GUIDE

Ask a trainer what they do when you stall for three weeks.

Every trainer has a plan for your first session. The one worth hiring also has a plan for week three of a stall, and that plan starts with the session log, not with a new program.

October 27, 2026 · 8 minute read



Before you hire a personal trainer, ask one question: what do you do when I stop making progress for three weeks? A stall is ordinary and is no failure of yours, and the answer tells you whether you are buying a record of your training or a steady supply of new workouts.

A three-week stall calls for the log, an easier week and one changed variable

A trainer who handles a three-week stall well checks your session log first, then usually suggests an easier week, then changes one variable and watches what happens. That order comes from Paul Hough, a lecturer in sport and exercise physiology at the University of Westminster, who published guidance on plateaus in The Conversation on October 21, 2026. His advice: if you have made no progress for three to four weeks, take an easier training week. If your performance returns or improves afterward, fatigue was the problem, not the plan.

If progress is still flat after the easier week, Hough suggests changing one thing at a time, such as a single exercise or a single session, rather than abandoning the whole plan. He names two good reasons to replace a program entirely: a new goal, or an injury. Three weeks without a new number is not on that list.

Every step in that sequence depends on something written down. Nobody can tell whether an easier week helped without knowing what you were lifting, or how fast you were covering a distance, before it.

One squat log, read two ways, shows what the record is worth

A session log shows its value in the week a squat stops moving. The log below is an illustration, not a real client, and it uses only the fields Paul Hough says to record at every session: weight, repetitions and sets.

Weeks one to three: back squat, 185 pounds, three sets of five, twice a week. All six sessions read 5, 5, 4, with the third set one rep short every time. Week four is the easier week: 135 pounds, two sets of five. Week five, first session: 185 pounds, three sets, and the log reads 5, 5, 5.

On the first path, the trainer reads that page. The weight never changed, and the missing rep came back after a lighter week, so the plan was sound and you were tired. The next session goes up five pounds and the plan carries on. Had week five read 5, 5, 4 again, the same page would say the opposite: rested and still flat, this plan has run its course, and the trainer changes one thing, such as swapping the third set for a lighter set of eight, then watches it against six sessions of known numbers.

On the second path, a new program starts in week four instead. Its first week is front squats, four sets of eight at 135 pounds, every rep completed. Nobody can say whether that is progress. Nothing above it was a front squat or a set of eight, and the six sessions that held the answer now describe a plan nobody is running. The question of whether you were tired is never answered. It simply stops being asked.

Both paths cost the same hours in the gym. Only the first put the record to work.

A brand-new program erases the comparison that would explain a plateau

A brand-new program is the wrong first answer to a plateau because it erases the comparison that would show what went wrong. Hough makes the point directly: changing your training program entirely makes it difficult to know whether you have progressed, because you can no longer compare directly with what came before. New exercises, new rep ranges and new session lengths all arrive at once, and every number from week one of the new plan is measured against nothing.

A new program also feels like progress. There is a fresh plan, a new order of exercises, and a sense that somebody has taken your stall seriously. That is a confident answer, and confidence is easy to mistake for skill. A trainer who hands over a new plan at the first stall has not found out whether you were tired, under-recovered, or on a plan that had genuinely run its course. They have replaced the question with something new to do.

A trainer who rotates programs may mean well. Clients enjoy variety, and a new plan is easier to present than a week of lighter training. Good intent does not change the purchase: if every stall gets a new plan, novelty is what you are paying for, and the record that would have explained the stall is what you go without. The test is simple: when the numbers stop moving, does the trainer look at the numbers first?

Buying a program means buying the record, not the hour

Buying an appointment means paying for an hour of somebody's attention: a warm up, coaching on form, a set of exercises. Buying a program means paying for decisions made across many sessions, and those decisions can only be as good as the record underneath them. The session log is that record, and it is the part of personal training that cannot be replaced by a new workout.

