woof!" When he's not doing cardio, his shoes must be untied. He always wears sweat pants, which he tucks behind the tongues of his sneakers (Nike, of course). And his hat is always on backward.

Tom Holland, 38, an exercise physiologist in Darien, Conn., recalled the "very particular" client who requested that he hand him weights with the numbers pointing up. "I had to stand a certain way in front of him, and he paid me to run next to him while he wore an iPod," Mr. Holland recalled.

Michelle P. Maidenberg, a psychotherapist in Manhattan and in White Plains, said strict exercise routines aren't uncommon. "People engage in these kinds of rituals because they're within their comfort zone," she said. "They know what to expect, where to expect it and when to expect it."

Dr. Robert H. Reiner, the executive director of Behavioral Associates, a private outpatient psychotherapy institute in Manhattan, believes these kinds of rituals can be forms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. "I have a guy who has to be on a certain bike number depending on the month and day of the week," he said. "If it's March 5, he has to be on bike 5. If he can't get that, he needs bike 3, for the month of March."

But, he said, "You would never say that everybody has O.C.D." Rituals become problems only if they interfere with a life, costing money, causing marital distress or eating up a lot of time.

Ms. Koeppen, 35, a consumer correspondent for “The Early Show,” on CBS, understands the need for order at the gym. A self-professed creature of habit — she always eats the same lunch at the same restaurant (traditional Greek soup and a chopped salad) — she said she is equally finicky at her gym.

She will often show up an hour early to sign up for bike 28, which is three bikes in from the door, beneath a fan. Recently, she arrived a little late and was forced to sit on another bike. The experience unnerved her. “The wheel didn’t spin the way my wheel spins, the seat didn’t tilt the way my seat tilts,” she said. “The whole time I kept thinking, ‘I wish I was on bike 28.’”

While experts say that being too rigid is not a good thing, they also believe set routines can enhance performance. Dr. Pamela Peeke, the author of “Fit to Live,” a fitness book, said exercise habits are the layman’s version of an athlete’s lucky jersey, or a boxer’s hand-wrapping ritual.

Joan S. Ingalls, a sports counselor in New York, even called fitness rites beneficial. “One definitely needs to be in a particular psychological and emotional state to exercise,” she said. “People can create so-called markers in the environment that stimulate the emotional state that they need to exercise.”

There may be practical reasons for a seemingly obsessive behavior, say, if the floor is more level under a certain treadmill. But some habits are a little, well, weird. Tracey Welsh, the general manager at Red Mountain, a destination spa in St. George, Utah, once accommodated a guest who loved doing her cardio with her dog at her side.

David Kirsch, owner of the Madison Square Club, in Manhattan, has one client who will say, “I did my hair yesterday — I can’t sweat.” Or, she’ll excuse herself and go and blow-dry the back of her hair in the middle of the routine, said Mr. Kirsch, 46, who happened to be wearing his good-luck red socks on this particular day.

None of this surprises Dr. Peeke. But, she cautions, you have to be flexible. “What I see in the gym is a metaphor for everything in life,” she said. “I usually tell people: This is a golden opportunity for you to learn how to use another piece of equipment.”

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