

Maximizing Motivation, Minimizing Fear

By **Kymerly Williams-Evans, MA**

Something is amiss in our industry. Despite constant confirmation that physical activity improves health, our population is getting less and less fit. According to retention and adherence expert Rod Dishman, PhD, head of the exercise psychology lab at the University of Georgia, exercise habits haven't changed much in the past 15 years. Dishman's research indicates that 50 percent of new exercisers still drop out within six months of starting a fitness program. And only 15 percent of the population exercises moderately, while a scant 10 percent performs vigorous activity. The sad fact is that these statistics haven't budged since the fitness boom started.

Clearly, the fitness industry has not been effective in keeping people exercising. Although group fitness instructors can't do a lot to initially attract new members, it is our responsibility to find ways to help retain the ones we have. To do that effectively, we need to better understand what people fear and what motivates them to get and stay fit.

The Fear Factor

"People avoid situations where they think they may fail," says David Conroy, PhD, assistant professor of kinesiology and director of the sport psychology lab at Pennsylvania State University in University Park. This is

especially true in what Conroy calls a "performance or socially evaluative situation," in which people are socially judged or assessed by others in a public or semipublic forum. "Group fitness classes, more than most fitness activities, lend themselves to performance or social evaluation."

Conroy points out that fear of failure can take several forms. The most significant is the **fear of shame or embarrassment**. Instructors who comment on mistakes in a group setting confirm a participant's worst fears. As instructors, we know to avoid obvious humiliation, such as laughing at a participant's misstep or chastising someone over the microphone. But some kinds of humiliation are more subtle.

Have you ever counted up the number of negative comments you make in a single class? Consider the impact of cues such as, "Don't lock out your knees," "If you can't do this version, do the easier one" or "I'm not seeing any energy out there!" Such comments not only deprive exercisers of rewards but also emphasize punishment. People who already have a heightened fear of failure will only become more anxious in this kind of setting.

The remedy to this kind of situation is so easy. Emphasize the positive over the negative. Cue participants to "Do A" instead of stressing, "Don't do B." As long as we prioritize **outcome**—be it

positive or negative—we will perpetuate their fears of failing to achieve that outcome. And they will leave and never come back. Instead, we need to emphasize the exercise **process**.

Process Instead of Outcome

What specifically can we do in our classes to keep people coming back for more? Conroy offers several practical suggestions, all related to the exercise process.

Up the Fun Factor. Think about why kids choose certain activities. The answer is they want to have fun. And the reason they reject an activity is that it stops being fun. Guess what? Adults are no different. Like kids, they stay active and interested when four factors are present:

1. The activity is fun.
2. It allows an opportunity for mastery.
3. It reinforces a person's sense of competency.
4. It provides a chance to be with friends.

According to Conroy, having fun is one of the most powerful "process motivators" fitness professionals can employ to help retain clients.

Encourage Risk Taking. Another way to increase motivation without putting undue emphasis on an outcome is to encourage and reward reasonable risk taking in your classes. For example, after presenting complex or unfamiliar

choreography, say, “Who tried at least one new move today? Congratulate yourselves!” Set the mood for risk taking: “I’m excited by the number of you who were willing to move out of your comfort zone.” (Note that this is not the same as singling someone out in a negative fashion!)

Avoid Comparisons to Others.

Nothing is more deflating to exercisers than being compared to their classmates. People are far more receptive and motivated when their progress is contrasted to their own past performance. Imagine how motivating it would be for a participant to hear an instructor say, “Your posture has really improved over the past few weeks” or “Have you noticed how much your balance has increased when doing this pose? You really hold your form better each time.”

Stress the Successes, Not the

Mistakes. You may be conscientious enough to refrain from drawing attention to participants’ mistakes. But how often do you make a concerted effort to comment on what people are doing well? Diligently correcting bad form is almost ingrained in us. To counter this tendency, look for opportunities to comment on what members are doing *right*. (You won’t have to look too far!) When your class is following your directions well, say so. If participants are listening to your cues, let them know you appreciate it and can tell by their quick pickup. If you see a few people struggling but not giving up, compliment their persistence and bravery.

