



Helping Clients Become More Active

By Barbara A. Brehm
August 2002

When you work with people who are in the process of making a decision to become more active, your job is a lot bigger than simply designing an exercise program: Your clients are more likely to succeed if you also help them prepare psychologically.

Many people have difficulty increasing their physical activity levels. No matter what you say and do, some people just can't change their lives to accommodate more physical activity. Changing any kind of behavior involves planning and preparation, and changing activity patterns is no exception. We are creatures of habit, and we rely on our routine to get through the day; the force of habit is very strong.

When people decide to increase their activity levels, they generally go through various stages of planning and preparation. You can help clients work through the early stages of change and become more active in ways that increase their likelihood of success. When you work with people who are in the process of making a decision to become more active, your job is a lot bigger than simply designing an exercise program: Your clients are more likely to succeed if you also help them prepare psychologically.

Making a decision to change: Weighing the pros...

People generally decide to change their behavior when something causes them to feel a need to change, and then by weighing what they perceive to be the pros and cons of an issue. Clients who hesitate to start an exercise program are often still unconvinced that the benefits of exercising outweigh the difficulties they expect to encounter. Your input at this stage can help people understand the benefits of regular physical activity, so that they can muster the motivation they need to decide to become more active.

Educate these clients about exercise benefits in every way possible. Ask clients questions to find out what they already know about exercise benefits. What would they like to achieve by exercising? What health problems run in their family? What health risks are they hoping to reduce? Simple, attractive handouts and articles that you think address clients' health and fitness concerns might help. If clients are concerned about a health problem, spell out how exercise can help, if it can, and what kind of exercise is best. Listen with empathy and understanding as you ask them about the importance of their health. Ask questions to lead them to conclude that their health is important, and a top priority. Help them conclude that exercise must be a priority as well.

At this point, you may be tempted to promise clients a winning lottery ticket if they begin to exercise. Unrealistic expectations regarding exercise lead to disappointment and exercise drop out. Be especially careful not to promise quick and easy weight loss. Focus on benefits they are most likely to see: feeling less stressed, sleeping better and feeling more energetic are a few. If weight loss is the goal, encourage them to think lifelong fitness rather than quick weight loss. And don't be afraid to point out the dangers of a sedentary lifestyle.

...And cons

You've probably heard all the excuses by now: I don't have enough time; I'm too tired; I have a knee problem; the dog ate my membership card. Ask questions and use your good listening skills to find out what your clients perceive to be the barriers that keep them from sticking to an exercise program. If they have exercised in the past, what caused them to stop?

Help clients come up with solutions for each of their identified major barriers. Try to get them to give you the answers, rather than telling them what to do. Clients who do their own problem solving come up with more realistic solutions and feel more invested in the process, and then more committed to their exercise programs.

There is one barrier, however, that you can help prevent: injury. Be sure your clients are starting slowly and

progressing gradually. Be sure the exercise program will not aggravate old injuries or cause new ones.

Build skills and confidence

Once your clients have made the decision to embark on an exercise program, you can increase their chance of success by helping them to acquire the skills they will need to stick to it. Help them prepare for exercise by planning how exercise will fit into their day. How will they manage their time? What will they do when problems arise at home or at work?

Clients who will be using a fitness center will appreciate your guidance about fitting in. Give them adequate information about the machines they will use, or the classes they will take. Don't underestimate how intimidating a fitness center can seem.

Encourage clients to build social support. Is there a friend who might want to exercise with them?

Do your clients feel "different" from most exercisers? Tell them about other people who have successfully established an exercise program, and introduce them, if possible. Is there a group or class that is geared toward their needs? Many fitness centers offer special programs, such as activities for older adults or new moms.

Reinforce the idea that regular physical activity is a lifelong proposition, not something you do for a few months to "get in shape." Help clients anticipate those times when exercise won't fit into their lives, and make plans for getting back into the exercise routine. Encourage clients to plan and prepare for becoming active again after life has temporarily interrupted their exercise routines.FM

REFERENCES

Barbara A. Brehm, Ed.D., is professor of exercise and sport studies at Smith College, Northampton, Mass.