

The Smart

# EXERCISE

Plan for Teachers



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# The Smart Exercise Plan for Teachers

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## **Disclaimer**

The following exercise program is based on the author's experience. Although certificated in physical education, he is not a personal trainer or health professional. Be sure to see your doctor for a physical exam and clearance before beginning this or any form of exercise.

## **Key Terms**

**Repetitions (reps)** - The number of times you perform a given exercise.

**Sets** - A group of consecutive repetitions.

**Interval** - Short burst of exercise followed by a period of rest.

**Calisthenics** - A workout that uses bodyweight as resistance.

**Functional** - Exercises that help you perform everyday activities.

**Perceived Effort** - How hard you feel your body is working.

## Introduction

I've been working out consistently throughout my entire teaching career, and I'm convinced that it has made me a better, happier, and calmer teacher. In fact, it's been my secret to maintaining an even keel, regardless of the multitude of stressors that come with the profession.

The mental benefits alone - improved mood, less anxiety, and enhanced cognitive ability - are enough to make exercise a critical part every teacher's toolbox.

The physical benefits, as we'll see below, are off the charts. You probably know this already. But here's what you may not know: The dizzying number of exercise programs, equipment, videos, clothes, machines, and even most of the exercises available to choose from are *all* marketing. Every last one.

They're created to sell, especially in this day and age of social media influencers. They're created to keep the money flowing out of your account and into their coffers. And you don't need any of it. In fact, all that stuff equals the biggest obstacle to starting and sticking to your own regimen.

Over the course of many years - 35 and counting - of researching and trying out every form, style, and program of exercise under the sun, I slowly pared down what I was doing until it became just me and a few feet of floor space.

As a result, I've made more progress in the past few years than I have in the previous three decades - and it's not even close.

I stumbled upon a way to exercise that is simple, effective in every mental and physical health outcome, and doable for anyone - no matter your age, your current physical shape, or how much exercise you've done in the past. What you're about to learn is guaranteed to work for YOU, just as you are.

Before we begin, I also want you to know this: If you've tried and failed to get in shape in the past, it's not your fault. You've been tricked and marketed to so aggressively that it's difficult for even the most disciplined people to stick with one program long enough for it to become a lifestyle.

The key to your success is that we're going to remove it all. We're going to take away all the barriers, temptations, quick-fixes, fads, and style over substance to build a solid foundation of physical health and strength and mental calm.

My promise to you is that *The Smart Exercise Plan for Teachers* (SEPT), while it does take work, is far easier to stick with and get results than you can imagine.

Let's begin.

*Note:* Please read all sections of the guide, especially the beginning, intermediate, and advanced plans, even if they don't yet apply to you. They include important information and will provide context that will help you as you progress along your fitness journey.

## **Success Conditions**

### **Work Out at Home**

Exercising at home saves time. In fact, in the 20-30 minutes or more it takes to get ready and drive to and from the gym or exercise studio, you can have a workout completed.

While it's true that leaving home to exercise can be an initial motivator due to its novelty and initial excitement, eventually it becomes your biggest hurdle and the reason 90 percent of people quit going to the gym within

three months. With the SEPT program, on the other hand, you need only a few feet of space right there in your home. Your kitchen, living room, or porch or patio is all you need. Plus, you can dress however you like and no one will care.

## **Skip the Cardio**

Pure cardiovascular exercise like running, power walking, or cycling can burn calories and be good for the heart. The problem, however, is that it's time-consuming, often painful and boring, and takes extraordinary discipline to maintain over an extended period of time.

It can also shrink muscle mass. This is why people who focus solely on cardio often lose weight but not body-fat percentage. Most importantly, cardio exercise doesn't boast the bang for your buck and sheer number of benefits as strength training.

## **Focus on Getting Stronger**

Strength training - especially the high-rep, interval method I recommend - includes the heart-healthy benefits of cardiovascular exercise, like lowering blood pressure and boosting HDL cholesterol, but it also . . .

