

How to Coach the New Exerciser



January is a popular month for making positive health changes, including joining a gym, starting an exercise program, hiring a personal trainer or following a healthy diet. New exercisers have the best intentions to initiate behavior change; however, some go to the extreme or don't know where to begin. When this occurs, their efforts are often short-lived.

Personal trainers play an important role in helping the novice exerciser stick to his or her **exercise program**. Trainers provide beginner clients with the necessary tools and knowledge required to succeed with their fitness goals.

Novice exercisers require coaching strategies that differ from the traditional, everyday exerciser. The following methods, tips and guidelines will help you understand the mindset of beginning exercisers and what it takes to help them reach their goals.

Health Behavior Theories

An individual's readiness to change varies according to his or her current life situation and beliefs about the need for change. A good working knowledge of the health belief model is helpful because it enables you to better understand the motivations and mindset of the **beginning exerciser**.

The health belief model demonstrates that people engage in health behavior changes based on their perceived threat regarding a health issue and will weigh the pros and

cons of adopting **behavior change**. A person's perceived threat is based upon three factors:

1. Perceived Seriousness. Some people adopt positive behavior changes because they're worried about the consequences if they don't. The more serious the consequence, the more likely one will change. For example, an individual's physician may warn that, if lifestyle habits are not changed, he or she will suffer from negative health, such as diabetes, obesity or a heart attack.

2. Perceived Susceptibility. People are likely to change behaviors when they believe they are vulnerable or susceptible to a specific health problem. For example, if a person's father died of a heart attack, he or she will adopt behavior changes due to fears of being susceptible to a heart attack.

3. Cues to Action. Cues to actions include health fairs, brochures, books or other promotional materials that educate the consumer about the need for positive lifestyle behaviors. When a person is aware, or reminded, of a specific issue, he or she is more likely to change behaviors. For example, a person receiving a diabetes brochure from a health fair may adopt better behavior based on the received knowledge.

Ask Open-ended Questions

"Get to know the person behind personal training." This is an important concept, particularly with first-time exercisers. Open-ended questions and thorough consultations assist in the relationship-building process. Clients better express themselves and "dig deeper" into the reasons why they've chosen personal training. Also, open-ended questions discover the "why" behind exercise. People train to lose weight, gain muscle or improve performance. However, most clients train for deeper reasons, such as increasing self-confidence, improving daily functions, reducing chronic pain or being able to play with their children. Get to know your client's "why" with the following questions:

Why have you chosen to personal train?

Why are your goals important to you?

How can personal training benefit your life?

What are barriers or obstacles that may hinder your results?

What are your perceptions about health-behavior change?

Lastly, open-ended questions allow clients to realize what is achievable in their present life. For example, ask the client, "When can you fit exercise into your schedule?" This works better than recommending an exercise routine that may be unachievable due to time constraints. Clear communication builds trust and leads to better results.

Build Self-confidence and Trust

It is important to build a trustworthy relationship with the novice exerciser. A major goal is to improve the client's self-efficacy, which is his or her perception or ability to perform and achieve certain behaviors. Self-efficacy increases self-confidence and vice versa.

You can build trust through the following methods:

1. Start slowly. Clients who are moving from "couch to training" benefit from a

gradual start to exercise. Starting too quickly results in overly sore muscles or negative perceptions that exercise is painful. Use the ACE Integrated Fitness Training® (ACE IFT®) Model to incorporate stability and mobility exercises during the first phase of a client's routine.

2. Encourage accomplishments. Praise small achievements, whether it's advancing a bird dog or taking a walk on a lunch break.

3. Stick to your word. If a trainer says 10 reps, stick to 10 reps. Avoid counting to 10 and saying, "Just two more." This leads to exercise feeling like "work."

4. Make 1 percent changes: When clients achieve small goals, it not only increases self-efficacy, but also fulfills the need to meet trainer expectations. Small changes include adding vegetables to a meal, walking on a lunch break or playing with the kids. Small changes lead to big results.

Change is a Gradual Process

It's no secret that most people desire fast results. However, depending on the client's past experience, one may have a positive or negative outlook on exercise. If past efforts have been positive, or part of one's life, he or she is more likely to think positively about exercise. Many clients need to recognize that their exercise efforts are a journey and that movement is a part of life.

Keep the Workouts Fun

Most novice exercisers see exercise as "work." To help combat this negative perception, incorporate "play" into your workouts by including things like reaction drills, partner exercises or obstacle courses. Trainers who build relationships with clients understand what fun exercises work best. For more exercise engagement strategies and partner exercises, check out ACE's **"Fitness Programming for Overweight Clients and Clients Affected by Obesity" Workshop**.



By Elizabeth Kovar

Elizabeth Kovar M.A, personal trainer and yoga/fitness instructor, earned Yoga Alliance 318 hours in Ashtanga yoga & Chakra Meditation from the Ayurveda & Yoga Retreat and Hospital in Coonor, India. She studied yoga in five different countries, and learned through some of the best names in the yoga industry. Her Master's Thesis "Creating Yoga Programs for People with Movement Disabilities" was implemented on a 12 week research study for people with Stage 1-2 Parkinson's Disease with the University of Toledo Physical Therapy and Neurology Department. She resides in Seattle, WA and is the fitness coordinator at the City of Lynnwood Recreation Center. Elizabeth is also a freelance fitness / travel writer, workshop presenter and instructs an online Yoga 1 & 2 course for Walla Walla Community College. Questions or comments can be directed to erkovar@yahoo.com