

# Getting Started:

A Beginner's Guide to  
Building Strength,  
Flexibility, and Motor  
Control through  
Bodyweight Training



## GMB Getting Started Guide

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## INTRODUCTION

Starting a new exercise regimen is intimidating, especially if it hasn't been a regular part of your life.

There can be confusion about which program is best, what type of training to focus on, and - the most common question we get - **where to start.**

Well, where to begin all depends on where you are at right now, but no matter where that is, there are three main areas of focus: **Strength, Flexibility, and Motor Control.**

Those three elements comprise the whole of what physical fitness is and knowing how to work on each of them solves half of your issues. The other half is actually doing the work.

In this guide, we'll first take a look at what "the basics" are. Everyone says that's the place to start, but what exactly does that mean?

Then we'll take a deeper look at each of those basic elements, starting with an assessment of your current abilities, then moving on to specific recommendations for what you need to work on the most.

## GMB's Public Service Announcement

Before we get into the nitty gritty, here's an obligatory PSA:

**We're not doctors, and this guide and the suggestions included in it are no substitute for being seen by a real-live professional in person.**

If you haven't been training due to a previous injury or physical limitation, just be sure to get cleared by a doctor or physical therapist before starting a training program.

And if you develop any ongoing aches and pains that don't seem to improve with rest, make an appointment to see a professional as soon as possible.

Okay?

Good, now let's continue.

This guide is designed to empower you with helpful information about the most common areas to start with in a training program.

And, as long as you've been cleared by a doctor or physical therapist, you'll be able to get started with a training program by focusing on what *you need to work on most*.

## How to Use This Guide

We've already given our disclaimer, so you know this guide is not meant to be used in place of seeing a qualified professional.

From here on, we'll assume you've done your due diligence and are cleared for exercise.

We suggest reading the chapters in this guide in order, as each one builds upon the last.

- ★ In Chapter 1, we'll give an overview of "the basics" - what they are, why they're important, and how to work on them.
- ★ Chapter 2 includes an assessment to gauge your current level of ability, which helps you determine what area is most important for you to work on. It also covers some ways to address flexibility to improve your physical restrictions.
- ★ Chapter 3 will give you the tools to start building the kind of strength you need.
- ★ And in Chapter 4, we'll look at building motor control, even for the "clumsiest" among us.

We recommend reading this guide all the way through, as it will help you determine what you need to work on, and how.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE BASICS

### How to Work on the Basic Elements of Bodyweight Exercise

Basics and fundamentals are important. Everyone says so. But, often it's unclear what the specific basics of a movement or exercise actually are.

If you ask many people what “the basics” of training are, you'll likely get a list of exercises and standards that are touted as fundamentals. And they are probably a fine group of exercises, but the true basics are more fundamental than even the simplest exercise.

In this chapter, we'll be talking about what the basics are, why you should spend your time on them, and how to work on them effectively.

We emphasize bodyweight skill training at GMB, and the basics for our purposes involve appropriate amounts of:

- ★ Strength
- ★ Flexibility
- ★ Motor Control

And what is deemed appropriate for these elements will depend upon what you need to work on to improve whatever skills you've chosen to pursue.

## What Are “the Basics”?

Starting with the root of the word \*basic\*, you’ll notice that it is “base.”

That’s what it’s all about. Everything we end up doing and working on has to come out of that base and foundation.

At its simplest, working on your basics, then, is what you need to do to build a strong platform upon which you can build everything else. If it isn’t strong, then anything on top of it will cause it to crumble and give way.

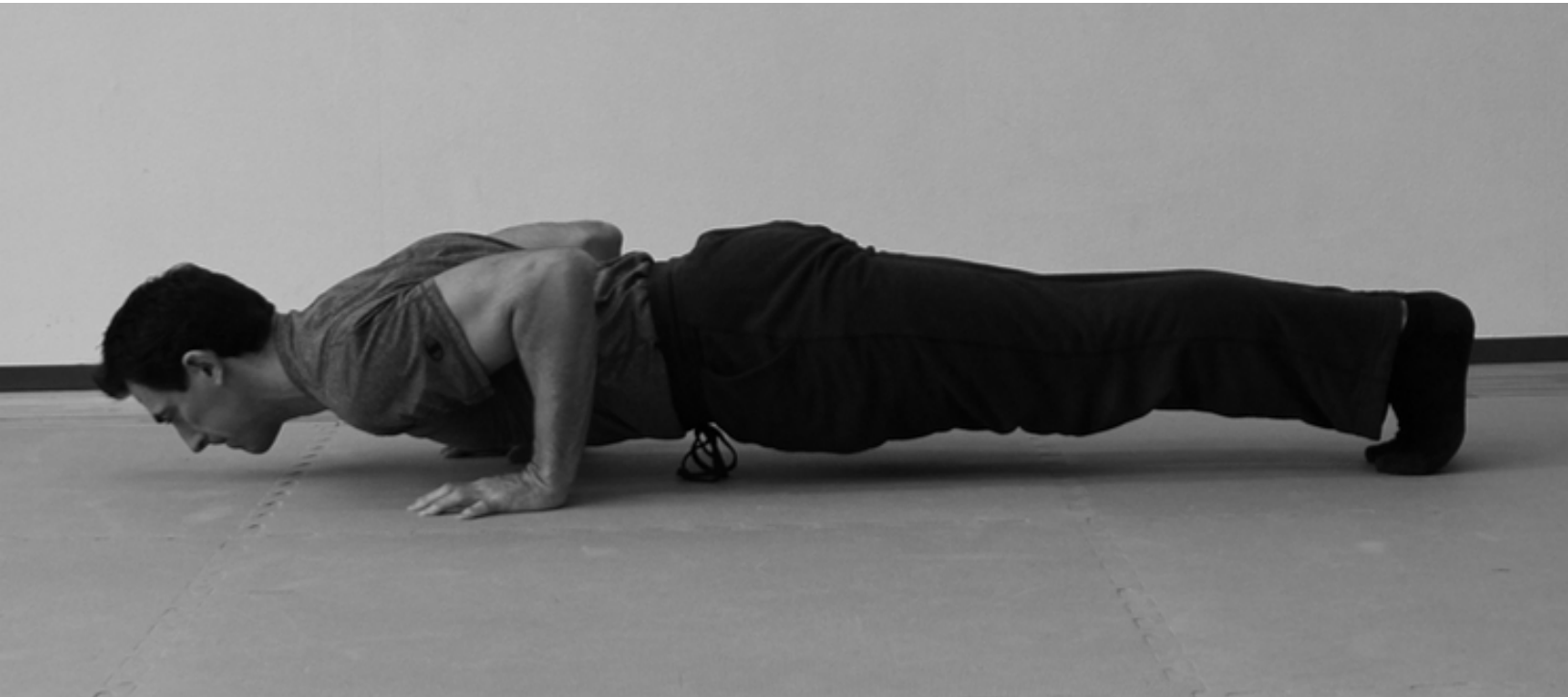
And who wants that to happen?

