Head to a gym or flip open a fitness magazine, and chances are good you’ll encounter the term “metabolic training” (also called “metabolic conditioning”). But what exactly does it mean, and how can the workout technique help you reach your weight-loss goals?

“In a nutshell, metabolic training is completing a series of high-intensity exercises with short bursts of rest in between,” says fitness coach Ryan Toshner, owner of TNT Performance in Brookfield, Wisconsin. This technique increases your metabolic rate—meaning you burn more calories at rest.

Let’s compare metabolic training to a traditional aerobic workout. If you go for an hourlong run, you have to conserve your energy to make it through the whole hour. You might be operating at 58 percent of your maximum capacity. If you run for short intervals, you can push yourself to work at a higher intensity—say, 95 percent—because you don’t have to last as long. Plus, then you’ll be operating at a low intensity during the recovery period between intervals. So if you’re operating at a 75-percent average (combining sprints and recovery periods), you can exercise for less time to get the same calorie-burning benefit of a long workout.

Think of it this way: Driving a car at slow speeds uses less gas and mechanical energy. Ultimately, it takes longer to get somewhere, and the car cools down quickly upon arrival. On the other hand, driving a car at fast speeds requires more gas and greater energy output. Rapid travel means you’ll get where you’re going sooner, and the car will need more time to cool down.

Benefits of Metabolic Training

More specifically, metabolic training will help you:

**Burn calories.** Studies have shown a direct correlation between the amount of oxygen (energy) consumed and calories burned. “If you’re using more oxygen for a shorter period of time, you’re going to burn more calories,” Toshner says.
**Build strength.** When you lift a heavier weight and add more repetitions, you’re doing a lot of work in a short period of time, thus building muscle mass.

**Spike metabolism.** Increased muscle mass burns more calories and ups your metabolic rate, helping you shed pounds even after your workout is complete.

**Reduce boredom.** Even avid exercisers get tired of the treadmill. In metabolic training, participants move rapidly between exercises, requiring increased focus.

With all of these advantages, it’s no surprise that challenging workout programs like kettlebell, boot camp and CrossFit are increasingly popular at local fitness centers. Let’s take a closer look at each of these approaches, which also incorporate strength training. As with any fitness program, consult your healthcare provider before beginning one of these intense workout programs, and remember that a trainer can modify exercises to suit you.

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**How She Did It**

Kelly, featured in the exercise photos for this article, hit a plateau after losing 55 lb. Instead of giving up, she tried a kettlebell class and liked it instantly. “I can work everything in an hour, and be done,” she says. “To get an equivalent workout before [taking kettlebell classes], I would have had to go to three different classes.”

Within four months, she lost another 30 lb. Kelly went on to lose more than 100 lb. with her TOPS chapter (TOPS NE 0504 Papillon). “Find an exercise program you like,” Kelly recommends. “You’ll be more likely to stick with it.”

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**Kettlebell**

**What it is:** A challenging series of functional exercises—which use large muscle groups to simulate real-life activities—involving a round weight with a flat bottom and a thick handle.

**History:** Made popular in Russia.

**Pros:** Works multiple muscle groups at the same time; improves stability, core strength and range of motion.

**Cons:** As with any exercise equipment, there is a risk for injury if used improperly or with poor form; may require an investment in multiple kettlebells of different weights if you want to stick with a home program; the heavier the kettlebell, the more expensive it is.

**Tips:** When purchasing a kettlebell, find one with a smooth handle for a good grip. Begin with a lighter weight and exchange it for a heavier one later; women can start with 5- or 10-pound weights, and men with 10- or 15-pound weights.
A coach can tailor a boot camp workout to meet your abilities—from simple lunges to pull-ups.

Boot Camp

What it is: An intense workout featuring exercises you did back in school—sit-ups, push-ups, jumping jacks, lunges and squats, for example. You push yourself to complete as many repetitions as you can in a short period of time, such as 60 seconds; recover; and then repeat.

History: Inspired by military training.

Pros: Requires little to no equipment; allows you to exercise anywhere, including outdoors; improves strength, endurance and agility; keeps your exercise plan fresh, since classes change frequently and offer different combinations of exercises.

Cons: May prove difficult if you aren’t already exercising regularly; may lead to injury if you push yourself too hard.

Tips: Styles vary, so experiment with different trainers or DVDs to find one that’s a good match for you. If you take a class, communicate with the instructor so that you’re offered modifications that suit your needs.

CrossFit programs provide a lot of variety, including weight lifting, gymnastics, rowing and more.

CrossFit

What it is: A demanding circuit of varied exercises, including weight lifting, gymnastics, sprinting and rowing, designed to prepare you for a range of activities.

History: Developed by gymnast Greg Glassman and used to train police officers, firefighters and military personnel.

Pros: Many CrossFit gyms—called “boxes”—have a strong sense of community and support; includes variety to stave off boredom; involves balance, strength and endurance.

Cons: Requires special equipment; may prove pricey if you make frequent visits; may not be suited to people with injuries, or prone to injury, or those with certain health conditions.

Tips: Begin working with a trainer to ensure proper technique.