- improves the size and shape of your muscles
- strengthens bones
- alleviates back and body pains
- boosts metabolism
- improves posture and balance
- helps manage blood sugar and insulin levels
- burns calories during and after exercise
- enhances mood and energy levels
- improves sleep quality
- makes you look younger and healthier.

If there were a miracle pill to reverse age and extend life, consistently strengthening your muscles would be it. The best news, as you'll see, is that it's a lot more enjoyable and efficient than aerobic activity and thus far easier to make into a habit.

## **Train in Intervals**

Interval training is when you combine short periods of exercise with extended rest breaks. The greatest benefit to training this way is that it's remarkably efficient. You get the most return on your investment in the shortest amount of time.

Unlike sustained cardio activities, interval training raises and lowers your heart rate multiple times within a single exercise session, which uniquely improves lung capacity while lowering resting heart rate and blood pressure.

It's also a potent fat-burner and far easier to stay motivated than, for example, spending an hour on a treadmill. You need only to engage in several 30-second to one-minute bursts of exercise with two to five-minute breaks in between. And unlike long, continuous exercise, it keeps your body fresh and able to work out again the next day.

## **Leverage the Power of Calisthenics**

Calisthenics are by nature interval training. You do a set of push-ups, for example, then recover before your next set. This naturally raises and lowers your heart rate, which, as noted above, has shown to have maximum health and fat-burning benefits.

And because you're using your own bodyweight as resistance, and performing movements that are natural for the neuromuscular system, you have a lower risk of injury.



Calisthenics are also functional. Meaning, they help you perform everyday tasks like carrying groceries up stairs, raking leaves in your backyard, or teaching all day easier and with less effort.

Your strength and stamina improves day by day in a way that you can feel as you go about your normal activities.

### **Start with Just a Few Minutes**

Research has shown that you can enjoy many benefits of exercise in just a few minutes a day. However, the biggest reason to ease your way into a fitness program is motivation. So, if you're new to this form of exercise, haven't exercised in a while, or have never exercised, taking it slow is the way to go.

The key to your success is consistency. Thus, instead of making weight loss or improved health your goal, make it just to show up every day and the rest will take care of itself. This removes any pressure you put on yourself and makes the experience a lot more enjoyable.

### **Don't Make Big Goals**

"Go big or go home" is terrible advice when it comes to exercise. Audacious goals are demoralizing and rarely come to pass. If you get overly excited about your new life change, and start picturing yourself in a fresh sleek outfit and your jealous friends, then it's not going to last.

Sure, you may run that marathon, but you'll be back where you started in a month.

Process - the act of taking one day at a time and enjoying it - is a better way to look at achievement. Therefore, do not set goals other than just to show up and complete your workout. Even if you feel weaker than the day before,

or lousy and want nothing more than to sit on your sofa, as long as you get it done, you win. Forget about results and get on with your day.

And if you do blow off your workout, don't beat yourself up over it or wallow in your perceived failure. It's not a big deal. Shrug your shoulders and get back at it the next day.

You'll not only make great progress with a process mindset, but you'll also build unshakable confidence and mental toughness that will transfer to everything you do.

## **Work Out Every Day**

Sticking to an exercise program is *all* about making it a habit. People tend to commit to only 2-3 days per week in the belief that fewer sessions are easier to stick with.

But the truth is, fewer is harder because it never really becomes habitual. The longer you go between workouts, the heavier it hangs over your head, becoming something you dread rather than look forward to.

Working out every day, on the other hand, is the easiest way to make it part of your lifestyle and eventually something you look forward to. Things will come up, however. Life happens and so there will be the odd day here and there that things get so busy you can't exercise.

No big deal. Just don't make it two in a row.

## **Do Only Two Exercises**

I recommend only two (specific) exercises *in total* because they work or engage every muscle in your body and thus there isn't a compelling reason to do more.

Furthermore, limiting your program removes the mental anguish of deciding which exercises to choose from out of the hundreds available and wondering whether they're the right mix. In other words, it removes yet another common obstacle.

It also frees you to focus on mastering technique and pushing the envelope on your number of repetitions.