With this in mind, you can figure out what the basics are for any movement or goal.

### 3 Steps to Mastering the Basics:

1. Think of the movement itself and what you need to do to simply get into the starting position.
2. Think about what you would need to be able to do, in order to move into the position with control.
3. Think about what elements you need in order to complete the movement.





Let's use a fundamental bodyweight exercise in itself as an example.

The push-up is about as straightforward as it gets, as it doesn't really get more basic than pushing yourself up off the ground. But even though the exercise seems - and can be - very simple, it can be broken down even further.

- ★ Step One in this case would include strong and flexible wrists to hold yourself steady, and an appropriately strong core to keep your back straight.
- ★ Step Two, your triceps, shoulders, stomach, back, legs and hips need to be strong enough and coordinated to allow you to move into the start of the push-up with control.
- ★ Step Three of completing the push-up requires all of the above plus the addition of controlling it all in motion.

Though it is a simple up and down movement, there are a multitude of other ways you could be moving.

The basics are fundamentals which comprise a platform from which you can push off and explore.

An appropriate amount of strength, flexibility, and motor control has to be developed before even starting on the exercise itself, as those are the basics for the movement. When those are achieved, the full push-up is then a basic exercise for further exercise performance. A fine distinction, but a crucial one if you find yourself unable to perform a "basic" exercise.

The goal of push-ups as an exercise is not to do more push-ups, but to be able to do enough push-ups with good form to prepare your body for further skills. You could just keep doing more and more push-ups, if that's what you want. But we are looking beyond that.

## What "the Basics" Are Not

It's really important to understand that basics are not a fundamentally agreed-upon thing.

Basics require a qualifier.

What they are depends upon what you're doing and what you need to improve upon. Anything else is arbitrary.

## Why a 60 Second Handstand isn't All That

Let's look at the handstand as an example.

A lot of groups say a one- to two-minute hold as a fundamental requirement for “mastering” handstands. But that really is quite arbitrary. Do you really need to get that before doing anything else?

Now there are a lot of great reasons that training to do a handstand for 60-odd seconds would be beneficial for most people. But it’s an irrational thing to say that this is a basic standard that everyone needs.

A one-minute handstand hold can't really be called a “basic” because the handstand itself is built upon other components. Working on your wrists, opening your shoulders, and strengthening your core and hips are the true basics of the handstand hold - not the hold itself and not a number pulled out of thin air.

## The Basic Elements of Strength, Flexibility, and Motor Control

We choose our fundamental areas of training as strength, flexibility and motor control. This requires a bit of awareness of the structure of your chosen goals, but we’ll outline the process for you below.

### **Basic Elements of Strength**

Again, the fundamentals aren’t a specific exercise or even a way of training, but they are specific to what you need for the exercises and skills you’d like to perform.

For us at GMB, the basics of strength involve proper form and controlled movement.

There is nothing wrong with a focus on strength and getting as strong as possible, but after a certain point you will have built enough strength to focus on the skills themselves and move forward from there.

In general the best way to begin building the basic components of strength is by starting with the weakest link of the movement. Build up that weakest link, then move on the next weakest until you are strong all the way through.

For our movement example, we'll be discussing the Frogger, and how it is the basic fundamental movement for moving into the handstand.

Strength-wise, the basics for the handstand include the appropriate amount of strength in the wrists, shoulders, arms, and trunk to move into and hold the position.

The Frogger is perfect for this, as it allows you to progressively bear more weight through your hands and slowly condition your wrists and hands, which is commonly the weakest link in the chain. The Frogger gives you the opportunity to develop strength in your hands and wrists, while allowing you to adjust the weight as needed so as not to strain your wrists.

## **Basic Elements of Flexibility**

No, being able to do the splits is not a basic flexibility requirement.

The most fundamental component of flexibility is the ability to move into the position of best form and technique for the activities you want to do.

In Focused Flexibility, I present the concept of the Basic Assessment Positions (BAPs) which I put forth as the basic postures we should be able to get into to simply move through our daily lives well.

### The Basic Assessment Positions (BAPs):

1. Squat
2. Crosslegged Sitting
3. Longsitting
4. Supine Hip/Knee Flexion
5. Hooklying Crossleg Hip Rotation
6. Shoulder Combined Motions
7. Prone Backbending
8. Neck Motions

Each position represents a certain level of flexibility that makes our normal activities a bit easier to do. They are meant as a general representation of your overall functional mobility minimums. Some people will need to work on their stretching to achieve these, and some will pass these quickly and need to set other goals.

And perhaps splits and full back bend bridges will be their benchmarks.

The basics won't change, however, as the fundamentals of how to stretch for further positions are already there. You'll simply have to do more and go further.

