

What Older Adults WANT

At the 2002 World Fitness IDEA convention, held in San Diego, the hot topic among attendees was teaching older adults. As all of this year's IDEA award recipients emphasized in their acceptance remarks, not only is it cool and fun to teach the older-adult population, but it's prudent as well. With the baby boomer wave cresting, teaching older adults really is an investment in your own future!

So how do you make the transition from teaching standard classes that are geared toward any age to designing and leading classes that target older adults? Can you simply use the skills you already have? According to the experts consulted for this article, the answer is "yes and no."

To arrive at your own conclusions, use the following lists to determine what you need to add to your repertoire of skills in order to reach this burgeoning market.

Program Design

All of our experts stressed one basic program design principle: Know your participants. In many of the standard fitness programs offered in clubs today, the class descriptions are so specific that participants know what to expect before they enter the room. But in many cases, classes geared toward older adults have nebulous, all-encompassing names like "Senior Fitness." While this kind of class title aptly states *who* the class is for, *what* is being offered is less than clear.

The reality is that the older-adult population encompasses a wide range of ages and physical ability levels, from active to frail. Additionally, there is great diversity in fitness goals, motivation, experience and expectations in this population. Once you get to

Program Design

DO:

- * Come early.
- * Plan to stay 15 to 20 minutes after class to answer questions.
- * Ask seniors what (if any) type of exercise they are used to.
- * Find out what types of exercise they like.
- * Find out what types of exercise they don't like.
- * Determine what they hope to gain from the class.
- * Stay flexible; be ready to change or modify moves.
- * Create a program that is realistic about the participants' limitations.
- * Examine your own priorities for the class.
- * Be aware of goals not related to physical conditioning: social interaction is an important desire for many participants.
- * Keep It Safe and Simple (KISS): You can provide a great workout just by walking in squares, triangles, circles, lines and squares. Basic moves work well in this format and help with injury prevention.
- * Think "Good, Better, Best"; the best movement choice is one that everyone can perform well and that is easy on the joints.
- * Plan for longevity; this group of loyal participants will stay with you for years, so plan moves they can perform and perfect for years to come.
- * Incorporate exercises that mimic or assist with the activities of daily living; for example, squats help people get in and out of chairs.
- * Let participants know that some moves may be added or deleted on a "trial and error" basis.
- * Ask for feedback from the group.
- * Remember that choreography isn't the goal; improved health is.

DON'T:

- * Assume anything about this market.
- * Automatically associate age with frailty; many seniors are quite hearty and able.
- * Feel you have to be a medical expert; it's okay and necessary at times to say something is out of your realm of competence or knowledge.
- * Feel that every minute of class needs to be filled with movement; breaks for social interaction, instruction and water are just as necessary.
- * Razzle-dazzle participants with your moves; use your personality as your main tool.
- * Single out older people from your standard classes and invite them to be part of your older adult class. Instead, simply make a general announcement to everyone so no one gets embarrassed.
- * Be afraid to laugh at yourself and life (but not at your participants!).

know the basic makeup of your potential participants, you can tailor your program to their needs and levels. Alternatively, you can design a class that highlights your existing skills and then market that exclusively to older adults. Of course, as your program grows and evolves, you can start adding to your older-adult class offerings and provide specific workouts within that track.

Movement & Cuing

Most of your older participants will probably attend your classes because they want to feel better and enhance their quality of life. "With older adults, it's all about *functional* fitness, not fashionable fitness," says Peggy Buchanan, MA, director of the fitness and aquatics center at Vista del Monte retirement community in Santa Barbara, California, and the 2002

IDEA Program Director of the Year.

As you're teaching movement to older adults, try to relate your cuing to daily tasks. For example, instead of saying, "Reach and stretch," say, "Reach as though you're trying to get something off the top shelf." Ken Alan, a Los Angeles-based instructor who has been teaching older adults since 1985, calls this "movement with meaning."