### **Push for More Reps**

To get stronger you must continually try to do more and more repetitions - and eventually sets. This doesn't mean that every workout has to be an improvement over the last.

You will experience plateaus when you might not feel like you're getting stronger for weeks.

It's the mindset that is most important. Not only will the idea of continuous improvement result in better and faster progress over time, but it's also a potent motivational tool. Seeing changes in your body and confidence level will only push you to keep going and enjoy further benefits.

### **Give 80-85 Percent Effort**

There is a misconception that you need to be in agony to get in shape and that people who exercise regularly must be super motivated. Neither is true. The key to making exercise a lifestyle is to feel good right from the start and increase difficulty as you get in better shape.

The way to ensure this is to give only 80-85 percent of your best effort. This is still substantial, however, considering the all-out effort you would give if trying to lift a car to save a family member.

Just focus on good form and solid effort and you will get stronger. Eventually, you'll discover that giving more will feel better, but it's always smart to leave some on the table, especially in the beginning.

I know this sounds somewhat contradictory from the advice above about continually pushing for more reps. But the truth is, you can do both. Have the mindset and goal of doing more and more reps, but don't let it become so all-consuming that you push too hard and burn yourself out. 80-85 percent is a good rule of thumb.

Remember, consistency is your primary goal. Just showing up is your win. Some days you'll feel great and other days not so much. This is normal. Work out anyway.

In time, you won't even think about how you feel. Exercise will be just something you do, like brushing your teeth or making your morning coffee.

## **The Plan**

### **Warm Up**

It's important to warm up before exercising. It lowers your risk of injury and prepares your body and mind to move, allowing you to start your workout with full strength and concentration.

I recommend, slowly at first and then progressively faster, to circle the joints in the body—shoulders, elbows, wrists, hips, knees, and ankles.

Marching, skipping in place, pulling your knees up and down, and twisting from side to side will slightly elevate the heart rate and warm the core of the body.



You don't necessarily need to sweat, but you should feel warm and ready to begin working out once you've finished. Between five and ten minutes is all it takes.

## **Two Exercises**

The SEPT program consists of only two exercises: pushups and squats. Together, they meet every condition above, are doable - in the way I describe - for *everyone* no matter your age or physical condition, and are most conducive to creating a lifestyle habit.

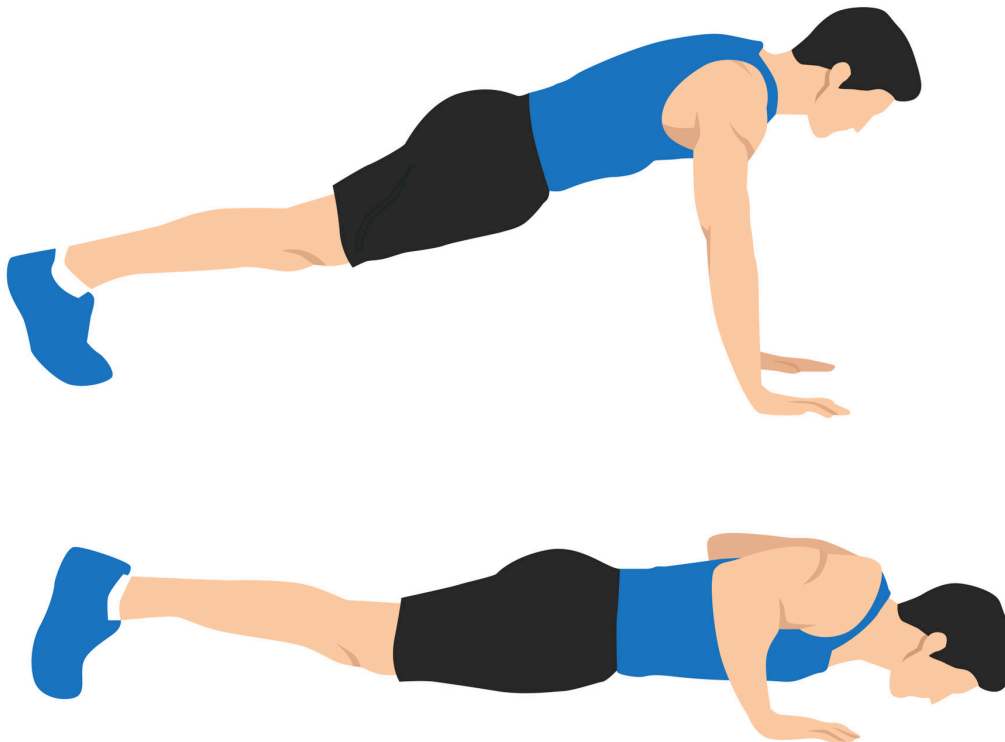
For overall health and full-body strength, they're the perfect combination. There is no need to do any other exercise. What follows is a description of