Back to our example of the Frogger, as you practice and perform the movement, you'll be engaging active and dynamic flexibility of the wrists, shoulders, and hips with each repetition.

The movement also serves as an assessment check for you, and is an example of a specific BAP. If you have trouble getting into the positions of a proper Frogger, then you are clued in to what areas of flexibility need work. Those are then your personal basics.

## **Basic Elements of Motor Control**

The smooth performance of a skill means steady and obvious control though every inch of your movement. This is what we mean with the GMB mantra of “Make it Pretty.” It's not about how you look at the beach, but how graceful and strong you are in your movement skills. You simply look good and everyone can tell.

The basics, then, include the fundamental strength and flexibility for the movement, as well as the coordination and balance to be graceful and controlled through the various iterations of the skill.

This means that you can enter and exit the movement in different ways and still have control.

There are some general fundamentals here, including basic balance skills like standing on one leg with your eyes closed for at least 10 seconds without falling over.

Or coordination and body awareness training, such as moving your arms and legs in different patterns smoothly, or various hand/foot and eye coordination patterns.

But beyond these general dexterity concerns, your primary training for body control will relate specifically to what you are most interested in performing. In our example of the Frogger, your body control basics are being able to control entering the move from different directions, tempos, and intentions.

Can you do it slowly, fast, from the side, in reverse, and look pretty at the same time?

That's good body control.

## Figuring Out What Your Basics Are

It'd be easy to list out a series of exercises, with a number of repetitions or set times to hold, and call those the GMB Fundamentals. It's comforting to have a specific list that you can just put a check next to and move on.

But that's not what we are going for.

We encourage critical thinking and understanding of what you are doing so you can make good choices in your own program, and can adjust as needed for your personal situation. Are you just going to go ahead and walk around on your hands and knees without thinking, or are you going to be able to gain maximum benefit from that 15 minutes that you're doing it?

If not, then you might as well be on a treadmill watching TV, right?

Know what your basics are, for what you're trying to do. The real basics are always the underlying structure that tie together the movements you perform, and the way you do them in order to achieve your goals.

No one can tell you what *\*your\** basics are. Get to know your strengths and weaknesses, and work on the basics that *\*you\** need to.



## CHAPTER TWO: MOVING PAST PHYSICAL BARRIERS (INCLUDING A FULL PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT)

### Getting Started with a New Exercise Program

There are many challenges you can expect to encounter when starting a new exercise program. In this chapter, I'll explain the three most common challenges you'll face and how to handle them.

If you're just starting a new program, you'll have to be prepared for soreness from muscles unaccustomed to the work, and also for the frustration from how fatigued and weak you'll feel in this new experience. It's just the way it goes.

If it were so easy, then you wouldn't need to do it.

Muscle soreness and feeling tired sooner than you'd like are normal parts of this whole process. You should expect it, but you can also expect to get through it if you keep on trucking and don't quit.

But besides the usual difficulties with starting training, there are some issues that can stop you before you even get a real chance to start.

### **Other Reasons It's Tough to Get Started**

Our method of training emphasizes learning to move your body well through various bodyweight skills, in which you go through positions such as on your hands, squatting, and kneeling.

And for quite a lot of people these are very difficult, if not impossible, to do in the beginning.

This isn't a reason to give up, but it does require some awareness of potential issues, along with smart planning to overcome and move on from them.

Below, I'll describe some of the most common issues I see in new clients.

Then, I'll share how to figure out what particular weaknesses may be holding you back or may get in your way if you don't address them.

Finally, I'll give you my recommendations for addressing these issues head on, without slowing down your progress.

Let's get you set up for success.

## The Most Common Physical Barriers to Performing Exercises

I've been lucky to work with a big variety of different clients and students over the years, and during this time I've noticed particular patterns in the way people move.

I can tell almost immediately what a person needs to work on when I see them try out a few simple movements.

I then ask them what they do for a living and a little bit about their physical activity background, and then their limitations and particular issues tend to make a lot of sense.



## **Barrier #1 - Weakness in the Wrists and Hands**

First, most people don't spend a lot of time bearing weight through their hands - or even using their hands and wrists for more than pecking away at a computer. As such, their wrists and fingers are not used to the pressure of performing skills like handstands, cartwheels, and crawling.

This is a key area that needs to be worked on right away because all the repetitions and holding needed to improve your hand balance performance can be murder on the wrists if you aren't ready for it.

Conversely, if you have consistent wrist pain, you won't be able to endure the practice time needed to get better at those skills.

Wrist and hand stiffness and pain can stop you right in your tracks in bodyweight training. Solving and preventing these issues are keys to achieving success in your practice.



## **Barrier #2 - Tightness in the Shoulders**

Another consequence of having less physically active jobs nowadays is that most of the movement in our upper body occurs at not much higher than shoulder to head height. Unless we actively move into a bigger range of motion, our shoulder muscles and joints will stiffen and limit movement to just the motions we actually use daily.

In Japan there is a term we use that translates to “40 year old shoulder,” also called “frozen shoulder” in the west.

It’s where the shoulders tighten up so much that people can’t reach up above their head. Usually it happens so gradually that people don’t notice it until that rare occasion when they stretch their arms up more than usual!

It’s so common here that it seems people expect it to happen. Well it’s not normal, and addressing this issue is vital to getting the most out of a training program (or out of life, for that matter).



### **Barrier #3 - Restricted Mobility in the Hips and Back**

There's a lot of alarmist news about how sitting will literally kill you. LITERALLY.

While it's probably not as immediately life threatening as all that - [we talk about this more in this podcast](#) - sitting for long periods is not the best thing in the world for you.

Your hips and back are particularly affected, as they are forced into the poor positioning of sitting in a chair all day. The “chair shaped posture” is a real thing, with hips and back tight and weakened from being flexed and rounded.

We adapt to our environment and activities, which is both the best and the worst thing about our bodies.

