



Programming for Lifestyle Change

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You can reach the unfit — the majority of Americans who have not yet committed to exercise — by using these simple steps to change your focus from physical fitness to lifestyle change.

To date, health and fitness facilities have generally failed to attract large numbers of unfit and overweight people. Instead, they are perceived to be only for "fit people," and

those who need regular exercise the most often find current exercise facilities intimidating and overwhelming. Such people take just one look at what is currently offered and make a split-second decision that may last a lifetime: "It's not for me."

However, if you take steps to attract and keep this potential market of unfit individuals, you could not only increase your number of memberships, but also help solve an enormous problem in the U.S. Fitness facilities should not be designed only for the fit; many new ideas exist for attracting and keeping the unfit and overweight in your facility.

A new message

If health and fitness centers want to survive and prosper, they need to take a serious look at what is currently offered, and make some radical changes to attract those who do not use fitness facilities. Glossy brochures, stunning facilities and the latest high-tech machines are not enough. "Sophisticated shoppers" are looking for an un-intimidating environment. They want a warm and welcoming atmosphere where they feel at ease. They also need a structured programming approach that takes into account barriers to starting exercise. They need guidance from knowledgeable and helpful staff who can empathize and encourage. Most of all, fitness centers need to portray the messages: "We care" and "We are here to meet your special needs."

Creating a welcoming environment

Vast exercise areas and huge lines of equipment can be intimidating for unfit and nervous beginners. So, pay particular attention to create a warm and welcoming environment. Here are some steps to help:

Pay attention to changing areas. Unfit and overweight people do not like to expose their non-athletic bodies. So, build as much privacy and modesty into the changing areas as possible (e.g., self-contained showers, personal drying areas, large towels and nice vanity areas). Make the changing experience as pleasant as possible.

Select exercise equipment carefully. All equipment should be easy to use and understand. It should be appropriate for beginners, aesthetically pleasing and the best available for the specified function. Also, avoid the temptation to cram a large number of exercise stations into a small area.

Consider décor. To create a warm and uplifting environment, use warm colors and match them carefully, including carpeting. Make use of lighting, signage and plants to bring in the human aspect. When combined, these aspects can create the kind of environment to which people like to return.

Focus on the programming room. Exercise alone is not enough; it is just one part of the process of losing weight and achieving lifestyle balance. Beginners need guidance, helpful strategies and encouragement. This requires a comfortable and private environment where sensitive issues can be discussed. Therefore, you will need a well-designed programming room in which this can take place. Avoid a stark, clinical environment; make it a pleasant area where clients can be at ease.

Make all procedures quick. The No. 1 excuse used by people who do not exercise is "not enough time," so design all

procedures for the time-starved. Avoid intimidating fitness checks in the early stages, and take all the hassle out of beginning an exercise program; get into the serious stuff later. Make people feel good about themselves, instead of inadequate. Try to make the initial exercise experience as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. This will help to overcome feelings of embarrassment that unfit people often experience when starting an exercise program.

See everything through the eyes of the unfit. To create the right sort of environment for attracting those who do not currently use fitness facilities, take a fresh look at your whole operation. Try to step outside and take a new look at your facility and programming procedures as they are seen through the eyes of the unfit and overweight. If you find this difficult to do yourself, then take a sample group of your new target market around with you and get some feedback. This will help you get closer to the market, and you may start to see things from a completely different perspective.

By paying careful attention to the above factors, you will be taking the first essential steps toward creating a more welcoming and uplifting environment for those who most need your help. Once you start this process, you will begin to see the possibilities of attracting a new market segment unfold. However, don't stop there: Pay an equal amount of time to programming.

Introducing wellness

It is time to move beyond programming for just fitness. Focusing on the physical has a limited appeal to those unfit millions who perceive health and fitness facilities as catering to fit people. To change this perception, programming structures should be changed to encourage, and then develop, the whole person.

This requires a shifting of focus from just exercising, to lifestyle results for your target market. It means helping people to reconnect with their bodies and understand how exercise, nutrition, weight control, stress management, relaxation and lifestyle balance affects their mind and body alike. Provide more than just information; make them feel you care. Together with one-on-one wellness coaching, this can encourage a personal philosophy that appreciates the importance of health and wellbeing.

Introduce wellness in its broadest sense: Wellness is a feeling of total wellbeing. It involves choosing to follow a healthy lifestyle and taking personal responsibility for one's own health. It is a process of making healthy choices and gradually gaining control over lifestyle habits. It also involves the development of a positive mindset, greater self-confidence and developing personal potential to the full, along with peak health and fitness.

Wellness is a lifelong quest for total lifestyle balance. Almost everyone can achieve it, but some may take longer than others. Your aim should be to offer guidance, strategies and self-help materials to encourage this ultimate state of wellbeing by offering to become a "lifestyle coach."

