

STYLE

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Top Boy THE RISE AND RISE OF Barry Keoghan

Party
special

HOW TO
DANCE, DRESS
— AND LEAVE
(WITH
BEYONCÉ, VICTORIA
BECKHAM
AND KATE MOSS)



HELP!

I have 'gymxiety'

Over a quarter of women find going to the gym intimidating, including **Emma Rowley**. Could one of the new more 'friendly' gyms entice her back?



Are you gymtimidated? For me the moment came when I caught myself putting on a full face of make-up for an early morning gym class where everyone, in my mind, looked perfect. Frustrated, I decided it was not for me and never went back.

For Kate, 42, it was the cliqueness at the gym near where she worked in her new job in finance — “like a club I felt like I wasn’t really meant to be part of. There were loads of crop tops.” Say no more. For others it’s the bro culture of male-heavy gyms and all that grunting over the weights that puts them off.

It seems few of us are invulnerable to “gymxiety” — anxiety at the prospect of a gym trip (other than the actual hassle of having to exercise).

The number of gyms and fitness centres in the UK more than doubled between 2011 and 2020, and after a dip has now passed pre-pandemic figures, according to Statista. But as the gym scene has blossomed, encompassing everything from chic boutiques to high street superchains, for many the boom simply offered more venues in which to feel uncomfortable: one study found that 28 per cent of women feel anxious in a gym environment.

Even if we make it there, most of us have our limits. Use the nearby outdoor gym in the glorious sun? Not after I tried the parallel bars during lockdown and swung as if on a hinge, bruising my nose. Anything in competitive groups? Not after being yelled at by a former rugby player for not jumping fast enough over a box (would vomiting help?). Return to the one where would-be “fitfluencers” film themselves and any bystanders for their socials? No, no and no.

Understandably whether you meet a perceived fitness standard is a big obstacle for some. When the newbie gymgoer Laura, 41, joined a famous group-training gym she found the instructor, initially at least, “sympathetic to the fact that I was so bad. A couple of months in I was still by far the worst in the class and needing special attention.” She sensed her trainer’s frustration growing, which she shared: “There are times when I just hated it so much that it actually made me cry in the middle of a routine.”

Some in the industry are making efforts to change its ways. “I almost want people to think that they’re walking into their grandma’s living room, not a gym,” says the Angel Gyms co-founder Gabe Saclain, ushering me into his studio in Clapham, south London, which opened last year. With fringed lamps and velvet sofas, a wall covered in fabric roses, and painted dramatically dark (Farrow & Ball’s Inchyra Blue, a calming blue-grey), it’s a world away from the industrial ambience of commercial gyms, and deliberately so: here, and at its sister gym in Shoreditch, the mission is “to end gym anxiety”.

So all the trainers undertake mental health training, and there is additional support available from the studio's CBT therapist. As I am talked through the machines, I'm struck by the absence of mirrors, which — while great for checking form — can be a source of paralyzing self-consciousness (I once spent a treadmill session at Barry's hypnotised by my bottom, multiplied ad nauseam by wall-to-wall reflections). Rather than lock clients into never-ending membership, the goal, says the gym's co-founder and trainer Daniel Solbe, is for the studio's PTs to help them achieve "gym independence", meaning that they work up the confidence to go alone. He proudly tells me about one client, four weeks in, who finally took himself off to the leisure centre he'd been a member of for a year.

For many it's the weights corner where they fear to tread: a PureGym report found from its own research and new member feedback that the free weights cause "the most feelings of gymtimidation". One avoidant friend calls it "the big manly grunting-weights bit full of men looking at people as if they're trespassers". Which is why Lift Studio LDN, a female-focused weight-lifting gym in south London, sets out its stall with boobs painted on the kettlebells.

The co-founders, Danni Tabor and Mimi Bines, worked together at an upmarket gym before opening in 2021. "We found that we had clients who genuinely were intimidated by the weights section but really wanted to learn to lift and to get strong," Tabor says. "Also, techno music at 7am may get you pumped, but often that's quite intimidating to walk in to." Instead they went for a yoga studio feel with plants everywhere, and they host intimate classes where you work your way around weights stations with a notebook and pencil to track your progress. I manage some complicated manoeuvre wielding a bar on a diagonal to hit muscles I never knew I had. Again, the aim is to build independence via 16-week training blocks: "The idea is that



Left Weights and kettlebells at the female-focused Lift Studio LDN.

Below Angel Gyms in Clapham has an ambience that aims to end gym anxiety with soft lighting and fabric roses

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our members can walk into a commercial gym confident about their lifting."

They're not alone in trying to change the gym experience. In Glasgow the two sisters behind the female-only Sorella Strength (*sorella* means sister in Italian) say the most rewarding thing is seeing women "experience what training can do to help your mental health". In Manchester, Hero Training Clubs, which launched just before the pandemic as "the UK's first mental health gym", lets you book counselling and hypnotherapy services alongside boxing and Pilates classes; while in Norwich the fitness centre Perun Strength — specifically aimed at those who find gyms intimidating — opened in July with the promise to be "like a therapy room with weights", no staring allowed.

Of course even the friendliest of gyms can still have the potential to freak someone out. The psychologist Dr Helena Curran, who herself admits once signing up to a year-long gym membership and visiting only once, notes that a new regime can spike our feelings of vulnerability because we're acknowledging a desire for change, which, while affirming, can also bring up difficult feelings: "Essentially you're saying I want my body or the way I'm feeling to be different in some way." There can be an uncomfortable power dynamic too, even with the friendliest trainer: "You're putting everything — what goes into the body and what you do to your body — in their hands." As for the discomfort around being shown up somehow, it could even tap into some "evolutionary anxiety" about showing weakness.

For Laura, the last straw was when she found herself fretting about what knickers to wear under her new gym leggings — before

discovering that the truly hardcore skip them. "I thought, this is insane. I could just be working out at home wearing what I sleep in." Which she now does. But not everyone wants to exercise at home (or has neighbours who are fine about burpees on their ceiling).

On an individual level baby steps might be the answer. The TikTok creator Hope Zuckerbrow recently went viral with her "Cozy Cardio" sessions detailing her early morning at-home workout set-up of iced coffee, scented candles and soft pink mood lighting while she hits steps on her treadmill — then faced the inevitable backlash when she built her confidence up to face a public gym. "Cozy Cardio [CC] wasn't created for weight loss, it was created to help heal my relationship with exercise," she responded. "CC is the whole reason I go to the gym now."

As for the kit, there are moves there too: one independent label, Amazing Jane, has cleverly labelled itself as "designed to boost confidence" with its super high-waisted and sculpting leggings and no-cling vests.

So what about those still waiting for soft furnishings to trickle down to their high street gym chain? Instead of powering through, it's about prioritising whatever "leaves us calm and connected to ourselves and the environment" rather than ripped, Curran says. Which, on a practical level, I've found means preparing your workout in advance, even if that just means going at quieter times and, critically, admitting what works for you (for me, female-led classes have a less stressful vibe).

Finally I canvass my sister, who goes to a terrifyingly glamorous Manchester gym without a worry. What's her secret? "It has never really got to me," she muses. "Everyone is quite self-involved." Perhaps that's the answer: everyone is too bothered about what they're doing to worry about you. And if your instincts really do scream "run" (my reaction to a class where we were urged to "shake your bingo wings"), then do — and count it as cardio. ■

Angel Gym sessions from £60 (angelgyms.com); Lift Studio LDN from £85 a week for four sessions (liftstudiolondon.com)