Most articles and advice out there - and they're great - encourage us to go into the complete opposite pattern. Standing with legs straight, hips forward, arms up, and bending back.

Again, it's a great idea, and you would get a lot of benefit from doing this simple stretch throughout the day. Yet it's better to address specifically what's going on with your body and what you need. It's more efficient that way and I think we can all agree that we should try and get the most out of the time we can make for our training.

You may already know what your weak spots are, especially if you've been working on some of the skills we teach.

Again, what I've talked about above are very common issues and even working on these areas in a general way will be very helpful. But now I want to show you a way to find out what in particular *\*you\** need to work on to make the most out of *\*your\** time. And one of the great things about this is that the moves are simple, intuitive, and you can get started on it right away.

## How to Assess Your Limitations So You Can Move Beyond Them

In addition to GMB, I run a gym where I live in Osaka, Japan. When my new clients come in I make sure to take them through an assessment process so that I can tailor our programs to their needs. Most only need a few adjustments, some need a lot, but all benefit from taking the time to find out how to best get them started.

I've chosen four basic moves here from my client intake analysis to share with you all here. This assessment is not complex at first glance, but it allows you to see quite a few things right away if you know just what you're looking for. I'll take you through it step-by-step and you can use it for yourself before beginning any training program.



## My 4-Step Assessment for New Trainees

This is NOT your typical “let’s see how many push-ups you can do in a minute” sort of assessment.

I see that kind of thing quite a bit at gyms around here, and browsing online, and while it’s great for looking at your stamina and endurance, it’s not the best for assessing form or figuring out what’s preventing you from performing exercises safely.

Doing as many burpees as you can in a minute is just going to lead to bad form.

The movements I’ll share here will show baseline levels of flexibility, coordination, and body awareness for the skills we teach, and will give you a good idea of what needs to happen for you to get better.

Click here to see how I take my clients through this assessment:

★ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4U-sPKDbXm8>

I'll describe each exercise/hold in detail, and how each one tells you about your body's makeup, and what may hold you back if you don't take care of it as soon as possible.

I recommend you take some video of yourself performing each of these assessment exercises, as that will allow you to look back and see your progress.

It's quite common for people to not really know what's going on in their bodies, especially if they're fairly new to exercise. So, taking some video can give you some visual feedback and help you understand what needs to change.

### **Assessment Exercise #1 - The Squat**

The squat may seem like a simple move, but it can tell you a lot about your current level of performance.

1. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, turned slightly outward.
2. Squat down as low as possible while maintaining a relatively flat back.
3. Keep your neck neutral, avoiding jutting the chin forward.

Don't worry if you can't squat down very low. It's very common for people to have limited mobility in the squat, and that's totally fine. This is about seeing where you are right now, not about trying to reach a certain level.

Below, I'll describe what you can do to address any issues you may have with the squat. For now, just take note of your current position.



To take the squat further, you can practice the frogger jump, as I demonstrate in the video. This will give you an even better idea of your current level of mobility.

## **Assessment Exercise #2 - Seiza (Sitting on Heels)**

This is another position that is quite difficult for most people living in the Western world.

Since I live in Japan, I don't see many locals with this particular issue (it's common for people in Japan to rest in this position throughout the day), but if you live elsewhere, you may have difficulty sitting comfortably in this position.

1. Sit up on your knees with the tops of your feet on the floor.
2. Then, lower your butt as close to your ankles as possible.

Ideally, your butt will be touching your heels, your back will be nice and straight, and this will be comfortable for you. If it's uncomfortable, or if you are unable to bring your butt all the way to your heels, don't worry.

## **Assessment Exercise #3 - "A" Position**

If you've ever done a bit of yoga, this position may make you think of downward facing dog. Since we're not using this as a stretch, but rather, as an assessment, just think of it as the "A" position for now.

1. Start on your hands and knees, with your hands directly beneath your shoulders and your knees directly beneath your hips.

2. Push your hands and feet into the floor, raising your hips up as high as possible.
3. Bring your heels as close to the floor as possible (ideally they should be flat on the ground).

If you have flexibility issues in your hamstrings, hips, lower back, or shoulders, those issues will show up loud and clear in this hold. That's why I love using this particular position, as it gives me a quick and clear look at what's going on with a person's flexibility in a wholistic way.

#### **Assessment Exercise #4 - Bear Walk**

The bear walk is a great move that shows me how your flexibility, strength, and coordination work together.

1. Begin in the "A" position.
2. Move your right arm and left foot forward, maintaining the "A" position as best as possible, then do the same with your left arm and right foot.
3. Keep your arms and legs straight throughout the movement.

Often, people will have trouble coordinating their opposite limbs to move at the same time, while maintaining the right position. Take note of how well you are able to move in this way.

This is a great move to video and look at each month or so to see how you are improving in your practice.



## How to Make Corrections Based on the Assessment

Now that you've read through some of the most common issues people face, and have gone through the four assessment exercises I use with my clients, you should have a good sense of where you're starting from.

### **Strengthening Your Wrists**

In the "A" position and bear walk, you're placing a fair amount of pressure on your wrists, though not as much as in a handstand and other handbalancing exercises. If you are experiencing wrist pain or tightness already then it's a clear sign that you need to work on this right away before it turns into a major issue.

We've provided a [thorough wrist warm-up here](#), which should be done prior to any session where you will spend a significant time on your hands, from crawling to cartwheels to handstands.

Take the time to warm up correctly and you'll be saving yourself from grief later.

If you know you already have problems that go beyond just needing a proper warm-up, then you'll have to be even more vigilant about warming up and doing more to strengthen and stretch your wrists.

In [this article](#), we share complete programming for extra warm-up and rehabilitation using two fundamental positions (flexion and extension).

Take your time and be patient with wrist stretching and strengthening, as it can take quite a while before your hands and wrists get adjusted to the work. But if you work on this sooner rather than later, you'll be preparing yourself much better for the road ahead in learning bodyweight skills.