how to do proper pushups and squats safely, along with illustrations of each exercise.

Familiarize yourself with them, but hold off on doing them until you determine whether you should start at the beginner, intermediate, or advanced level - which you'll find below the descriptions.

## **Push-Ups**

Push-ups work the chest, shoulders, triceps, upper back, and the entire torso all the way up and down both the front and back of the body. Even your neck and leg muscles from your hips to your toes are engaged.



To begin, place your feet close together (two inches apart or touching), resting on the balls of the feet against the floor. Keep your back straight or bent ever-so slightly upward toward the ceiling.

Your hands should be shoulder width apart and hanging down from your shoulders. Keep your head slightly up and eyes looking about a foot ahead of you.

Now, with your elbows sticking out in a 45 degree angle from your body, lower yourself until you reach a 90 degree angle of your upper and lower arms.

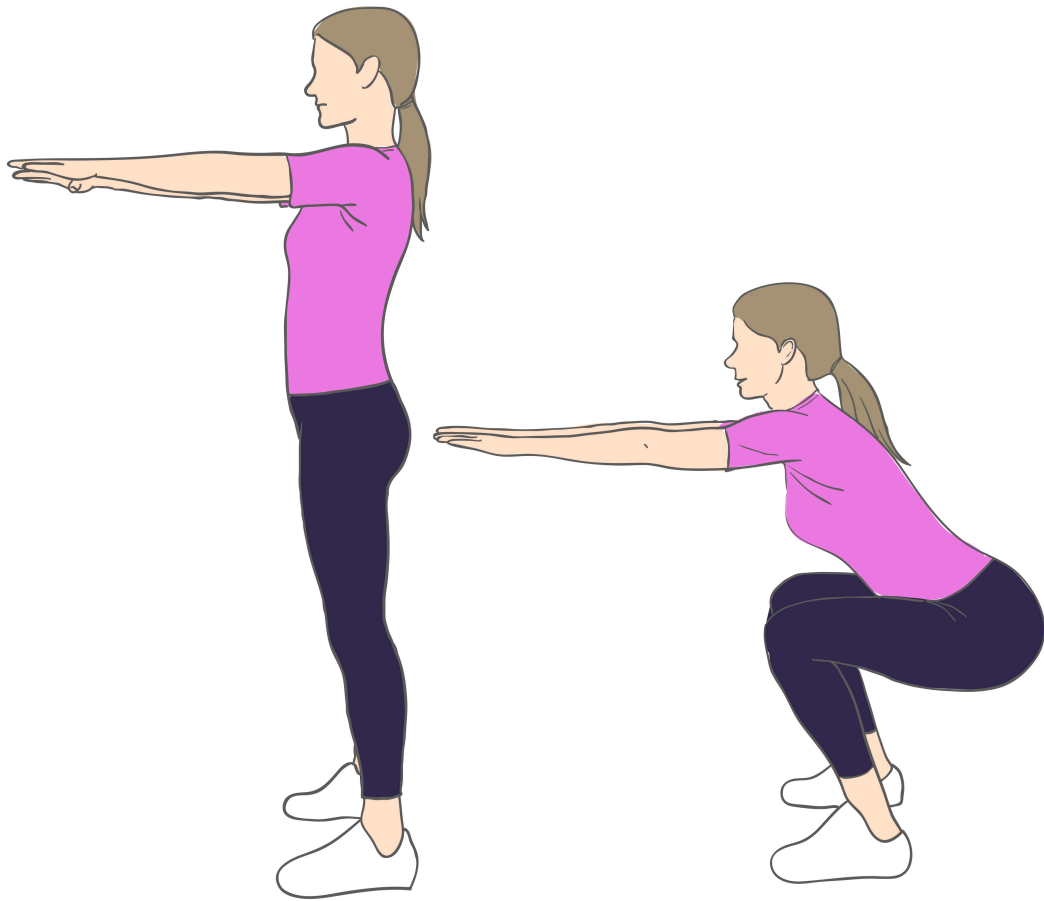
You may go lower if you wish, and even tap the ground lightly with your chest, before returning to the starting position.