In its purest sense, there are six main dimensions to wellness: physical, emotional, occupational, spiritual, intellectual and social. You will not be able to affect all of these areas in your new health and fitness program, but there is a lot you can do. When combined, these various dimensions can all contribute to a feeling of total wellbeing. Here are some ways you can assist someone within your new programming structure:

Physical fitness. Reconnect people to their body's basic needs and how it functions. Regular exercise remains an important function, and is the starting point for taking control of lifestyle habits. Include cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility and body composition.

Teach the need for balanced nutrition, "healthy" self-denial, vitamins, minerals and the best strategies for weight control. In this part of your program, you could include such areas as "making time for exercise," "developing a positive mindset" and "motivating yourself over the long term." Also, try to reduce factors that may lead to health problems later on (high blood pressure, being overweight, drinking too much alcohol, smoking, etc.) by providing clear guidance and strategies to reduce these factors.

Emotional fitness. Having a positive mental state is directly linked to wellness. Understanding human emotions, controlling personal feelings and maintaining emotional stability are all part of it, as well as laughing, enjoying life, coping with stress and maintaining balance.

As a lifestyle coach, there are various ways to contribute to emotional fitness through building self-efficacy and confidence, explaining how stress affects the body, providing helpful stress-control strategies, and teaching the importance of relaxation and balance in all things. However, you will not be in a position to offer such guidance

until you have gotten to know your clients well, and they have gained confidence in you. Also, do not overstep your bounds: If clients need professional help, help them to find it.

Occupational fitness. If your clients are not happy with their occupation, you will find that their entire wellbeing suffers. It is important to derive personal satisfaction from work. Perhaps the best way to convey this is through personal example. When you expand your program offerings and talents to include the wellness dimension, you will find that this is much more fulfilling and rewarding, and you will enjoy your work more.

Spiritual fitness. Spiritual fitness refers to the development of the inner-self and spirit, viewing life as purposeful and pleasurable, and experiencing and enjoying it to the fullest. Encourage reflection to discover personal meaning and purpose in life. Help clients identify the true sources of pleasure, fulfillment and joy.

Sometimes this falls into place when all the previously mentioned factors are well under control and balanced. As a lifestyle coach, you may also be able to offer guidance on how to make more time for personal reflection, how to better balance the work/family dimension, and how to do more of the things that make your clients feel good about themselves. In the busy world of work, people neglect these areas and become spiritually empty. You can show various ways to prioritize better and to "recharge the batteries" occasionally.

Intellectual fitness. Maintaining an active mind greatly contributes to total wellbeing (continuous learning, creative and stimulating mental activities, reading, writing, doing puzzles, etc.). Mental curiosity and learning should be continuous throughout life.

Perhaps the best thing a lifestyle coach can do in this area is merely reiterate the "healthy mind/healthy body" connection to those who have perhaps forgotten that these are closely related.

Social fitness. Getting along with others and appreciating the differences in people is important. Also important is having a concern for the welfare of the community and the environment. Good friends, close family ties and trusting relationships are a part of high-level wellness. Do your best to show people how to make adequate time for this through prioritizing what is really important in life.

Total wellness is a combination of all six dimensions, continually trying to improve each dimension to reach an ultimate state of harmony and wellbeing. Many people will be strong in some areas (e.g., physical fitness) and weak in other areas (e.g., spiritual fitness). However, neglecting any dimension weakens the lifestyle balance that is critical to high-level wellness. The greatest part a lifestyle coach can play to assist this process is to learn and then share the self-improvement strategies that can be introduced to improve each dimension, and to offer positive help and encouragement.

Your aim should be to start with the physical fitness dimension, and then progress through areas in which the client is interested as you build confidence in your program. Unfortunately, many new members drop out during the initial fitness phase because it is just too physical. Taking a wellness approach provides the opportunity to move beyond this phase and to increase interest and commitment as you progress.

Practical steps to wellness coaching

Many people do not use fitness centers because of feelings of intimidation, embarrassment, low self-esteem, little confidence, perceived lack of time, and that it is all simply too overwhelming. That is why you must start at the beginning and break everything down into easily digestible steps. Your mission in the early stages is to make people comfortable in their new environment, and to enjoy the one-to-one interaction.

Do not overwhelm new members with expectations. Just start out with enjoyable exercise, and then take it from there. The areas to tackle are those the client feels ready to tackle, so don't rush the process. Help your client establish a plan of short-term steps that will lead them toward their long-term goals.

Four-week "stepping stones" work well, with a personal guidance session to review progress at the end of each stage. From a practical and operational viewpoint, this is manageable and can be sustained. It also builds self-efficacy when small lifestyle changes are recorded, and confidence in both you and your program gradually builds. If you can build the steps into an initial 12-week program structure, you may also be able to avoid early attrition.