## **Improving Your Shoulder Mobility**

As we've talked about earlier, decreased shoulder flexibility can turn into a big problem when people don't have the chance to stretch out to their full range of motion. It's not just one day that does it, but day after day of following the same routine and never opening up your shoulders will eventually lead to stiffness.

Just as with the wrists, the "A" position and bear walks will give you a good test of your shoulder strength and mobility. The proper positioning and movement in these exercises gives us a lot of information on the shoulder.

In the “A” position, you’ll notice that the hips should be up high and the chest brought down to form the “A.” You simply can’t do this properly with tight shoulders.

The same is true with the bear walk, only now you’ll be adding the components of shoulder strength and motor coordination, along with shoulder flexibility. If you feel fatigue in the shoulders in trying to keep the proper positioning and movement, then you are already aware of the muscles working hard with these moves.

We presented [a comprehensive shoulder article](#) which addresses all these concerns. From flexibility to motor control, there are a great variety of exercises and concepts you can use to help bring your shoulders up to par.

## **Loosening Up Your Hips**

All of the four assessment exercises bring your lower body flexibility into play, from going into a deeper squat to sitting on your heels and stretching out your hamstrings in the “A” position and bear walk.

Tightness here is nearly universal for people just getting into exercise. We just don’t have many opportunities for working on full hip mobility in all the different angles during the course of our regular day.

- ★ Our [detailed post on the hips](#) gives you a better look at what’s involved with the various muscles, along with stretching, strength, and motor control exercise examples.
- ★ This [other article](#) shows a different sequencing that may help you more in the different rotational angles at the hips.

- ★ And finally, if you feel that your hamstrings are the primary villain holding you up, here's a post devoted entirely to [opening your hamstring flexibility](#).

## Stretching Out Your Back

These four assessment exercises will also give you good feedback on how your spine is moving.

In the squat, keeping an upright posture means having a good ability to bend backwards in the mid back and let your hips roll under at your low back. Sitting on your heels positions your pelvis in a way that supports backward bending at the low back, and finally the "A" position and bear walk also look at backward bending, which is essentially what's happening when you want to maintain a flat line in the spine when bending forward at the hips.

The spine is a very complicated structure and we go into a good amount of detail, along with different movement sequences, [in this comprehensive post](#).

Give the movements there a shot and find what you need to do to keep your back healthy, mobile, and strong. It's not too much able to perform all things we are asking of it in our training and the rest of our daily lives.

## Staying Consistent and Injury Free With a New Training Program

Getting motivated and starting up an exercise program is hard enough.

We don't need to mix in joint and muscle strain and sprains to make it even more difficult! Once you decide to start and actually get going with a new training program, the last thing you want is to be stopped in your tracks by injuries.

And even barring any injuries, it's natural to get frustrated because it feels like you simply can't get your body to move into the positions and alignments that you want.

I've presented the most common issues, along with sharing my way of looking at where people are starting from and how to adjust their program to address these concerns. And while we are working on these issues I still have them practicing and training hard with what they can do.

You don't need to stop everything else while you work on your weaknesses. Just focus on what you can do and work with what you have.

If you keep waiting until everything is perfect, then you'll never start. Trust me, I've been there before.



## CHAPTER THREE: STRENGTH TRAINING BASICS

### 4 Kinds of Strength and 3 Rules to Develop Them

There are two common reasons why people begin an exercise program:

1. To look better (fat loss)
2. To improve their overall function (strength building)

In a [previous article](#), we covered what needs to be done to get the “six pack”, so in this chapter I’ll talk about building strength - what it is, how to get it, and what to do with it.

Strength in and of itself doesn't mean a lot. It can mean a lot of different things to various people. The question then is what are you building strength *for*? How much strength do you need to accomplish what you want and need in your daily life? And what are the most effective and efficient ways to build that level of strength?



Below, we'll explain the four kinds of strength and three rules for building them, along with links to resources to help you do it.

## Not All Strength is the Same - the 4 Types of Strength

Strength can be split into several different forms, and the type of strength training you will want to do depends on what kind of strength best suits your needs.

We all have our own preferences and goals, and none of the types of strength described here is superior to the others. And it's not like working on one means you are excluding all the others, just that for any program one will be emphasized more than the others to make the most efficient gains.

You certainly don't need to pick just one type of strength to work on forever. I recommend prioritizing a program for a period of time and cycling different training regimens throughout your year.

In this post I describe four kinds of strength:

- ★ Absolute Strength
- ★ Relative Strength
- ★ Power (AKA Speed Strength)
- ★ Strength Endurance

Below, I'll explain what each of these types of strength are, and what they'll mean to you.

## **Absolute Strength**

Absolute Strength is the maximum force your musculature can exert for a particular action, whether it's a press, a squat, or a pull.

Usually this type of strength is measured in terms of total weight lifted. The sport of powerlifting is a good example of athletes training for absolute strength. For them, everything is geared towards improving their 1RM (1 Rep Max) in three lifts - the squat, bench press, and deadlift.

The application of absolute strength for most of us comes when you need to pick up something heavy, or move it out of the way one time. The ability to lift your couch up so you can clean behind it, pull a heavy gate with a rusted hinge, and push a big boulder that's in your path require a higher degree of absolute strength.

If you don't have enough, then you simply wouldn't be able to perform those actions.

In general, training for this involves lifting weights at 85%+ of the maximal weight you can lift for several sets of a few repetitions.

## **Relative Strength**

Relative strength concerns your maximum effort in relation to your bodyweight.

A 225-pound person that can push 250 pounds overhead is weaker in this respect than a 175-pound person who can push 210 pounds overhead, even though lifting 40 pounds more. This is often called “pound for pound” strength.

