

Vol 4, 2006 CEC ARTICLE:
Understanding Your Personal Training Client
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Before we talk about our personal training client let's talk about what a personal trainer's job is. I see my job as empowering someone to take charge of his or her mental and physical health. No, I'm not a psychologist. But I can give them physical and mental tools to motivate themselves and to deal with the stress and negative thoughts that might be draining them mentally and physically. I can give them the aerobic and strength training knowledge they will need to feel strong and healthy. Hopefully they will be so happy with the way they feel that they will go from me motivating them to self-motivation. They won't need me any more. They will become independent exercisers seeing exercise as essential to their well being as food, water and sleep are.

When I have my first initial consultation with my potential client I try to find out several things. The first being why do they think they want to work with me? What is the real reason they need me? What are their goals? Are they realistic? Are they willing to change their lifestyle to achieve those goals? Are they willing to commit to the time it will take to accomplish their goals? Are they harboring any myths or fallacies about the magic pill, diet or workout that will immediately fix all their problems? What motivates them? How do they feel about themselves and exercise? Will their personality work with mine?

Let's look at the first two questions? Why do they think they want to work with me and what is the real reason they need me? These may both be the same answer. They need my knowledge to help them meet their fitness goals. Sometimes, though what they think they need from me and what they really need are two different things. They may think that I'm going to give them the magical quick fix secret and guess what I'm NOT because I CAN'T. If I could I would be marketing it and making a fortune! I won't work with somebody who wants me to recommend a certain diet or diet supplement because I don't believe that those will work in the long haul. My job is to give them healthy valid options that will work for the rest of their life. We talk portion control, and a healthy well rounded diet with 8 to 10 fruits and veggies and 64 ounces of water everyday. I give them a workout suited to them that they would **want to do** 3 times a week for the rest of their life. I don't want them just to lose weight now. I want them to be healthy and energetic for the rest of their life!

At first they may need me to be their coach motivating them to stick with it. Someone they are accountable to. Someone who's going to ask, "did you come and workout two other days this week? Why not?" They need someone to praise and reinforce positive behavior. "You substituted raw veggies for potato chips this week! That's fantastic, you are eating so much healthier!" As I mentioned above, my job is to help them become their own coach.

One of the things that we discuss during the consultation is their goals both short term and long. We discuss whether they are realistic. My "potential client" wants to lose 50 pounds in a month to look good in a friend's wedding. I say "potential client" because if I cannot convince her that this is an unrealistic, unattainable goal by the end of the consultation then she won't be one of my personal training clients. I need to explain to this person that to lose weight in a healthy, long term way she should lose between 1 to 2

pounds per week or 4 1/2 to 9 pounds in a month. This is because you have to burn by working out or cut from your diet 3500 calories to lose one pound of fat. I will have set her up for failure if I say working out with me will help her lose 50 pounds in a month. My job is to help my clients set up realistic, attainable goals.

I always like to include long-term goals so that my potential client can see that this is a lifetime commitment. They will need to make lifestyle changes. We have to work together to help them find options that they can live with for the rest of their lives. That is why diets that cut out or seriously limit one food group aren't the solution.

-Your body needs all the food groups in varying amounts to be healthy.

-Your body needs you to do a cardio activity 3-5 times a week to stay healthy.

-Your body needs you to do some type of strength training activity to keep your muscles healthy and strong.

I want my clients to understand this and be committed not just now but for a lifetime. My goal needs to be to find a workout routine that they will enjoy so much that it becomes part of their life.

As we discuss the potential client's goals I try to find out what's currently happening in their lives. How do they feel about exercise and food? What is their exercise history?

Let's say that our potential client has just lost a loved one after a year of illness. He is depressed and has gained weight, which is putting stress on his knees causing pain. He has never exercised before.

Looking at this situation we have several goals. They are both short and long term. Our potential client needs to get out of the house and start interacting with others to help relieve his depression. He needs to feel part of a group that cares and that he may be able to have other social interaction with. My long-term goal would probably be to get him in a group exercise class. First though we have to build his comfort level with exercise so he will feel competent in a group exercise situation. Next I would look at finding an aerobic activity that will help him lose weight without putting undue stress on his knees. Obviously, water would be a good option. Once he becomes comfortable working out with me in the water I will encourage him to start attending the Aqua Arthritis class the other two days a week. Hopefully, within a few months he will be a committed Aqua Arthritis class participant with a whole lot of new friends and no pain in his knees because he's lost that extra weight!

Here's another example. We have a new mom that comes to us to lose the 30 pounds she put on during her pregnancy. Her husband travels and she is depressed and stressed out with the constant responsibility of caring for a baby. She was on the swim and track team in high school but hasn't done any exercise since she got married 5 years ago. She feels like she has no time for herself. She has no family living in the area and doesn't like leaving her child with people she doesn't know.

