

## TOUGH LOVE

BY ROB MAXWELL, M.A.

The greatest lesson I think I ever got on tough love was when I worked at Stewart Treatment Center in the 1980's (It is now called Stewart Marchman). The program director was a phenomenal motivator and great counselor. He was my boss, and I learned so much about tough love from him. I remember one day we took the patients (who were all adolescents struggling with chemical dependency) to the Ocala Forest to learn more about nature. My boss, whom I'll call Jon, called all of the patients and counselors over to tell us a story. I always paid attention because his stories were good. He told us that he was in the woods years ago and he had a camera with him. He was filming wildlife. He said that at one point, a very tame deer kept getting closer and closer to him. He said he lured the deer closer and closer to him by making kissing noises and pretending he had food. He drew all of us in talking very slow and low. He was saying this with a smile, and you could tell how much he loved animals. He went on with his story. He told us that the deer finally came all the way up to him, close enough to pet. He said as soon as the deer was close enough to pet, he took his camera and smacked it on the nose as hard as he could! Shocked, the deer fled off into the woods. When he told us about the smack, naturally he did a smacking sound with his fist, making the entire group (including myself) jump. A few looked at him like he was the meanest person on earth, some kind of sick joker. After the murmurs subsided, Jon went on to state, "That's love, my friends". He explained that it was more important for him to keep that deer alive than to have that deer like him. He further explained that if a deer were to trust just any guy in the woods with an object in his hand, then the deer will trust a hunter with a gun in his hand as well. So he sacrificed that deer's affection that day so that it may go on to live a life without being shot down by a hunter. Tough Love!

### THIS APPROACH IN PERSONAL TRAINING

So what on earth does all of this have to do with personal training? Everything! A trainer who is not tough on his/her clients does not appear to care if the clients reach their goals. It's far easier to not care or to not be tough and let clients do as they please or do what they would do if you were not there, but you will be doing them and yourself a disservice. A big reason why someone hires a personal trainer is for accountability. And this isn't just for the accountability of showing up. This is for the accountability of doing what they're supposed to do to reach their goals. In fact when I discuss with clients why they hire trainers and keep trainers, this is what they state: Accountability. So, if I'm not being tough, I'm not doing the job they're paying me to do. I love my clients. And I don't mean this in a weird way like when Madonna's PT loved her and married her. I mean it in the exact way that the word states: Doing what is best for the client. Heck, it's a lot easier to not be tough. Who likes confrontations? Who likes having to constantly stay on somebody? Naturally, it would be easier to just sit back and collect money and nod and smile. That's not going to happen at Maxwell's. I care so much about fitness and the field, that I'm going to point out when a client is doing something that is incongruent with reaching their goals.

Where does this happen? I'd say the biggest area I/we have to get tough is concerning diet. To lose weight takes a lot of work. It takes a big effort on diet. Good effort on diet really doesn't even bring

about good results, but great effort will give back good results. I know this. I know this for sure. So I can't accept less than that as an effort or I'm doing a client a disservice. So I'll have to do the uncomfortable thing and confront the client and let them know that what they're doing is not enough. And this will take assertive talk. Sure, it's far easier to say "I applaud that you've made some effort and at least you're doing something". But to me, that's enabling and not true. And this is especially true when this is something that a client can be doing 100% on. The total results may be out of the person's control, but the total effort is in their hands, and if I'm rewarding a less than great effort, am I really doing my job? I don't think so. I love to see a client change their life by losing weight, and I know this takes a lot. So, I'll be tough. I'll state, "When you're ready to do what you're supposed to do, you'll see changes. Until then, let's not waste each other's time". Tough talk? Yes, but loving talk. If I, being the person who is looked up to in this environment, say it's okay, then I'm giving the person permission to do what they want to do. It would be no different than letting a child do something unsafe just because they'll throw a temper tantrum if I say no.

It's not only about diet we have to be tough with. It's also when checking with a client about their other fitness activities, like getting in their cardio. Another area is ensuring a client uses proper form. It's easy for a trainer to look the other way, and correcting some people can be exhausting. They just don't listen. But I know for sure that how we do each exercise matters big time. So, I'm going to be tough on form. I won't let bad form go. I'll be as consistent with correction as the client will be with doing wrong. I owe them that. But again, I owe the profession that. There is no doubt that on certain days it's far easier to just stand there and be in my own world. I'm being as ineffective by doing that as the client is with bad form. So, I'll stay on them even if it peeves them off! Some clients simply want to take the easier way out and knock out their reps quickly without much effort or concentration.

The ultimate sign of showing tough love in the fitness arena is simply telling a client that I won't work with them if they will not do what they are supposed to do on their end. I've had to do this before and I wouldn't hesitate to do it again in the future. That's being tough. If we continue to let clients do what they're comfortable with, and sometimes what they're comfortable with is not productive, then they won't get results. I care about results. I'm not in a situation, thankfully, where I simply need business. I need results. So I can afford to be tough. And ultimately, of course I know clients really appreciate this. They know I care. I believe this is why I've had clients for so long. I do care. I really love seeing people have the same benefits from exercise that I have had. And this I know takes work and sacrifice. The payoff is great. I tell new trainers all the time that they will not lose clients from being too tough but they'll lose clients from being too soft. Clients know when a trainer is just telling them what they want to hear and not what they need to hear. And they know that they need more than that, so I've seen clients respond very well to tough love.

So the next time you get mad at your trainer because they're telling you something that you don't really want to hear, remember it's harder for them to do that than to simply let it go. Remember that none of us reach our fitness goals by not putting in all we have. And a lot of it takes the support of another person to get the best out of us, and that's what a good trainer is trying to do. They may be pushing you to a rep that you really don't want to put out, or they may be harping on you about not getting in

your cardio when you have a goal to lose weight, or they may be telling you that your effort regarding your diet is not going to get it done. And all of this harping and prodding isn't being mean, it's being loving.

Stay well and accept your trainer's love.