Module 6

PROGRAMMING: SMALL WINS!

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Provide some stimulus for change.

Fitness programming should be created to engineer “small wins” to generate enthusiasm for ongoing efforts at change. Rather than emphasizing the big goals, the early steps involve providing a fitness experience that is challenging enough to provide some stimulus for change, but more importantly, avoids triggering negative perceptions about exercise and recreates more positive associations with physical activity.

There is a tremendous difference between knowing how to act and being motivated to act. When helping clients change fitness-related behaviors, the first instinct of many health and fitness professionals is to teach clients something. Health and fitness professionals often immediately begin telling weight-management clients what to do to effect change. Interestingly, many people find it more motivating to be partly finished with a longer journey than to be at the starting gate of a shorter one. The length of the journey and the perceived size of the change for the client can create a heavy psychological weight related to the effort required to lose the physical weight. Thus, as rapidly as possible at the outset, the health and fitness professional will want to create the perception that the client has already made some progress—is in the middle of the journey—rather than define “success” as occurring only after significant progress has made been made toward the larger, stated goal.

Any large goal—whether to lose a substantial amount of weight, get a college degree, or take a dream vacation—requires the translation of the big goal into an extensive number of small behaviors. To earn a college degree, a person has to show up to classes and put in the little daily efforts that add up to the big goal over time. Too often, however, this realization is lost on many weight-management clients, who often feel they must do it all at once and make big changes.

In truth, in any area of life, big changes typically follow a formula:

\[ \text{BIG CHANGE} = \text{SMALL CHANGES} + \text{TIME} \]

Successfully making a series of small changes (i.e., small actions or behaviors) will result in taking less time to achieve a big change (result), but even with fewer small changes, given enough time, big changes can result. Consider the following scenario: A woman lost 170 pounds. For the first few years, she was willing to make improvements only to nutrition behaviors, and lost 90 pounds. After maintaining this weight loss for some time, she became willing to add physical activity in gradually expanded efforts, and lost an additional 80 pounds. It took a total of seven years for her to shed 170 pounds. It could have been faster if more behaviors were changed from the outset. However, she never regressed, and the pace of change matched her desire and willingness to make changes to her behavior.

The ultimate objective of the health and fitness professional is to engender real and lasting change for the weight-management client. This means that changes must be chosen so that clients have absolute confidence in their own ability to complete them, physical activity is integrated smoothly into a client’s life, and the client ultimately adopts a more positive mindset surrounding physical activity (both exercise and non-exercise based) and actively searches for opportunities to move more outside of exercise sessions.
SMALL WINS

For many weight-management clients, the size of the task ahead looks massive. This can make the effort required to change feel monumental and create the sense that conditions may need to be nearly perfect for real and lasting change to occur. However, in the terrific book, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (Heath & Heath, 2010), the authors note that: When milestones seem too distant, look for “inch pebbles.”

They refer to the practical application of this idea as “small wins”—milestones that are within reach. Clients are not delaying “success” until they reach the stated weight-management goal. Rather, they are successful once they engage in behaviors that lead to the stated goal. Success is not losing 50 pounds next year, it is performing tomorrow’s actions related to that goal.

The result is that the professional creates a feeling of success for the client even in the very early stages of change. By attaching success to smaller daily or weekly behaviors rather than to crossing the finish line on the larger goal, health and fitness professionals help create within the client a sense of accomplishment and enthusiasm for continuing. When the professional engineers early success, what he or she is really doing is engineering hope that lasting change is possible.

Select small wins that have two traits: (1) They are meaningful and (2) they are within immediate reach.

Examples:

- Complete two workouts independently this week on Monday and Thursday at 7 A.M. in addition to the two trainer-led sessions.
- Progress one strength exercise (by perhaps adding resistance or repetitions) and one cardiorespiratory activity (walk either faster or longer) from baseline abilities.
- One day in the coming week, perform some form of non-exercise physical activity (e.g., gardening, walking/hiking, or dog walking) with a friend, family member, or neighbor.
- Successfully replace soda with water at lunch while at work for one week.
- Participate in one new exercise class this week.
FEEL BETTER FIRST

As important as the first few weeks of a fitness program with the weight-management client are, it is also advisable to sometimes be willing to throw out the rulebook. Consider that this type of client likely has experienced numerous cycles of weight loss followed by relapse, often including hard exercise that was noticeably unenjoyable. Large physical changes will not happen in a matter of weeks or even, in some cases, months. Therefore, the health and fitness professional can have the biggest impact in the early stages by altering how the client perceives, experiences, and feels about physical activity, rather than focusing attention primarily on the details of the exercise program itself.