Be sure to extend your arms fully before beginning another repetition. You do not need to pause at the top before lowering back down. However, you mustn't rush either. For the SEPT program, your reps should be quick but smooth and in control - full but neither locking nor pausing.

## **Squats**

Squats target your glutes and quads, but they also engage the hips, calves, hamstrings, and core muscles of the stomach and back. They're great for bulletproofing the knees and strengthening tendons, ligaments, and bones.

As you progress and are able to do more and more repetitions, they're also a wonderful aerobic exercise and fat burner.



To begin, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and your arms either straight out in front of you or with your elbows bent and hands clasped. You decide which feels more comfortable.



**Bent-Elbow Position**



Begin to lower as you shift your hips back and down. Bend your knees and continue to lower in a controlled manner until your thighs reach parallel to the ground. It's okay to drop a little farther as long as you don't bounce on your calves or round your back.

Push down through your heels as you return to start, then immediately begin the next rep. Do not rest in the top position. It's a slight pause only.

## **The Schedule**

The schedule couldn't be simpler. You'll focus on push-ups one day and squats the next. This way, you give each group of targeted muscles 48 hours to recover before exercising them again.

## **Beginner Level**

The beginner level is for anyone new to strength training or who hasn't exercised in awhile. The idea is to slowly and gently strengthen the body until you're able to do five perfect repetitions of each exercise (push-ups and squats) as described and illustrated above.

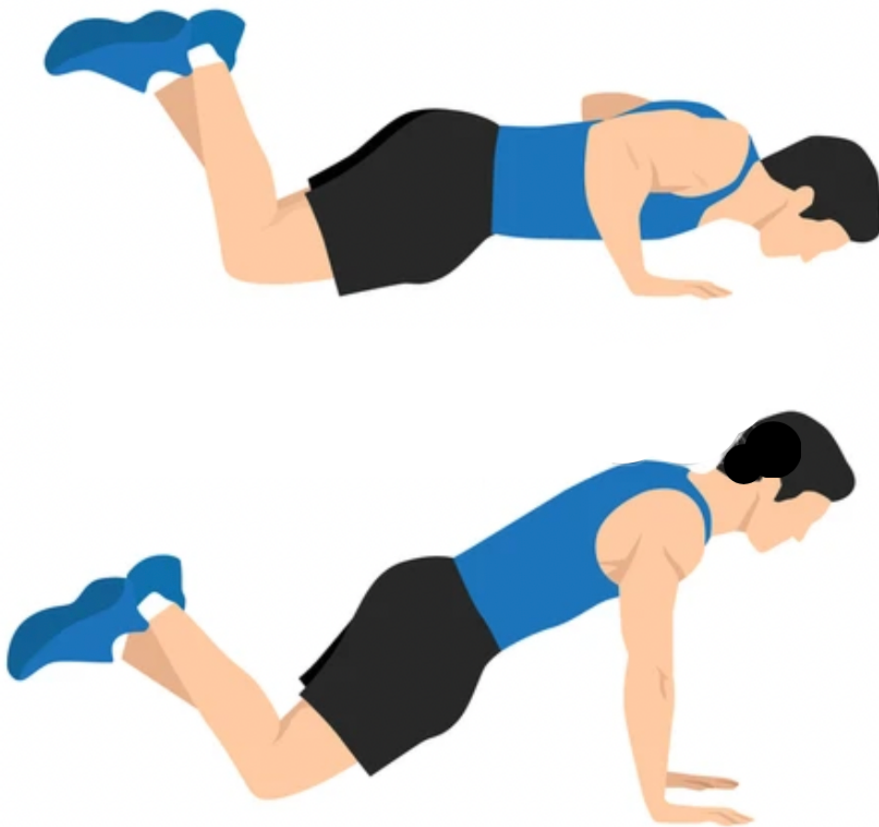
Once you can do this comfortably, then you're ready to move on to the intermediate level. However, there is no reason to hurry. Take your time and focus on good form. You'll get there. Remember, the goal is the workout, not the results.

