

February 8 · 4 min read

How the RPE scale makes the most of every workout

Exercise. Record. Refine. Repeat.



Becca Moorhead



When it comes to effective workouts, there are two important things to remember. First: quantity of exercise is important, but quality matters, too. You can go to the gym every day of your life, and if you just hop on a stationary bike and go through the motions, you probably aren't going to see the kind of progress you set out to achieve.

Second: performance is relative. You can't judge the progress of a first-time exerciser by whether or not they can bench press more than an Olympic-caliber weightlifter. It's always about comparing where you are today to where you were yesterday. And sometimes, that progress isn't linear from one day to the next.

Part of what makes Future's approach to personal training valuable is that you always have an open line of communication with your coach. They know exactly what's in your workouts, and you can always let them know how you're feeling before, during, and after you exercise. That qualitative info is invaluable, and can refine your fitness approach from one day to the next.

But when it comes to tracking your effort day in and day out to ensure that you're exerting yourself properly and keeping things moving in the right direction, it never hurts to turn to the data. That's why in addition to more conventional inputs like reps and weights, you and your coach can add an extra layer of insight by tracking the RPE associated with every bit of exercise.

RPE sets a standard.

RPE stands for Rate of Perceived Exertion. As the name implies, it uses a 0-10 scale to measure the intensity of physical activity as you work out, with 0 referring to a state of complete rest, and 10 representing a peak level of intensity that can only be sustained for a short period of time.

RPE is adapted from the Borg scale, which runs from 6 to 20. While that range can give you a handy way to estimate your heart rate during exercise (by multiplying your Borg scale rating by 10), using the adapted RPE scale offers a slightly simpler and more comprehensive way to measure exertion. You can think of it similarly to the 0-10 "pain scale" you might have seen in hospitals before — except this time, that pain translates to gain over time.

RPE sets a standard.

RPE stands for Rate of Perceived Exertion. As the name implies, it uses a 0-10 scale to measure the intensity of physical activity as you work out, with 0 referring to a state of complete rest, and 10 representing a peak level of intensity that can only be sustained for a short period of time.

RPE is adapted from the Borg scale, which runs from 6 to 20. While that range can give you a handy way to estimate your heart rate during exercise (by multiplying your Borg scale rating by 10), using the adapted RPE scale offers a slightly simpler and more comprehensive way to measure exertion. You can think of it similarly to the 0-10 “pain scale” you might have seen in hospitals before — except this time, that pain translates to gain over time.

Understanding the RPE scale.

RPE No.	How It Feels	Estimated HR Zone	Example Activities
0	Resting	Blue	No activity
1	Very easy, easy breathing	Blue	Arm circles, knee hugs
2	Easy, easy breathing	Blue	Walking
3	Moderate, noticeable increase in breathing	Green	Quick walking
4	Moderate, noticeable increase in breathing	Green	Jogging, bodyweight squat
5	Somewhat hard, breathing quickly	Yellow	Jogging
6	Somewhat hard, breathing quickly	Yellow	Jogging
7	Hard, breathing hard	Orange	Running
8	Very hard, breathless	Orange or Red	Running uphill
9	Very hard, breathless	Orange or Red	Running uphill
10	Max effort, out of breath	Red	Short sprint

*Adapted from Borg Category-Ratio- 10 scale

Pick a number to set the tone.

Variety isn't just the spice of life. It's the engine that moves you towards your goals. That's why RPE is incredibly useful: it creates a standardized way to measure the impact of wildly different workouts, whether you're crushing a cardio day, attacking the squat rack, or squeezing in a bodyweight circuit on vacation. No matter what's on the agenda, your coach can designate an RPE to target for your workout, which gives you an idea of what kind of intensity, speed, weight, or reps you should shoot for.

Whether the goal is to expand your comfort zone or ensure your recovery day of light movement actually feels light, RPE sets the expectation for how hard you should push yourself before you start. The exact RPE that constitutes your "sweet spot" for a given workout will vary depending on factors ranging from your overall goals, to your nutrition plan, to the week's workload. So when in doubt about how hard to push yourself, consult with your coach first.

More data = more progress.

After a workout is done, RPE creates an important data point you and your coach can use to keep your progress on track. Because the 0-10 scale is based on your perceived exertion at any point in time, repeating the same workout won't automatically translate to the same RPE score from one day to the next. For example, if you're feeling very well-rested, fueled up appropriately, and aren't weighed down by stress, an activity like 30 seconds of bodyweight squats may register as a 3. But if you haven't eaten or slept well, it may feel more like a 5.

That variance might seem frustrating at first, but that ultimately makes it a vital tool for understanding how nutrition, hydration, and sleep (among other factors) play a role in preparing your body to perform at its best. A higher than expected RPE isn't a sign of failure, but it does open up the door to a convo with your coach about how you can take a truly holistic approach to achieve your health and fitness goals.

Your exertion is worth the effort.

Similar to the picture that [fitness assessments](#) can paint, an RPE score is a snapshot of how hard a given workout or

Your exertion is worth the effort.

Similar to the picture that [fitness assessments](#) can paint, an RPE score is a snapshot of how hard a given workout or movement made you exert yourself at a particular moment in time. As you progress, what once consistently felt like a 7 in the first stages of your fitness journey may end up feeling like a 4 a few months down the road, especially once you put all of the pieces together. Think of using RPE as one more way to see and celebrate how your consistent efforts are making you fitter and stronger without even stepping on the scale or looking in the mirror. Especially when the going gets tough, every last bit of confidence and motivation you summon can help.

Like any new acronym, RPE can feel confusing at first. But the process — and its purpose — couldn't be any simpler. Just show up, do the work, and honestly assess how it made you feel. That will help you and your coach move forward with purpose, so you can give yourself a 10/10 chance of hitting your fitness goals.

• • •

Tracking RPE is just one of the ways that working with a Future coach can personalize your training for the better. Whether you've had trouble calibrating your efforts in the past or you don't know where to begin, your coach will create a customized approach that moves you from your starting point towards any health or fitness goal you desire. No matter how you feel on a scale of one to ten, your coach is ready with the advice, encouragement, and accountability that changes your perception of what you can accomplish for the better

Ready to ramp up your RPE for less? Enjoy a no-risk month of Future absolutely free. [Sign up today](#) and cancel any time if you're not satisfied.



Becca Moorhead