In the early stages of programming, the health and fitness professional may find value in ignoring the guidelines for exercise and thus removing any subtle pressure the client may feel to do more or to feel he or she is settling for less than the ideal amount of exercise. Rather than create a program following the standard parameters for exercise, program an amount of exercise that leaves the client feeling better in the days following any workout.

This contrast of feeling better and more capable—if perhaps a bit sore from the novelty of certain movements—will be a refreshing change from the usual pattern of initial efforts at exercise exacting a high physical and psychological toll on the weight-management client. Building this new association between exercise and positive mental and physical states reverses the usual trend and sets the stage early on for a different mindset surrounding exercise.

Most often with weight-management programming, as a result of the goal to burn more calories during the exercise session, the emphasis is on longer cardiorespiratory exercise and perhaps less on functional movement and resistance training. This is a puzzling choice when you consider that anyone carrying even a little extra body weight above what is healthy likely possesses greater levels of “adaptive strength” than endurance, due to their need to move their own body mass during the day. Further, if the client is initiating exercise after an extended period of not doing so, this, combined with the extra body weight, will likely render any endurance activities much harder than they “should” feel. This can be a demotivator for the client.

Adaptive strength refers to the ability that is developed from the need to manage living with excess body weight. In strict terms, excess weight can weaken strength as traditionally defined when body-fat levels rise to the point where fat infiltrates muscle tissue (similar to “marbling” of meat), as it disrupts the contractile abilities of muscle (Messier, 2008).
Example: A new client, who weighs 360 pounds, performs two sets of five different exercises—one for each of the five primary movements as outlined in the ACE Integrated Fitness Training® (ACE IFT®) Model phase 2. Add a third set at the beginning of the following week’s workout. The client also performs five minutes of cardiorespiratory exercise below his heart rate at the first ventilatory threshold (VT1). Each weekday, the client will add one minute.

Rationale: Functional movements allow for the performance of activities when the client is more likely to feel capable and provides preferential fuel use for both types of exercise. Endurance activity should be chosen to limit duration so that the client never feels exhausted or like he is working too hard. Small progressions are added each day as ability improves.

The primary objective during the first few weeks of participation is “feel better first.” Clients should feel better physically, feel better about the concept of exercise, and begin to feel more capable from enhanced awareness of their physical selves. Consider the fact that following accepted programming guidelines with the client above would mean that, at the beginning of training, the program would follow these guidelines:

Perform any of the following (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2008):

- 150 minutes each week of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity (such as brisk walking or tennis)
- 75 minutes each week of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity (such as jogging or swimming laps)
- An equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity

Perform aerobic physical activity in episodes of at least 10 minutes and, if possible, spread it out through the week.

For even greater health benefits, do one of the following:
- Increase moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity to 300 minutes each week
- Increase vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity to 150 minutes each week

Doing more will lead to even greater health benefits.

Not only would this likely be too much exercise initially—from the perspective of the physical ability of the client, schedule availability, and motivation level of the client—but it is also confusing. Early attempts by new exercisers to meet these guidelines in the first few weeks of training create a negative experience both physically and psychologically. These exercise guidelines are often the ultimate objective, but nowhere do they mention how to start so that one can steadily and safely progress to those levels of frequency and intensity.
DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DO THIS?

Any actions agreed upon between the health and fitness professional and the weight-management client must be chosen so that the client has absolute confidence that the actions will be completed. Any doubt or statements of “I’ll try to do that…” often reflect ambivalence about the change. By making the size of the change large enough to make a difference but small enough to allow for confident execution by the client, the professional can generate “small wins” and a feeling of competence and success.

For example, at the beginning of the program, a health and fitness professional recommends that the client mentioned above (new to exercise; 360 pounds) commit to one short-term behavior related to nutrition and one related to exercise. During intake, it was discovered that the client drinks several sodas per day and plans to begin exercising during the work week. Initially, the client makes the following two statements:

- I will stop drinking soda and replace it with water.
- I will work out each day after work (assuming a five-day work week).

These changes may appear to the health and fitness professional to be wise choices based on the impact they would make. However, these changes may ask too much of the client given her motivation level. The health and fitness professional will want to investigate the viability of these statements. Some sample questions for doing so are as follows:

- “I am hearing you say that you will replace all 21 sodas you drink per week with water. Do you feel 100% confident that you are able to make that change and are you feeling positive about making that change?”
- “Are there any weekdays that prove to be more challenging for your schedule than others? I recall you mentioning that your daughter has gymnastics in the evenings two days per week. Will this affect your plan of working out after work in any way?”

If the client’s responses are anything less than absolute confidence and a positive attitude about committing to the two changes, then perhaps some adjustment of the stated/planned behavior changes is in order.