Implementing a 12-week program

Remember that your new target market is made up of beginners in terms of health, fitness and getting in control of lifestyle habits, so start at the beginning. If your new client is someone who is fit and knowledgeable, merely adjust to meet his or her lifestyle needs and expectations. The customer should dictate the program.

Total lifestyle balance cannot always be achieved quickly; however you may simply create a greater awareness of what is involved and achieve some definite steps. Some people will be happy with that, others may wish to move on and become your future success stories. The end of the 12-week program can be marked by a lifestyle reassessment to show the progress achieved, and perhaps special recognition for the lifestyle targets achieved.

The 12-week process requires a high level of customer care and lots of one-to-one help and encouragement. From a coaching perspective, the instructor requires a high professional knowledge base, good communication skills and the ability to put people fully at ease. Select only the best for this task.

Conducting the program sessions

Everyone has their own ideas about how to conduct a good programming session, and it is impossible to cover all of the important factors in this short article. However, if clients leave with a big smile on their face, you have probably done a good job. The following checklist might help:

Create a good first impression. Be clean and tidy, and have all materials organized beforehand. Anticipate the relevant information and helpful strategies in advance. Stage-manage the first impression, and help the client feel comfortable with you.

Quickly establish rapport. Create a helping relationship, and use people skills to put your client at ease. Show you really care about them. When starting, the main objective is to establish rapport and show empathy.

Identify particular areas of interest. Try to get a picture of the complete person and their level of interest and commitment. Listen carefully to what really interests them. Try to assess current behavior patterns, and then establish some priority areas for possible future action.

Build confidence. Explain the wellness concept, programming structure, steps to be taken and level of commitment required. Use success stories to build confidence and teach the "I can" approach. Agree on an action plan for the next four weeks, and include achievable lifestyle-change steps. Provide helpful strategies and self-help materials, as well as lots of encouragement. Next, work toward a personal wellness plan for the long term.

Record progress. A visual achievement record is motivating. Always celebrate the small changes and reward outstanding commitment and effort. Confirm your long-term support, and then plan the next appointment date.

Developing a lifestyle-change program

To begin a lifestyle-change program in your facility, you will have to clear out all the clutter in your current operation and make a fresh start. Remember, your aim is to attract a new target audience, so don't forget to look at everything afresh, as seen through the eyes of the nervous new beginner.

The emphasis is on the long-term: keeping customers for life. The best way to differentiate yourself from competitors is to continually work harder to please your customers. This is a long-term commitment with lots of hard work in front of you. However, it is also rewarding, and may breathe new life into your existing operation. It should add interest to your programs, and also to your staff.

As you progress, you will come up with new materials and approaches, and everyone will grow in experience and capabilities. The important thing is to make a start.

However, don't forget the basic principles:

- * Create an attractive facility.
- * Become customer-led.
- * Create a good programming structure.
- * Attract (and keep) the best staff.
- * Be passionate about customer service.

Your success will be measured by how close you can get to your new target audience, and to show them that you care. Your "success stories" and the resulting word-of-mouth promotion should do the rest. FM

Sample Structure for a Lifestyle-Change Program

This sample 12-week program includes three major beginnersteps toward achieving better lifestyle balance. The 12-week program is broken down into three, four-week stages as follows:

Stage 1 --Getting fitter (four weeks)

General lifestyle steps: During this stage, show how to make time for exercise, provide a safe program, and suggest steps toward following the wellness concept and staying motivated.

- * Agree on personal goals
- * Teach how to exercise safely and enjoyably
- * Discuss how to overcome problems and to make time for exercise
- * Discuss how to become more positive
- * Review progress

A colored exercise program card can be provided for this stage, which includes boxes for self-stamping when exercise and lifestyle targets are achieved. This visual record builds self-efficacy.

Stage 2 --Healthier eating and weight control (four weeks)

General lifestyle steps: During this stage, continue with the exercise program, reinforce the wellness concept and also create a personal plan for healthier eating and weight control.

- * Create a healthier eating plan
- * Help clients to understand weight-control principles
- * Identify areas for improvement
- * Develop an "I can" mindset
- * Help them to be realistic and take a long-term view

A second four-week program card is provided for recording purposes, as well as personal focus sheets and any other relevant self-help materials to create a greater awareness and understanding. The targets set must be realistic and achievable.

Stage 3 -- Lifestyle balance and relaxation (four weeks)

General lifestyle steps: During this third stage, progress toward peak fitness is encouraged, and steps are taken to achieve better lifestyle balance and personal wellbeing.

- * Teach how to prioritize
- * Discuss making more "self-time"
- * Teach stress-control strategies
- * Discuss achieving better lifestyle balance, learning to relax and switching off the "on" switch