Because it is connected with your bodyweight, this classification favors people that are of lower bodyweight. Olympic weightlifting is an example here, because the weight of the competitors is considered in tiebreakers. If two lifters end up lifting the same amount of weight, the winner is the one who weighs less.

Also, gymnasts and other performers often elicit wonder from the crowd with their various strength skills - “Wow they are strong!” We think of how difficult it would be for us to do the same moves. They are able to move their usually quite small bodies around with control and ease, whereas an untrained person couldn't even get started. This is an illustration of their high relative strength.

With respect to this type of strength, it isn't necessarily trained for specifically other than keeping your weight in check while you continue to build your strength.

## **Power (AKA Speed Strength)**

Power considers how quickly you can use your strength.

From a technical, physics standpoint, power is the rate of doing *\*work\** (defined as force *\*x\** distance). Hurling a heavy ball a short distance is not as powerful as throwing a lighter ball twice as far. And lifting the same barbell weight but taking longer to do it indicates less power.

But we don't need to be this technical to think of power in our daily lives. In our style of training, increased power is usually measured by how fast we can move our body around. For instance, we can see how powerful we are by how high or far we can jump. Another example comes from fighting sports, where power is measured by how hard you can punch and kick.

You are trying to deliver a great amount of force to your target, and may have a high level of strength, but if you are too slow, you'll lack power.

The specifics of training for power usually involve lighter forces in high speed movements for several repetitions with long rest periods. This encourages explosive performance with low fatigue.

## **Strength Endurance**

Strength Endurance is the ability to perform a near maximal level of strength repeatedly over a period of time. Defined by Mel Siff in the classic text "Supertraining,"

"Strength endurance is the specific form of strength displayed in activities which require a relatively long duration of muscle tension with minimal decrease in efficiency."

Exercises such as hill running or pushing/pulling a sled will work this kind of strength. The movements are difficult and require a significant amount of strength that need to be sustained over time to get the work done. Another good example in the bodyweight world is the gymnast performing ring strength skills one right after another in a routine.

We see this in daily life when we have to do the dreaded task of moving furniture up and down stairs or carrying very heavy boxes.

The next time one of your friend's ropes you into helping them move, you can take comfort in knowing that you'll be demonstrating your strength endurance! (But maybe make them buy you a couple beers at least.)

Training for strength endurance is pretty darn uncomfortable and has you working at high levels of force with as little rest as possible. Too little rest and you'll burn out, too much rest and you won't get the effects desired.

## The 3 Rules for Developing Strength

In the beginning, arguably, the majority of your training time should be spent on increasing your strength. If your current exercise level is occasionally taking the stairs to your favorite restaurant on the second floor, you should definitely focus on strength training.

And in fact, if you are weak, strength will come relatively easy in the beginning once you start to consistently do anything.

I had a client who had been very sedentary for most of her life, but then decided to take up martial arts classes. It was something that she had always wanted to do and she enjoyed the challenge. After a few months of simply attending classes as often as possible, she said she had gained 12 pounds.



She was likely “skinny fat” before, which basically means a person that is outwardly thin but with very little muscle on a frame of bone and fat. When she began participating in regular strenuous activity with martial arts drills and exercises, she gained muscle and strength at a pace that would make most long term exercisers pretty jealous.

It's not that martial arts classes are the most efficient way to gain strength and muscle; it was simply because she had a starting point of significant weakness.

Yes, randomly increasing regular activity levels may be an okay way to improve your strength, but it certainly isn't the most efficient.

The most efficient ways to improve strength follow certain rules:

### **Rule #1 - The Intensity Level Must Be Sufficient**

The first rule is that you have to hit a certain threshold of exertion. It's not enough to just move your body around for 30 minutes; rather, your activity has to reach a certain level of difficulty.

Simply walking isn't going to build strength unless you've been bedridden for several weeks. You have to do more than what you usually do in your daily life.

## **Rule #2 - Your Practice Must Be Regular**

Next, you'll need to be consistent so that your body adapts and increases strength in response to the stimulation.

You could workout at a sufficient intensity, but that won't do you any good if those sessions are a few weeks apart!

## **Rule #3 - There Must be Progressive Overload**

Finally, as you keep training regularly, you will adapt and get stronger, so your workouts have to get progressively more difficult. That ample amount of resistance when you first started will soon become too easy and will no longer be enough to induce any improvements in strength.

If you want to keep getting stronger, then your workouts will never get easier.

There are hundreds of ways to make different programs with as many different philosophies of training, but they all have to obey the above three rules if you want to build strength.

## How to Start Building Strength as a Beginner

In most weight training programs, beginners can progressively add weight to an exercise at nearly every session.

There is quick progress in the beginning of any weight lifting program due to simply getting used to the new movements. This neurological gain in strength is best described as learning the skill of the movement pattern and getting better at it, whether it's pushing a barbell overhead or swinging a kettlebell.

Strength is most definitely a skill.

There's nothing wrong with lifting weights, but it's not the only way to gain strength. As mentioned above, as long as you follow the three rules of strength development, you can do any kind of program you enjoy.

For bodyweight style training, you can start with the fundamental exercises, such as push-ups, pull-ups, hollow body holds, and squats.

## Basic Exercises to Help You Get Started

These four basic exercises can take you from scratch to a very good level of strength without needing to touch any kind of weight.

Even if you find yourself lacking the strength to perform a full repetition of the standard exercises, there are various modifications you can use so that you can perform them in a different way. For instance:



- ★ For push-ups, you can do them on your knees, and if that is too difficult you can push off of a table, countertop, or even the wall in front of you, then work your way down to the floor as you get stronger.
- ★ For pull-ups, you can use bands, or a tall box to take some weight off of your arms.
- ★ In the hollow body hold, you would bend your knees and bring your arms to your sides and, if necessary, even add a cushion behind your upper back for support.
- ★ For squats, you can hold on to support and use your hands to help you up.