The client may replace 18 of the 21 sodas consumed each week with water and realize that three workouts per week is more realistic, with a commitment to get active outside of exercise the other two days (and this should be discussed and planned in detail).
MOVEMENT TIME IS POSITIVE TIME

A simple method for helping weight-management clients develop more positive associations with physical activity is to ensure that if the client is talking about anything negative (such as the stress of fighting traffic to arrive at the training session), the professional prevents him or her from beginning physical activity while doing so. No warming up, and no exercise while they need to “vent” for a few minutes. If the client already has negative attitudes about exercise, allowing negative emotions to dominate while moving will subtly enhance that association. This can be changed through the creation of an environment where only neutral or positive topics are discussed while moving.

Guidelines:

- Use this approach only during exercises or activities that are low-skill, repetitive, and which the client has already mastered.
- Use knowledge of the client’s personality and current life situation to know whether it is best to ask about exciting family events or something more trivial like pop culture.
- There are endless ways to use this approach. For example, the professional can ask about upcoming vacations, exciting events in the client’s family, or the client’s favorite song, movie, television show, or musical artist.

Underpinning all aspects of the client–professional relationship is rapport. Rapport, which is also the essence of the ACE IFT Model, is defined as a close and harmonious relationship in which the people understand each other’s feelings and communicate well. Rapport makes the bond stronger between the client and professional, and a stronger bond can lead to more successful behavior change.
USE VISUAL TRIGGERS TO ADD DAILY MOVEMENT(S)

Recognizing the value of both exercise and supplemental movement beyond the exercise session, the health and fitness professional may find value in choosing a particular movement that the client can reasonably perform throughout the day. The movements can be chosen for any goal and would simply be chosen for areas where additional daily work will be more beneficial to the client. For example, a weight-management client may benefit from some additional leg strengthening or perhaps a postural exercise.

Using any available visual trigger that the client would choose, the additional daily movements would be performed and “marked off” using the visual trigger. For example, a client is given the task of doing an extra set of lunges on stairs at home. The daily task is to perform five sets of five lunges with each leg, alternating legs with each repetition by stepping from the floor to a step and then back again. To mark off when these are done, the client could use any of the following strategies:

- Start with five coins in the left pocket. After each set of lunges is performed, transfer a coin to the right pocket. At the end of the day, once all sets are completed, all coins are in the right pocket.

- Move five paper clips from the left of a stair one at a time to the right side as sets are completed.

There are endless items to use in endless variations. This approach can be used with any movement that is beneficial to the client when performed more often. For example, a client needing additional posture improvement could do three sets of 30 seconds of wall stands spread throughout the day.
Nasal Breathing Is Fat Burning

Our mouths are designed for eating, drinking, and emergency breathing only. Mouth breathing triggers the stress response; nose breathing triggers the relaxation response. As Ed Harrold, performance enhancement coach at The Aspen Club teaches, how you breathe determines many factors:

- How well the body’s cells are oxygenated
- Whether the body is burning primarily fat or sugar
- The pH balance of the blood
- The hormonal/brain response of the body to any activity

Specifically, nasal breathing on both the inhale and the exhale optimizes all of the above factors for performance and perception.

Nasal breathing produces nitric oxide, a bronchodilator and vasodilator, lowers blood pressure, and improves oxygen absorption in the lungs. On the exhale, nasal breathing extracts one oxygen molecule out of the carbon dioxide from the exhalation and adds it to the two oxygen molecules on the inhale, providing a third more oxygen in each inhale (Guz, 1997).

Nasal breathing helps the body burn more fat and less sugar. The heart rate determines sugar and fat mixtures used when active. Higher heart rates use more sugar, while lower heart rates use more fat. Nasal breathing lowers heart rate (Jerath et al., 2006).

Additionally, when muscles run low on stored sugar reserves, they become acidic. Nasal breathing increases the pH of blood, providing a more alkaline blood flow to working muscles (Harrold, 2015).

Tips to get started:

- Begin nasal breathing using the diaphragmatic breath. Practice this while walking to master how it feels to breathe this deeply with a rising heart rate. Then, try it while exercising and slow down initially to master breathing in this way.

- Next, use a system of counting on your inhale and exhale. Inhale the breath for a count of three and exhale for six (strides, pedals, or seconds).

- Create another layer by inhaling for a count of three, holding the breath in for a count of three, and exhaling the breath for a count of six.

One of the more powerful, yet subtle, effects for the weight-management client will be a potential shift in the mindset and perception of exercise and physical activity. By employing nasal breathing, there is the potential to shift from a stress response in exercise to a more relaxed yet energetic state in exercise, setting the stage for the beginning of a subjectively more enjoyable exercise experience than the client has perhaps ever experienced.
References


Jerath, R. et al. (2006). Physiology of long pranayamic breathing: Neural respiratory elements may provide a mechanism that explains how slow deep breathing shifts the autonomic nervous system. Medical Hypothesis, 67, 566–571.