Hough's guidance describes what the log should hold. For resistance training, he says to record the weight, repetitions and sets you perform for each exercise at every session. For endurance work, track your distances and pace. Add three lines of your own: how many more reps you think you had left at the end of the last set, whether a session was cut short, and which sessions were missed. When the main numbers go flat, those three lines are often what separates a tired week from a plan that has stopped working. A notebook holds all of it.

Scale weight belongs on a different page. The session controls the bar: the load, the reps, the sets. The scale answers to everything else, what you ate, how you slept, how much water you are carrying, so a trainer who judges a plateau by the scale is grading the sessions by a number they do not control. The log is where the rest of the week shows up in a form you

can use. Is your squat flat everywhere, or only on the days after a long shift? Did the stall begin the week you added a third session? Without the log, the honest answer is a guess. With it, a three-week stall becomes something you and the trainer can look at together.

The strongest case for a new program is boredom, and a deload has a measured cost

The strongest case for a new program is that some stalls are really boredom, and a bored client stops showing up. A plan you enjoy and attend beats a better plan you abandon. Hough concedes the point and answers it: if boredom is the problem, change how you train rather than what you train, for example shorter sessions, working with a personal trainer, or a new playlist. That middle item is worth reading slowly in an essay about hiring one. In Hough's list, the trainer is the fix for how training feels, not for what it measures: new company and new coaching cues, against the same lifts in the same log.

The second objection is sharper: a deload is not free. In a 2024 trial published in PeerJ, Max Coleman, Brad Schoenfeld and colleagues followed 39 resistance-trained adults through a nine-week, high-volume program. One group stopped resistance training entirely for the fifth week; the other trained straight through. The continuous group showed greater improvements in lower-body strength, while muscle size, local endurance and power showed no appreciable difference between the groups. It is one small trial, and it did not test Hough's sequence: its deload was a scheduled week off, not an easier week taken in response to three flat weeks.

That finding narrows the claim in this essay. A deload is a tool for a measured stall, not a reflex, and a trainer who schedules a week off whether or not anything has stalled may be costing you strength. It is also, quietly, an argument for the log. The only reason anyone knows the week off cost strength is that the researchers measured strength before and after.

One question about plateaus, asked before you pay, shows a trainer's method

Ask a personal trainer about plateaus in the first conversation, before any money changes hands. The wording can be plain: if my numbers stop moving for three weeks, what do you do? Then ask to see a client's session log with the name removed.

A good answer is short and in order: I would read your last three weeks of sessions, take an easier week, and if you come back no stronger, change one exercise and watch it. It names a sequence, not a date.

A weaker answer reaches for the new thing first: a new split, a new phase, a fresh challenge. Be suspicious of a confident timeline for breaking the plateau. Nobody can promise one without knowing whether you were tired, and nobody can know that without the record.

If the trainer does not log sessions at all, ask how they would tell fatigue from a bad plan. If they cannot say, you have learned what you would be buying.

A log-first personal trainer is the wrong fit for some people

A log-first personal trainer suits people who want their numbers to move, and it is the wrong fit if you train mainly for enjoyment, company or a reason to get out of the house. That is a reasonable thing to want, and a trainer who rotates workouts to hold your interest may serve you better, so say so in the first conversation. It is also the wrong starting point after an injury, where the decision to change a program belongs with a clinician who knows your history.

> They have replaced the question with something new to do.

The workout you do on a Tuesday is the visible part of personal training, and it is the easiest part to replace. The record of every Tuesday is harder to build and harder to fake. When you sit down with a trainer for the first time, ask what happens at week three of a stall, and listen for the log before you hear the word new.

Further reading

1. Paul Hough, lecturer in sport and exercise physiology at the University of Westminster, writing in The Conversation: guidance on tracking progress, deload weeks, changing one variable, and when to replace a program theconversation.com/has-your-fitness-hit-a-plateau
2. Coleman, Schoenfeld and colleagues, PeerJ (via PubMed Central): randomized trial of a one-week deload during nine weeks of supervised resistance training, used for the objection section pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10809978

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