The good thing about SEPT is that it will meet you wherever you are, no matter your age, ability, or physical shape. To that end, it's best to start with modified versions of push-ups and squats.

## Modified Push-ups

Modified push-ups are done from your knees, with your shoulders, hips, and knees forming a very slight L-shape. Because your knees are in contact with the ground, you may want to use an exercise mat, towel, or rug.

To start, work on simply staying at the top of the modified position for 30-second sets. In other words, you're just going to hold the position for 30 seconds, then rest for two to five minutes.



If you find that you can do repetitions, then do so. Just make sure your form mirrors the figure above.

Once you're able to hold steady in the start position for 60 seconds for 5 sets, then you're ready to begin partial repetitions. Partial repetitions are when you go down a few inches before returning back to the start position.

It might be two inches for sets of five repetitions. It might be three inches or more until the day you're able to bend your arms at a 90-degree angle (see illustration).

Another benefit to SEPT is that nothing is fixed. Every workout is on your terms. I'll provide recommendations, but you decide when you're ready to move on to deeper and more reps.

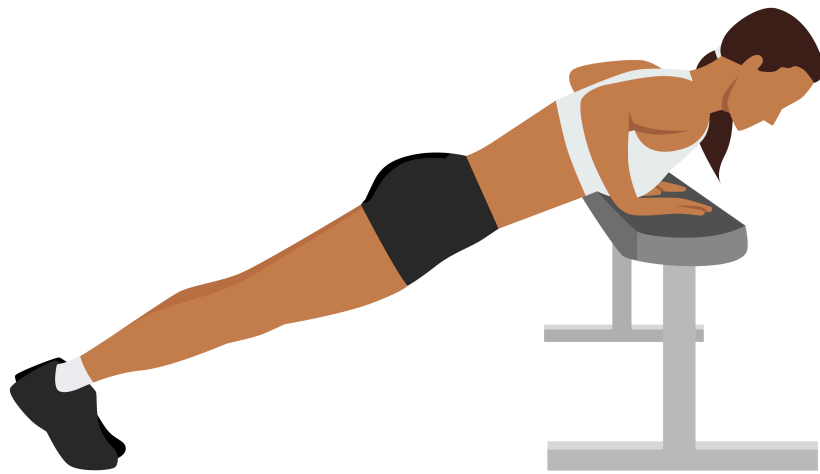
However, as mentioned previously, one of the keys to getting in better shape is the idea of constant improvement. Regardless of whether you're just beginning, or can do 250 push-ups or more during a workout, you must always strive for more. Thus, try and do a little bit more every workout, even if it's just holding for two more seconds.

Although you decide when to move on to regular push-ups, a good rule of thumb is that when you're able to do 15 repetitions of full modified push-ups, then you're ready to start doing regular push-ups.

The only rule is to stick with a total of five sets and two to five minutes rest between sets. This will enable you to make good recovery between sets and keep your perceived effort at about 80-85 percent.

A good way to transition to regular push-ups is by holding a regular push-up position - also known as an extended-arm plank - for 30 seconds for each of your five sets. Once comfortable, then you can begin holding for a minute before moving on to partial reps.

You can also transition to regular push-ups by doing incline push-ups, which can be done on a bench or coffee table.