## Progressions to Help You Go Further

Then as you get stronger when the regular exercises get too easy and begin to turn into endurance exercises, you can again use different variations to make the exercises hard enough to stimulate continued strength gains.

Here are some examples of more advanced variations:

- ★ Push-ups can be made harder by elevating your feet this time instead of your hands.
- ★ Pull-ups can turn into one hand pull-up variations or other pulling type exercises such as the front lever and all of its variations.

- ★ Hollow body holds can evolve into planks, front levers, human flags and so on with more difficult leverage holds.
- ★ Squats can lead to pistols.

The permutations are nearly endless - that's the beauty and appeal of bodyweight only training.

You can perform exercises that require nothing more than the space to do them in, or use equipment such as the rings, parallettes, monkey bars, etc. to increase your strength throughout your training life.

### After You've Built a Foundation of Strength...

Building strength is a great place to start working on your physical fitness and health, but it's not something you have to emphasize forever.

As you can see, there are several types of strength, and each one has a wider application than just getting stronger for the sake of getting stronger. For some people, that's all they'll want to do, and that's fine, but there are other choices as you continue in your training.

For the majority of us, at a certain point, strength maintenance will be far more important than strength development.

When you reach that point - and there are ways to gauge your progress in these areas - you can lower the volume and intensity of your training, doing just enough to maintain your strength level. And you can begin to fill your training time with other skills and movement practices that will help you to hold on to the strength you've built.

This doesn't mean that you won't improve strength any longer, but it's not your main objective and the improved strength will be just a pleasant side effect of working towards your primary goals.

When you let go of the thought that you have to do one thing forever, or conversely, everything at once, you will have a different view of what exercise and fitness can do for you.

It can be an exciting process full of new challenges instead of drudgery you make yourself perform because “it's good for you.”

## CHAPTER FOUR: BODY CONTROL FUNDAMENTALS

### What is Motor Control and How Can You Improve It?

I first heard the term “motor moron” from one of my professors in physical therapy school.

He was referring to some patients that seemed to lack the basic understanding of how to move their bodies, no matter how much demonstration and detailed instructions we give.

He had stories of patients repeatedly confusing left and right limbs, or an inability to do simple one-step movements like tilting the pelvis forward and back, or not being able to do the same three movements in a row. I’m sure we all know at least a couple of people like this, or even feel that way ourselves for certain things.

“Klutzy,” “clumsy,” “two left feet” – the endless stream of terms for people like this just demonstrates how widespread this phenomenon is.

In his accounts of these “motor morons,” my professor also seemed to imply that this was a condition that wouldn’t ever change.

I didn’t believe that then, and I don’t believe it now.

Over the last 16 years of clinical practice, I’ve been lucky enough to see tens of thousands of patients, and yes there were many that had difficulty moving the way I wanted them to move.

But with time, and work, and patience, we figured it out.

Perhaps they wouldn't be winning any dance competitions any time soon, but they improved. And it's no surprise they did, as nearly everything we do can be changed with consistent and mindful practice. No, not everything, but a lot more than we think.

In this chapter, I'll go over what body control is all about, the various ways to think about it, how to develop it, and a good process to start working on it.

## What is Motor Control?

Motor Control is a technical term concerning exactly how our bodies move to perform a particular task or motor skill.

It involves the interaction of the sensations within the body and outside of it, and our initiation and continuation of a movement based on the feedback we get from these sensations. There's a world of research and science exploring the details and specifics of what's happening when we learn and perform physical activities.

But we needn't be so technical to understand to some degree what good coordination and body control means and looks like.

We all intuitively sense when someone seems more "put together" than others in the way they move.

It's not only an athlete performing well that catches our attention, but a woman on the street that walks with a graceful gait, or a waiter that seems to move without wasted motion. And perhaps it's not something

we consciously think about at the time, but just a sense of knowing when a person is moving well.

## **Motor Control is an Individualized Process**

There are various ways to talk about control and coordination, including hand-eye and leg-eye coordination when manipulating objects, such as throwing, juggling, and using implements like baseball bats, tennis rackets, and golf clubs as extensions of our extremities.

But we'll limit this discussion to how we have control within ourselves and in moving our body through space.

Body control at its simplest is the ability to perform an action with precision and accuracy, along with a sensation of ease, with no wasted energy.

That's a simple definition for quite a difficult thing to execute!

More specifically, with a good level of motor control, you are able to control your joints and limbs in distinct actions to create your desired movement pattern. Whether it's something vigorous and powerful like a twisting backflip, or precise and coordinated like a cartwheel on a slack line, you are demonstrating an adeptness in that skill.

Yet the control I'm talking about isn't about being rigid and stiff from one step of a move to the next. Nor is it conforming to another person's standard of what a move "should look like."



If you can perform a skill smoothly with as little tension as possible for the task at hand, then you've got it.

You've developed and exhibited good body control.

Walking is a good example. It's a generalized motor pattern that is a common human function.

But we also all have individual ways of walking from habits likely started when we were children, followed by other patterns developed when we get older from injuries, cultural and personal affectations, and other random inputs.

So we have a pretty simple motion, one foot in front of the other with the alternate upper limb swinging at the same time, but with likely billions of small permutations that make a gait pattern unique to an individual. And some people's walking patterns are so distinctive you can pick them out of a crowd just by their gait.

Likewise, dancers can all perform the same steps in the choreography and be synchronized, but the best ones don't all look the same.

Their control is manifest in their individuality as well as the technicality of their movement.

These distinctions indicate how we can all put our personal spin on different skills.

This is a good illustration of what body control means to me. It's not a specific regimented concept, but instead, the ability to perform movement well and still have our personal stamp on the action.

## The Characteristics of Motor Control

There are several disciplines that devote a large portion of their method to body awareness, including Hatha Yoga, Feldenkrais, martial arts, and dance.

And, of course, calisthenics and gymnastics fit in to that category as well, since bodyweight skills necessarily involve a great deal of body awareness.