Now we have several issues we are dealing with. Does the client want to commit? She has brought up several red flags. She's tired. She has a limited amount of time. She doesn't like leaving her child in a nursery setting and has no family support. As a trainer I will try to make the workout meet her needs. Even though she has enjoyed swimming in the past the water may not be her best option due to the extra time needed to shower and change. Could we take the baby along on our workouts or does she need that time away for herself? Maybe at first we could walk on the track with baby in a stroller or baby pack

progressing to running. Let her become comfortable with the facility. Introduce her to the nursery attendants. Let them tell her how they handle hygiene and problems that might come up like a continuously crying baby. Is she willing to workout at home? If she can only afford financially to get together with you once a week will she do a simple routine you put together for her on the other days you're not working with her. If she says no then she's not willing to commit.

When my clients say they don't have time to workout I say, "do you have time to watch TV one hour a day?" If they say yes then I say, "you have enough time to workout". Lift some arm weights or do some core exercises while you're watching the program. March, jog, and skip rope during the commercials. There's always a way to workout if you're willing to make the commitment.

As mentioned above our potential client needs to make a commitment to change. They have to be willing to make time for exercise. They have to be willing to get rid of unhealthy habits, which are contributing to their inability to meet their goals. If they are not then don't take them on as clients because you are just setting yourselves up for failure.

It is difficult for us to understand as personal trainers why somebody who comes to us is not willing to commit to change. After all isn't it obvious that the way they are living is not working? They are going to have to change to see any results. The question is do they want the results badly enough to change their lifestyle. Most of what personal trainers wrestle with their client is psychological. Nobody likes change. They enjoy those 3 beers after work to help them unwind after a hard day's work. The chocolate chip cookies remind them of their mom waiting when they came home from school with a plate full. Those chocolate chip cookies represent love. Maybe due to being the overweight, uncoordinated child they were always made fun of in gym class and now have a real fear of looking stupid in front of others. Or maybe it's just the fear of the unknown. I had a client that I worked with off and on for several years. We would just start to make progress when she would quit. She finally told me it was the fear of the unknown. She knew what life was like now as an obese woman. She didn't know what it would be like if she wasn't overweight. I will no longer train her because she needs help that I am not qualified to give her.

Sometimes change is not an option. Your potential client may have just been diagnosed with MS or have had a stroke. Now their goal becomes maintaining or recovering as much mobility as they can. Yes, they may have to deal with depression and family stress. But often they are your most dedicated clients. They see how exercise and other lifestyle changes directly affect their life.

During the consultation I will also look at health considerations such as arthritis, joint and muscle conditions, cardiovascular health, balance and coordination. Are they on high blood pressure medications? Are they diabetic? Do they have a problem with balance? Do they have difficulty going up steps or walking? These all need to be taken into consideration when I plan their workout. I also need to acknowledge if they have health issues I am not comfortable or qualified to work with. If this is the situation then try to refer them to someone who is qualified. I have built a referral list of physical therapists, dietitians and doctors I trust that I can refer these people to. I can also work jointly with these people to help my clients successfully reach and maintain their goals.

Most important during this consultation and later as we workout together I try to find what motivates them. What is going to keep them working out? Will just seeing the results be enough? Fitting into that pair of jeans that was too tight two months ago or being able to climb a flight of stairs without becoming winded. For some seeing the results is all they need to keep them working towards their goals. Others need a support group to keep them focused.

Do they have family or friend support? A reliable someone they can workout with or who can encourage them not to have that second doughnut. A sympathetic, optimistic someone they can call when they are frustrated because they gained a pound this week instead of losing any?

Personality is an important component to consider when trying finding out what motivates your client. Are they a people person or a loner? If they are a people person then I try to steer them towards group exercise classes where they will make friends who can support and encourage them. Are they are a loner or are they competitive? Loners like activities that don't depend on others. Lap swimming is a good example of what a loner would like to do. Come, get their workout in and leave. If they are a competitive person then giving them a goal of increasing the number of laps swum or improving their lap time each week would be a good challenge for motivating them.

Talking about personality, it is important that your personalities can work well together. There is nothing worst then dreading working with a client because you can't stand them. They drag you down because they are never happy or pleased with the workout. Or if they are constantly questioning your abilities, thinking they know better then you do. It is essential that there is mutual respect and caring. I become personally involved with my clients. I often build lasting friendships.

Understanding your personal training clients will take time and effort. What are their real goals and why? What really motivates them? Are they truly ready to change? Without answers to these questions we cannot help them to attain their goals. We cannot help them become the successful, self-motivated, dedicated to good health person they and we want to become. You need to ask questions, then sit back and listen with an open mind. Every person is unique, with different personalities and needs. Find out what these needs are and then provide for them to the best of your ability. Some times you need to think outside the box, like the example I gave for the new mom. Her need was to know that her baby would be safe and cared for while she was working out so why not bring the baby along? Then they can both enjoy exercising so much it becomes a lifetime habit!

When you understand your personal training client you can put together the best fitness scenario. Find the one that meets their personality, their needs, and motivates them for a lifetime.

The one that makes them and you a success!

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1. What is the personal trainer's job?
2. What are the 10 questions to ask a potential client?
3. In the first 2 questions what is the main myth that needs to be discovered and dealt with?
4. Unless you are a nutritionist, what should you do if they want you to recommend a certain diet or supplement?
5. What may be your first role as a trainer with a new client?

15. What is another reason beside psychological should a trainer refuse to work with a client?

16. What are the 2 different types motivating responses that can influence training and keep focused?