Regardless of which transitional exercise you choose, just be sure to use good form and try to extend your depth each workout until you get to 90 degrees. Once you're able to do five good solid regular push-ups for a total of five sets, then you're ready to move on to the intermediate level.

How long will this take? It doesn't matter. It may take two months. It may take a year. Just keep going.

### **Modified Squats**

Modified squats are simple. Instead of sinking down into a full squat, you will do a partial squat. The form is the same. The only difference is that you're going to go down only the depth you're able to sustain for five sets.



As you get stronger over time, you can progress deeper and deeper until you reach 90 degrees - or lower - for five sets of five repetitions. Once you're able to do this comfortably, then you're ready for the intermediate level.

*Note:* If one or the other - push-ups or squats - is ready for the intermediate level, it's perfectly okay to move on with just that one exercise while staying at beginner level with the other.

## **Intermediate Level**

The intermediate level is where you're going to make the most gains, both in strength and fitness as well as body composition. My best advice for rapid improvement is to limit yourself to five sets total each day and work on increasing your number of repetitions.

Be sure, however, to use perfect form all the way down to at least 90 degrees at the bottom of each exercise and back up to the top. If you get sloppy, and your form breaks, you'll delay your improvement and increase your chance of injury.

Another important key is to keep your reps evenly distributed, just like you did at the beginner level. In other words, maintain the same number of reps for every set. So, if you do ten reps on the first set, the last set and every set in between must also be ten reps.

Also, at this level, make sure your rest times are at least three minutes and preferably five. These longer rest periods, combined with maintaining the same number of reps throughout the workout, ensure you're able to apply equal mental and physical effort.

As for how often you should increase your number of repetitions, it's up to you based on how easily you're able to complete your current workout.

However, once a week is a good general guideline. It might be five reps on the upper end or just one extra rep. Or you might want to wait another week. It's okay either way. Just be sure you feel ready.

The 80-85 percent rule is for your *total* workout. Meaning, it's okay to push the envelop a bit on your last set. The idea is to feel good afterward rather than beat down. Remember, you're making a lifestyle change. There is no hurry. Victory is not quitting.

Once you're able to do 25 reps for five sets, you're ready to move on to the advance level.

*Note:* Again, if one or the other - push-ups or squats - is ready for the advanced level, it's perfectly okay to move on with just that one exercise while staying at the intermediate level with the other.

## **Advanced Level**

The focus of the advanced level is to dramatically increase total repetitions. According to recent research, the muscle-building benefits of high reps are similar to lifting heavy weights and low reps.

However, and here's the greatest benefit, they also simultaneously build endurance. They raise your heart rate for longer intervals, thereby better strengthening the aerobic system. You'll also massively boost your metabolism and burn calories all day long.

Don't be mistaken. Even at an advanced level you can continue to progress, build muscle, and get stronger. There is still no need for weights or strictly cardio activities.

You may, however, want to start pushing your perceived effort up to 90-95 percent on some days.

If you've reached this level, you obviously love working out. You love the feeling of strenuous exercise, and high-rep push-ups and squats will give you all that you can handle and then some.

I recommend sticking to five sets of squats but pushing your number of reps to 50 and beyond.

Once you've reached 50 for five sets, and feel as if you can do another set, then go to 60, then 70, and so on. 100 reps for five sets is certainly within range of most people over time. But no matter. You're competing with no one but yourself.

You'll find that the better shape you're in, and the higher you go, the longer it takes to move up to the next level. You may be stuck at 25 reps for a month or more, and this is okay.

It can take time to become comfortable and for your muscles, tendons, and cardiovascular system to develop. Just be patient. Listen to your body. Then make the jump to 30 reps.

This is another benefit of sticking with the same two multiple-joint, full-body, functional exercises. If you mix and match and throw in a lot of supplementary exercises, you won't make the same progress. Become an expert at push-ups and squats and you'll feel, and look, like a superhero.

My advice for push-ups at this level is more complex than simply pushing for more and more reps. Push-ups are stubborn. It's tough for most people to progress much beyond 25-30 reps.