Talk Openly About Failure. Make failure a safe topic to discuss by using yourself as an example. Let your participants know about the time you attended another teacher’s class and went left when everyone else went right. Or tell them how you took a new class at a recent convention and felt like a novice exerciser. Also encourage your participants to share their own fears. Ask them what they think is the worst

thing that could happen in a fitness class. Then tell them how you survived a similar situation. The message you send out using this technique will be powerful: Even a fitness instructor can fail at fitness once in a while yet still succeed overall.

Focus Your Feedback on What Participants Can Control. It isn’t that we must avoid evaluating participants altogether, but we should try to focus our comments on things that are under the exerciser’s control. An example of something that is within a person’s control is effort. An example of something not within a person’s control is being able to follow an instructor’s cues perfectly. Keeping evaluative feedback relevant to control reduces anxiety, because participants do not have to worry about getting punished (or not getting rewarded) for outside variables.

Make Duration and Intensity Achievable

Another way to increase motivation and diminish fear is to reduce exercise time and intensity, says Dishman. He observes that exercise adherence goes up as time and intensity go down. “Exercise bouts of 45 minutes led to an adherence rate of 54 percent,” says Dishman. “However, that number increased to 71 percent when exercise time dropped to a 15-to-30-minute span” (Dishman 2001).

One reason for this may be that goals become more attainable when the activity period is shorter. And being confident of reaching a goal is the opposite of fearing failure. This correlation underscores the potential benefit of offering shorter classes and shorter cardio sections or placing minimal emphasis on reaching peak intensity. Another practical way to apply this knowledge is to remind participants, “We’ll be done in only 15 minutes” or “Five more minutes and we’ll be ready to cool down.”

WHY FAMILIARITY DOESN'T BREED MOTIVATION

You’d think fitness class participants would feel more comfortable and less afraid to fail if they got to know each other better, wouldn’t you? Not so, says David Conroy, PhD, assistant professor of kinesiology and director of the sport psychology lab at Pennsylvania State University in University Park. When researching interactions in fitness classes, he found that anxiety actually increased as participants learned more about each other. One reason for this, Conroy theorizes, was that exercisers felt more pressure to perform as others’ awareness of them grew. In other words, expectations rose as familiarity grew.

To address this, Conroy suggests, fitness professionals should avoid cues that emphasize structured interaction with other participants. Examples of such cues are, “Turn to your neighbor” and “Introduce yourself to someone new today.” Instead, he recommends that instructors channel group interactions through themselves and keep direct participant-to-participant interactions informal in nature.

For similar reasons, Dishman advocates de-emphasizing intensity and heart rates during sessions with healthy adults. That’s a radical statement for instructors used to monitoring heart rates, taking a pulse check or referring participants to a chart to see whether they are in the “right” range. Again, the issue is one of outcome versus process, failure versus success. When we measure heart rates, we tend to value a specific intensity (usually mid to high) as more appropriate than another intensity. We also ask exercisers to see

whether they have hit or missed an external target range, which is really outside of their control. The message becomes, “If your heart rate is in the bottom zone, you’re not working hard enough.” A better option to increase motivation is to teach participants to rate their intensity in terms of perceived exertion and how they are feeling.

To achieve this, use cues like, “If you feel you are working as hard as you want to, great! Who would like to be breathing more/less heavily?” (For more information on options for assessing intensity in group cardio classes, please refer to the article “Monitoring Aerobic Intensity” in the June 2000 issue of *IDEA Fitness Edge*.)

The Look vs. the Feel

According to the experts interviewed for this article, the real key to retention lies in emphasizing process over results. To do that, we need to teach our classes to become aware of what they *feel* rather than how they look. Some may consider this a paradox given all the people who are motivated to exercise by a desire to improve their appearance. Will they really care if we talk to them about how exercise makes them feel? The answer lies in distinguishing why they come to us in the first place versus why they keep coming *back*.

Remember that statistics indicate that only a small percentage of people exercise vigorously or even moderately. But achieving visible results—a different “look”—requires a heavy investment of exercise effort, intensity and time. Therefore, few exercisers actually get results they can see. In short, if people exercise just for the look, they are statistically destined to fail. How many class regulars do you have who have been coming to you for years yet essentially look the same as when they started? If they were motivated solely by visible results, they would have quit a long time ago. Obviously, these class

regulars are tapping into other exercise rewards—rewards that enhance the participants’ feelings about themselves and sustain their enjoyment of the workout process.