What the best of them have in common isn't just a consistent performance of the chosen activity, but also the incorporation of a mindful and thoughtful process.

Going through the motions isn't helpful for most things, and it's especially harmful when working toward improving control over your own body.



Good movement control has these qualities in common:

- ★ Adequate Strength
- ★ Adequate Flexibility/Mobility
- ★ Adequate Coordination of Strength and Flexibility

The first two are very important.

If you aren't strong enough to perform an exercise, or can't get your body into the correct positions for the skill, then no amount of coordination will make up for those deficits.

You have to make sure these are in order before you can do anything else.

As for the coordination of strength and flexibility, this is the quality that is borne out of the mindful practice I mentioned. Lots of consistent, thoughtful repetition is the key to success here.



## Body Control in Action

In prior posts on body areas, such as the shoulders and hips, I've approached motor control exercise as specific to the joints in question.

Moving the hips and shoulders in various rotations and angles, under load and unweighted, the exercises are essentially ways of testing your ability to maintain stability in that area while the rest of your body moves, or to move the area itself in a variety of challenging actions.

Click here to watch a demo video on exploratory hip exercises for building motor control:

★ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zc6AbQXPICU>



Click here to watch a demo video on motor control exercises for the shoulders:

★ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o47GYJtu-C0>

The trick with this approach is being inventive.

The videos above are simply examples of some good ideas to play with. Motor control work isn't limited to what I had demonstrated, rather it is only limited by your own creative constraints.

### 3 Ways to Improve Motor Control

The most direct way to improve body control is to perform the movement in mind, over and over again, until you improve. It's pretty obvious if you want to get better at something, you have to practice again and again, and when you think you've practiced enough, practice some more.

It's laborious and can be very frustrating, but it does work.

For those people my professor called "motor morons," however, this repetitive method likely won't yield the best results.

Yelling at a person while demonstrating the same movement over and over again isn't good therapy and it's not good coaching.

Instead, you can devise modifications of the movements and work through them to find what fits best for your body and learning style. If you've found the standard repetitive method of learning physical skills hasn't worked for you, you'll benefit from incorporating any of the following variations into your routine.

These variations change the load, sensations, and directions in the movements in various ways.

These changes are often a stimulus for that eureka moment when the gears click into place and you finally start to "get" the move.

### **Motor Control Method #1 – Changing the Position and Load**

This method is very common in physical therapy and other movement coaching, and basically involves changing the planes of motion.

So, if the chosen movement is upright, then you can switch to lying down.

Whether this means shifting to your side, back, or front, you'll be changing the way gravity is affecting you. With different resistance, the movement quality also changes, and the sensations of moving within and out of your body give you a different type of feedback than you're used to.

Removing weight from the actions by either lying down or being on your side decreases load, and that may make movements freer and less restricted.

It's easy to see that lifting your hands over head is less difficult while lying on your back, than it is standing up. Hip and lower body movements in particular are much easier to perform with a decreased load. In this way, the stress of doing the movement is lessened, which improves your concentration and performance.

You can also go the other way and add weight or resistance to the chosen actions.

Sometimes adding load improves muscle contraction, and the sensation of having something to “push against” stimulates the nervous system in a new way.

## **Motor Control Method #2 – Incorporating Passive Motion**

Another nice trick is finding a way to take yourself through the movements passively.

Sometimes we can get in our own way so much, that active movement just won't take you there. Perhaps there is pain, or so much tension that there is no way to move in the way you'd like.

Using handles and pulleys, dowels and bands are classic ways to help you move your extremities passively.

For more complex moves, you'll have to cut them up into components and work them one at a time.

For example, you could work hip movements separate from spinal motions and then move on to shoulder rotations on your side. Imagination and visualization is key in this approach since you aren't performing the entire move.

Visualizing yourself performing while moving in component parts will help integrate the movement when you go back to trying the whole movement again.

### **Motor Control Method #3 – Changing the Pattern**

One more strategy is to change up the pattern itself.

You can reverse directions, for example, by moving your shoulder before your leg if you usually move your leg first.

After so much practicing and concentration on a movement pattern we can get stuck in a rut and make the same mistakes over and over again. In this case, we need to find a way to make new mistakes. Completely dissociate yourself from a prescribed order and shake yourself out a bad groove.

Reverse directions, do the movement backward, and do it so “wrong” that it doesn't even look close to what you were doing before. Break yourself out of habit and then go back to it again.

I bet you'll notice quite a big difference.

## You CAN Learn to Control Your Body

Motor control and coordination is trainable just like everything else.

Exposing yourself to different stimulus, exploring new patterns, and figuring out what idiosyncrasies within a movement work best for you are the best ways to develop your skills practice.

There will always be people that appear “naturally” strong and adept at learning and performing complex skills, and perhaps these higher levels are not reachable to some people, but you can certainly reach a higher level with adaptable movement training, than you could if you choose not to practice and learn at all.

The best practices start with a goal in one hand and a thoughtful process in the other. Look through the examples and modifications above, choose your skill and get to work.

You may have been labeled a “motor moron” by someone else, but don’t let yourself be limited by someone else’s bias.

## INTRODUCTION

This Getting Started Guide was designed to help you understand your current abilities, and assess your most pressing needs. We've given you the tools to decide where to begin your efforts - with strength, flexibility, and/or motor control - and recommendations for getting started.



Obviously, there's a lot we haven't covered in this guide, but these basics will serve you well for education and exploration of where you need the most help in a new training program.

When you're ready for more, our new program, Elements, is designed to help you begin working on strength, flexibility, and *motor control* in a comprehensive package. Elements is designed as a "start from scratch" program that gradually guides you from where you are at to the achievement of very good movement fundamentals.

Thank you. We hope to see you soon!

The GMB Team

Ryan, Jarlo, Andy, Amber, Rachel, Clayton, and Jason