The upper body muscles burn out quickly and at some point don't seem to respond to adding more reps. In other words, once you hit a plateau, it's hard to rise above it.

Therefore, you may want to simply add more sets, which results in greater stimulation and improved cardio capacity.

Another strategy, which I learned from a professional bodybuilder, is to do just ten reps, sit back on your heels and take a breath (about five seconds), do ten more, sit back again and take a breath, then one more set of ten.

Take a full five minutes rest, then do it again. Continue on this way for up to eight to ten sets. This allows you to do a high number of reps while maintaining energy.

This workout enabled me to make big gains in strength and break through my own plateau. When I went back to doing five sets, the number of reps I was able to do skyrocketed.

One other plateau-breaking strategy I like is called "dirty dozens." I learned it from my dad when I was 15 years old and still use it today. It calls for only one set of push-ups, but it is extremely challenging. You *will* call mercy after this one.

The way it works is that you're going to do one push-up on the floor and then one against a wall (standing about two feet from the wall and using the same good push-up form) without pause.

Then do two on the floor and two on a wall. And so on with no rest between reps - other than transitioning from the floor to the wall - until you reach 12 push-ups on the floor and 12 on the wall for a total of 156 push-ups.

Brutal.



You may only get to eight or nine your first time around. But after a few weeks, once you reach 12 and go back to your five-set workouts, you'll blow by your previous plateau.

Just be sure not to push yourself beyond your maximum effort threshold. It isn't worth it. Nor is it needed to continue progressing. Too much of a good thing will cause you to burn out and not look forward to your workouts.

Again, it's okay to plateau and stay there for a while. No rush. The “breakthrough” strategies are just if you feel motivated to push through and reach a new level. Otherwise, just keep showing up and you will progress naturally. It's a lifestyle, not a competition.

## **Additional Tips**

### **Breath Work**

After each workout, give yourself five to ten minutes to sit and breathe and let your heart rate come down. Close your eyes and focus on exhaling more fully with each breath. Keep your mouth closed and your mind on your breathing.

You can do some light stretching if you wish or lay flat on your back. This few minutes helps bring your energy level down and make the transition to calmly living your life rather than succumbing to the stress of modernity.



## **Recovery**

The SEPT program will give you better energy and stamina throughout the day, but it's important to have down time most evenings and eight hours of sleep each night. It's during recovery that your body heals and gets stronger.

Although there is a small amount of crossover, the two workouts - push-ups and squats - stress different areas of the body and thus allow for 48 hours recovery. Still, ensuring plenty of water, a whole-food diet, and ample rest is critical to your continued advancement.

## **Technology**

The more natural and organic you can make your workouts the better. Although motivating in the beginning, smart watches, tracking apps, and online trainers add unnecessary stress that will build up over time and push you toward the couch.

They'll bring about more stress, not less. You're better off throwing on an old pair of sweats and a t-shirt and getting down to business.

## **Daily Movement**

One of the benefits of teaching is that you're able to stand most of your day. You can move and stay active if you wish, which is extremely healthy and linked to longevity - especially if you can get your stress under control.

You may, however, have to make some changes like buying or building a stand-up desk and choosing to stand and lean in rather than sit when working with groups.

While daily exercise like SEPT is extremely important, low intensity movement throughout most days - rather than sitting in an office - is even more so. So embrace it. Enjoy all the reaching, squatting, bending, climbing stairs, and walking. It's a good thing.

## Final Words

Big results don't come from big, dramatic changes—which are destined to fail. They come from small, quiet decisions barely noticeable and repeated over time.

It's consistency that makes the difference.

So instead of making grand New Year's pronouncements or buying new workout clothes, take the tiniest action right there in your living room. Do what you can do at an enjoyable level of effort and know that it's more than enough.

You'll naturally progress over time if you continue to just show up. That's the entire game.

Don't think about the future or place a single expectation on yourself. Some days you'll feel amazing and strong. Other days you'll feel 100 years old. This is normal.

**Just show up.** Then show up again the next day. And the day after that. Before you know it, your daily workout will become a habit you can't live without.