

The Training Edge – The Latest for Fitness Professional

Petra Kolber's Cure for Toxic Perfectionism

Kolber had everything—fame, success and a career she loved—but fear of mistakes almost took it all away.

BY RYAN HALVORSON



Sign of progress: Kolber traded “I’m not enough,” for “I am enough,” but the story doesn’t end there.

Perfectionism, arguably, is not inherently evil. In fact it helped make Petra Kolber one of the biggest names in fitness.

In a career spanning three decades, she has spread her infectious energy to more than 30 countries, led more than 1,000 presentations, worked with multinationals like Reebok® and *Health* magazine, and won a raft of prestigious awards. She choreographed and starred in over 100 workouts featured on television shows, DVDs and VHS tapes. There was only one hitch: Her relentless push for perfection was ruining her life. Her public face was all energy and enthusiasm, but inside, rising anxiety was morphing into sweat-drenched panic attacks. Something had to be done-not just to rescue her career, but to free her from the vise of perfectionism.

"Great ideas die in isolation and thrive in collaboration."

So she developed Perfection Detox® to deal with her own perfectionism issues and to help others do the same. Her story is an inspiration for those who find themselves pushing so hard that it's draining all the joy out of their lives.



Kolber's first aerobics class had one participant; today, her classes, podcast and keynotes reach and inspire many thousands.

Uncertain Beginnings

Kolber made her name in the aerobics boom of the 1990s, but she originally wanted to be a musical theater dancer. Born and raised in England, Kolber moved to the United States in the early 1980s. She found work as a dinner theater dancer in Miami and dreamed of hitting it big on Broadway in New York City, but she hadn't given much thought to aerobics until a friend invited her to take his class.

"At the time I had pooh-poohed aerobics," Kolber says. "But I went to take his class and it was freaking unbelievable. I was amazed because it was just like a dance class." Her heart was in dance, but her mind calculated she could be an aerobics instructor if her dance career fizzled.

Then she visited the Big Apple on a vacation.

"I wasn't quite up-to-date as far as how talented the dancers in New York were," she recalls. "So, in 1990, I signed up to take a [group fitness certification](#)."

Back in Miami, she passed her first certification exam and then heard about a step workshop in nearby Fort Lauderdale led by Gin Miller and Peter Francis. "I had no idea who these people were. But I thought, 'Why not? I'll sign up,' " says Kolber.

Things worked out. She liked step aerobics so much that she decided to look for a job leading classes in Miami. She visited gym after gym trying to get somebody interested in adding step to their group exercise programs. At last, she met a manager willing to give her a try.

"I was told to not expect anyone to show up," she says. "Honestly, I don't know how I had the guts because I'd never taught before. That first class had one person. The next week there were five. Then there were 20. And then you couldn't get into the class."

"I bring all of me to the stage these days-my highlight reel and my backstory."

Eventually, she moved to New York, auditioning for fitness pioneers such as Molly Fox.

"I knew how competitive dance was in New York, but I had no idea about this aerobics thing," she says. "It was booming in the early '90s. Had I any idea who these people were, like Molly Fox, I would never have been so bold as to audition for them. That was a blessing, I think. Molly gave instructors room to try new things-and fail-without the fear of getting fired."

In the early days, Kolber loved the work but didn't consider herself an expert. "I didn't know so much that I became paralyzed." The paralysis came later.



Kolber and *Daily Burn* host JD Roberto had a blast fielding viewer questions on a day Kolber led the show's workout.

The "Expert" Trap

Working in some of the most respected boutiques in New York put Kolber's name on the map. She developed a passionate following and started landing major gigs with big companies. Soon she was a sought-after presenter for fitness conferences worldwide.

That's when the anxiety started to kick in.

"As I became more well-known in the industry, I got so concerned with knowing more-and feeling like I didn't know enough," she says. "I began to wonder if I should get a master's or a PhD."

Lurking below the surface of Kolber's positive, happy exterior were severe anxiety and panic attacks. The more she learned, the less confident she was that she belonged on the stage.

In a recent TEDx Talk, she put it like this: "I've been on many DVDs, starred along with 'Body by Jake' on television shows. I've worked with George Foreman, Nancy Kerrigan and Dara Torres. I've traveled around the world speaking to thousands of people and taught to packed classes in New York City. I've won pretty much every fitness accolade there is to win. I don't say this to brag, but to let you know that I [still] never felt as though I was enough."

Kolber eventually realized she'd developed an obsession with perfection that was creating a rift between her and the people she was aiming to inspire.

"What I thought people wanted from me as a trainer began to separate me from them because nobody can relate to perfect. It paralyzed me as a presenter and didn't allow me to do my best work because I was always two steps ahead, wondering if someone will question me or if I was going to make mistakes. So there was always a sense of anxiety around it," says Kolber.

These realizations helped trigger a shift in her perception. She stopped hiding behind the "gray curtain" of perfection and started developing a more realistic connection with the people she stands in front of.

"Most of the time I can show up and the person who I am on stage now is the essence of who I am off stage," she says. "I bring all of me to the stage these days-my highlight reel and my backstory."



