

# FITNESS HANDOUT

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## Succeeding as a Beginner

**A**re you eager to try a new type of exercise class or sport, such as weight training, step aerobics or racquetball? Learning new activities helps cross train your body, provides variety to keep you interested in exercise and lets you take reasonable risks that are good for your body *and* mind. Despite these benefits, many people shy away from beginning something new because they are afraid of failing. With the proper mind-set, however, you can enjoy being a beginner.

### Fear of Failing

You can learn a lot about being a beginner by watching children try new activities. Kids have no preconceived thoughts about failing. When children learn to walk, they instinctively accept that falling doesn't mean they're uncoordinated or failures. It simply means they have to get up and try again.

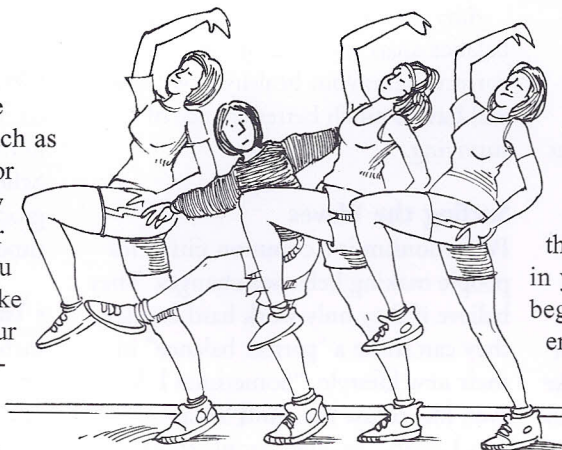
Taking a reasonable risk, like walking through health club doors for the first time or trying in-line skating, is about being willing to *change*. Change is positive, but it often causes anxiety. Unfortunately, because we worry about failure and the way we appear to others, we are fearful of starting something new. Relax. It's acceptable not to do an activity "right" the first time. For example, you might feel uncomfortable your first time in the weight room, but most everyone does. The object is not to pass judgment on your abilities. Mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. Give yourself enough time and practice to adapt.

### Learning Stages

Whether you learn slowly or quickly, you'll go through the following stages when starting a new exercise activity or sport:

**Stage 1: Starting Out.** Your body will take note of the demands of the new activity, including energy expenditure, speed, timing and direction of movements. For example, when taking step classes the first few times, your body will learn kinesthetically how high the step is and where to plant your foot on top without looking.

For effective learning, a positive perception of your efforts is crucial. If you make mistakes or don't pick up movements as quickly as you'd like, it's important not to just say, "Forget it. I'm not good enough at this." Congratulate yourself on *taking a risk* to move past your comfort level!



### Stage 2: Practicing the Activity.

You'll spend lots of time in this stage. Your focus will shift from learning movements to refining and perfecting them, and you'll start to notice consistency in your movements. You're no longer a beginner! You might even feel confident enough to branch out and try a different class or sport.

### Stage 3: Achieving Proficiency.

With proper instruction and lots of practice, you'll develop a mental and physical blueprint of skills that your body will eventually remember. Your technique will be efficient, reliable and consistent. You'll be able to stop thinking and let movements happen. You'll feel confident playing the sport in a different location or taking classes from different instructors. Although you might still make small mistakes, you'll accept them as part of the learning process.

### Ready, Set, Go!

Ready to try a new activity? Follow these steps and have fun!

- Choose an activity you've always wanted to try, perhaps an aerobics class or tennis.
- Find an instructor who will help you learn the activity. The instructor should teach in logical, safe movement progressions; be personable and patient; provide lots of positive reinforcement; and help you set realistic goals for a successful experience.
- Start with no expectations about the new activity except that you'll have fun trying it.
- Realize you'll need practice and instructor feedback to become proficient.
- Accept your initial blunders. Don't get mad at yourself; move on and practice until you achieve the desired outcome.
- Enjoy the process of acquiring athletic ability for the new activity! ■

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*As continuing education for working with beginners, Suzanne Nottingham challenges herself to learn at least one new sport each year. Last winter, she played ice hockey for the first time—on an all men's team. This year, she plans to learn to ice climb.*

*A service of IDEA, the international association of fitness professionals, the leading organization serving personal trainers, exercise instructors and business operators.*