The way to help shift the focus from what isn’t always attainable—a new look—to what is sustainable is to convey to participants the immediate rewards of how exercise can make them feel. Kathleen Martin, PhD, assistant professor of kinesiology at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, and an expert in motivation, refers to fitness professionals who can do this as “Enriched Group Leaders.” Such fitness leaders stress intrinsic over extrinsic factors. They avoid results-oriented, or extrinsic, motivators—for example, “We’re going to burn 300 calories in this class” or “Ten more workouts and that bikini will look fantastic.” Ultimately, rewards like these prove to be short-lived or unreachable. Instead, enriched group instructors rely on cues that emphasize process-oriented, or intrinsic, rewards—for instance, “I hope you are proud of yourself for coming to class today” or “Give yourselves a hand for trying your best.” For more on motivating exercisers in this way, see “Traits of an Enriched Group Leader” below.

Masters at Motivation

In order to encourage participants to motivate themselves intrinsically, you

need to understand the factors that motivate people. Conroy says motivation first serves to “energize or initiate” behavior. Next, it “directs” that behavior. Finally, motivation “sustains” behavior. In fact, in the final analysis, the quality of motivation is best assessed by its ability to *maintain* behavior over time.

As Conroy points out, people essentially operate from two types of motivational orientations. **Approach-oriented** individuals exercise to increase the probability of receiving a reward, such as praise or admiration. **Avoidance-oriented** individuals exercise to avoid punishments, such as criticism, embarrassment or weight gain. According to Conroy, “Both orientations can effectively initiate and direct behavior. However, approach-oriented motivation is typically associated with greater behavioral persistence than avoidance-oriented motivation. More important, avoidance orientations are associated with greater distress than approach orientations.” For this reason, Conroy recommends that fitness professionals create environments that promote rewards instead of criticisms.

Verbal praise is the most common reward exercisers can get from instructors. Researchers have found that exercisers report an increased interest in and persistence at an activity when they are praised for it (Deci, Koestner & Ryan

TRAITS OF AN ENRICHED GROUP LEADER

A group fitness instructor who relies on the Enriched Leadership Style, as defined by motivation expert Kathleen Martin, PhD, is likely to

- **engage in conversation with exercisers before and after class**
- **give specific positive reinforcement**
- **offer encouragement after mistakes**
- **emphasize the positive through comments and facial expression**
- **use praise following exercise**
- **reward ability and effort immediately**
- **give specific instructions**

1999). Positive comments are consistently associated with enhanced intrinsic motivation. The motivational value of appropriate verbal praise from fitness instructors is clear and strong.

The Take-Home Message

So, motivating group exercisers is not so abstract after all. We need to look for opportunities to highlight how participants feel as they move and to comment positively on how they feel. We need to offer praise, positive reinforcement and leader-to-participant interaction. We need to remind participants how well they are doing, emphasize how much they are doing for themselves simply by moving and give them every opportunity to succeed, not fail. If we do these things, we may find that people do indeed stick with it. I'll bet none of us would mind becoming an Enriched Group Leader known for great motivation!

Kymerly Williams-Evans, MA, is editor of IDEA Fitness Edge and academic advisor for the fitness instruction minor at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

She wouldn't mind looking good via fitness activities, but she is happy to still feel great about exercise having spent 20 years teaching the process.

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Editor's Note: To learn more about the latest motivational theories you can apply to fitness participants, look for an upcoming article by David Conroy, PhD, in the May 2002 issue of IDEA Health & Fitness Source.

10 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL EXERCISE MOTIVATION

According to Rod Dishman, PhD, head of the exercise psychology lab at the University of Georgia and a leading researcher in motivation, retention and adherence, fitness professionals can help exercisers succeed by reminding them to do the following:

- **Set specific long-term and short-term exercise goals.**
- **Commit for the long haul.**
- **Make the activity fun.**
- **Focus on the intrinsic, not extrinsic, rewards of exercise.**
- **Schedule exercise so it becomes a priority.**
- **Try something new—seek pleasure and have options.**
- **Make it difficult *not* to exercise.**
- **Exercise to feel better, not to look better. (Don't judge success by visible fitness gains.)**
- **Exercise with a friend, since people often commit better to others than to themselves.**
- **Finish exercise sessions feeling good.**