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Finding the Missing Piece

Over the years, through all the fame and the emotional ups and downs, Kolber noticed a troubling constant in her classes. "I would see the same people and hear the same questions from

women in my class who, from the outside looking in, looked perfect-and they'll come up to me and point to their arms or waist and ask, 'How do I lose this one pound?' "

She had become an instructor to help people feel more joy, but that didn't seem to be why they were exercising with her. Something was missing; finding it would launch the next phase of her career.

As she searched for that missing thing, "the term, 'positive psychology' kept coming up," she recalls. Eventually she took a yearlong course and earned a certificate in positive psychology under the leadership of Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, and the Wholebeing Institute. At the same time, CreativeLive, an online education platform that broadcasts live classes, asked Kolber to lead a 2-day fitness workshop.

"I told them that I was pivoting out of [fitness], but that I'd created a new program called 'Moving to Happiness®.' "

Kolber felt renewed and invigorated-and *scared*. This was uncharted territory because Moving to Happiness didn't exist. She had no Molly Fox or Gin Miller for guidance.

"This is the first time in 25 years that I've never had footsteps to follow. There is no one that I know who has done this," she says. A conversation with longtime friend, colleague and fitness expert Jay Blahnik helped put things into perspective. "He told me I was in a space where I was in the white powder creating the footprints, and that gave me the courage to move ahead."

She put her fears aside and spent the next 8 months building a program combining her knowledge of teaching group exercise and her study of positive psychology.

"The main premise was, 'I'm not here to change your workout; I'm here to change *why* you work out," she explains. "I think our industry needs to take weight loss and jean size off the table as a goal forever. It can be a stepping stone, but that's where we went wrong. We made how we look the definition of success, instead of how we live as the definition of success."

Her new program aims to change all of that.



The Perfection Detox

In a year, Kolber went from a fitness maven to a purveyor of happiness who helps individuals and groups gain more satisfaction from life. Tackling the concept of perfection is one of her top priorities.

Perfectionism isn't a problem, she says, if it's helping you improve your life. "If, however, the idea of having the perfect life, body, being the perfect wife, teacher, trainer-if that makes you sick to your stomach, then this is what I want to talk about."

Her TEDx Talk and her podcast encourage those who experience the latter to go through what she calls a "perfection detox."

"I hear so many people say things like: 'It needs to be the perfect day to start my diet.' Or 'It needs to be the perfect outfit to be a good date. It needs to be the perfect meal so I am disciplined.' Or 'I need to manage my time perfectly, or have my idea, workshop or presentation perfect before I can share it with others.'

"Hearing this makes me want to hide in bed under the covers. There's a sense of 'I'm not enough.' That inhibits people. [But I'm also] not a believer in the concept of 'I'm enough and that's it,' either. Instead I look at it like, 'I'm enough, and there's still work I want to do.' I want to change the conversation."

Dismantling the need to be perfect gives happiness and joy a chance to flourish, she says. She shares this message with colleagues, corporations and, recently, a retirement home.

"My talk was 'Flourishing After 50,' " Kolber says. "The youngest person in the room was 70 and I thought, 'What am I going to tell these people that they don't already know?' I really was quite nervous."

To her surprise and delight, her messages were well received.

"At the end of my talk, a 94-year-old woman came up to me and she said, 'I want to thank you so much for today. I learned so many things that will make me feel happier as I move forward.' My heart cracked open."

As a 25-year veteran fitness instructor, Kolber has collected an epic novel's worth of wisdom. Here are a few of the things she's learned along the way about how to boost the happiness quotient:

On social media and insecurity: "The reason we suffer from insecurity is because we're busy comparing our backstory to everybody else's highlight reel [an idea Kolber credits to pastor and author Steven Furtick]. Social media exacerbates this. But we can also change how we look at it. Is it possible to see someone's post and simply think, 'I'm so happy for them' without comparing yourself to them?"

On being self-critical: "I think we need to achieve some balance and be a little less harsh on ourselves and maybe, as leaders, ask, 'Can I talk to myself as I would my favorite client?' "

On competition and judgment in the fitness industry: "We're really quick to judge each other. [I wish] we could become more compassionate to each other in this industry-and stop viewing one another as competition. There are [plenty of] people who need our help. We need to come

together to create change together because great ideas die in isolation and thrive in collaboration."

On the importance of human connection: "As humans, we're designed to be around others and to be in community. And as much as we have communities online, it can never replace human connection. I don't care how many apps, happy apps, mindfulness apps you have-true happiness comes from when we're around other people and, even more than that, when we're in service of something greater than ourselves."

On how to succeed in fitness: "If you want to be more successful and retain clients, your job is going to change. You're going to be a connectivity coach; you'll be a compassion coach, an empathy expert, a connector. That's what people are craving; they just don't know it. And if you're a trainer who shows up with that skillset and can combine it with being fully present, you will have more clients than you know what to do with."

On giving yourself a break: "If what you do personally-your workout, your diet-brings you joy, don't change a thing. But if your diet is so restrictive, if your workouts are so intense, that every moment you are worrying about your six-pack-I think you're missing out. If you ease up a little bit, you will get more clients and experience more joy because you will be able to connect on a deeper level with those people who struggle-because we connect through our cracks."

To hear more of Kolber's insights, check out her "Perfection Detox" podcast at petrakolber.com/podcast.

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