

JUST WORKING OUT

Advice from Dear Ethel

My name is Maria Callahan, and I'm a certified personal trainer. For more than three years I've been tackling stereotypes in the fitness industry: how one should exercise and conduct personal training and what a personal trainer should look like.

I've also had the pleasure of meeting some amazing fitness trainers such as my business partner, Andrée Culpepper. In 2006, Andrée and I will be opening Ethel D's, a fitness and wellness facility dedicated to bringing the gift of health and wellness to everyone regardless of their current level of fitness, size, gender, sexual orientation or economic status. In future issues, Andrée will likely be joining in contributing to this column, bringing with her 15 years of group fitness expertise.

There are generally four reactions people have when they find out I am a personal trainer. Without provocation, they tell me what they eat or don't eat. They punch my shoulder, challenge me to arm wrestling or cower completely. Frequently they present a revered body part for my inspection or they question my level of fitness in some way, based on their perception of how I look.

I'm a stocky, butch, genderqueer dyke, and I couldn't pass as straight if I wanted to (although I still occasionally give it my best on Halloween). Recently I was about to visit a good friend in Los Angeles whom I hadn't seen in several years. She knew I had become a personal trainer but rarely asked me about my work. In a phone conversation prior to my visit, she skirted around the subject. I asked her what was wrong, and she very quietly asked me, "Are you still family?" The good news is I've never been able to decrease my queerness by going to the gym. In fact, it seems to have increased and filled out quite nicely.

Discrimination is still rampant in the locker room and in hiring practices, and we have solid evidence of such. Lori Buckwalter's charges against Cascade Athletic Club are an example of the former. While I was employed at a corporate chain gym, managers got into the habit of referring gays, lesbians and anybody non-mainstream to me for training. While I was happy to have such a good crowd of people I could relate to, I was certain I was qualified to train anyone. I soon realized they were referring the fitter-looking mainstream clients to trainers who fit the most common stereotype of what a trainer should look like.

I began working within the trans health and size-positive communities and found a stunning lack of information on exercise, hormone replacement therapy and genderqueer issues. In



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by Maria Callahan

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September 2004 *Just Out* published an article on my work within the queer and size-positive communities, and I proudly presented it as part of my résumé. More on a potential employer's reaction to that in a future column.

The purpose of this column is to answer your questions about

health and fitness. I will do my best to answer based on what I've seen in my career as a personal trainer and information received from my certifying agency, the American Council on Exercise.

DEAR ETHEL:

Gyms are really hard for me. As a dyke of size and color, I'm very tuned into the vibes, and they regularly get in the way of my having a good workout. I feel like the personnel are either cheerleaders or drill instructors. How do I find a happy medium?

In large corporate chain gyms, the sales profiling begins the minute you sign up—hence, the intimidation factor of the personnel. Though not all gyms are shamelessly self-promoting, there is often a palpable vibe. Conversely, clients commonly ask me to "yell" at them. There seems to be some expectation on both ends.

I personally have felt more comfortable in public facilities, such as community centers, community colleges, or the Y. There are also a few smaller, independent gyms in town that offer a relaxed environment. Create your own environment by taking your friends to exercise with you. A basic weight training class at Portland Community College will teach you how to create a program for yourself. You can easily exercise away from the gym, too; walking, swimming, basketball, Frisbee or golf are excellent choices. At home, you can exercise with a stationary bike, a stability ball and a couple of hand weights or a resistance band. I've seen a lot of people push way too hard and then flop. Adherence is the name of the game. Start simple and make simple changes.

Exercise can be as simple as swimming, playing a game of pingpong or walking through the woods. It really doesn't matter what you do; be creative and stick with it! **JM**

Information in this column should not be used in place of advice from a licensed health care professional. If you don't see the question or answer you're looking for, e-mail DEAR ETHEL at maria@etheldiesels.com.

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