Motivation & Communication

How you communicate with your older participants helps determine whether they continue with your class, but their reasons for initially attending can differ significantly from those of other age groups. Alan says the factors motivating seniors fall into one of four categories: "(1) Prevention: They want to prevent something from happening, such as cardiac disease or physical deterioration. (2) Control: They want to gain control of their lives, bodies and health. (3) Reversal: They want to reverse something that's already happened, such as weight gain or a decrease in range of motion. (4) Participation: They want to participate in life in a meaningful way."

Buchanan says members of the older generation attend fitness classes to focus on the whole person. She cites six aspects of fitness motivation for seniors: emotional, spiritual, vocational, intellectual, social and physical (which is the basis for the first five). Knowing that you are teaching to a "whole person" and not just an "exerciser" will free you to use these six aspects of your own personality within the context of your class.

Keep in mind that this generation didn't grow up viewing fitness as a goal and may still cling to the perception that exercise is uncomfortable and grueling. It is incumbent upon you to make exercise a learning experience that is fun but still geared toward your participants' goals.

Music

Volume and selection are the biggest issues when selecting and playing music for older-adult

Movement & Cuing

DO:

- * Relate exercises to the activities of daily living.
- * Explain why a move is relevant, and describe its purpose.
- * Use the warm-up as a rehearsal for moves that will be used later in the class.
- * Build from basic steps and do gradual progressions.
- * Pay attention to changes in direction, rhythm, tempo, balance, volume, complexity and plane.
- * Suggest simple modifications or default moves.
- * Use movement patterns that reinforce agility, balance and stability.
- * Take advantage of repetition to reinforce muscle memory and create a comfort zone.
- * Limit overhead reaches, jumping and lunges; shoulders and knees can ache easily.
- * Pay attention to transition moves; for example, build in a stationary step before a traveling step.
- * Encourage class formations that foster social interaction (circuit stations, circles, etc.).
- * Incorporate games and playful moves into your routine; these can be fun and help with memory and with concentration.
- * Occasionally introduce a challenging move, but be sure to label it as such first and give participants permission to opt out.
- * Cue both visually and verbally; people may have visual or auditory difficulties.
- * If it's not too confusing for your participants, face them. This helps those who may be lip-reading. It also alleviates the effects of extraneous noise, such as indoor pool echoing.
- * Keep verbal cues short and concise. "Go right four" is easier for participants to process than "We're now going to grapevine over to the right in four counts."
- * Pay attention if you see participants talking; they might be asking each other what you just said.
- * Check the acoustics in the room. How will outside noise, music, fans and microphones affect your participants' ability to hear you?
- * Assess the room's physical setup. How will posts, doors, equipment and size affect your participants' ability to move safely.
- * Help people find the right spots in the room. For example, someone who wears bifocals may need to be directly in front of you so she isn't consistently trying to shift focus, whereas a person with a hearing aid may need to stand away from the speakers.
- * Be aware of the amount of space each person has or needs in order to move freely, comfortably and safely.

DON'T:

- * Overuse lateral or backward movements, as these can be unsettling or unsafe instead, choose moves that let participants see where they are going.
- * Talk louder if people can't hear you over the music; turn the volume down or off.
- * Keep doing a move if you're the only one who can execute it successfully.
- * Use small gestures when cuing nonverbally. Big motions can be seen better.
- * Be afraid to use props, such as balls (stability and medicine), balloons, noodles, weights, bands and tubing (but first check for latex allergies).

classes. "Music is very, very important," says Terry Ferebee Eckmann, MS, co-owner of Fitness First in Minot, North Dakota, and former chair of IDEA's exercise and aging committee. "Watch the volume. My older adults don't appreciate the blaring sound that my younger participants enjoy."

If the music and you are competing for attention, turn the sound down or off. Turning up your microphone will not improve the situation, especially for people with hearing aids.

As in any age group, music preferences differ, but music from this generation's past tends to be popu-

lar, Big band, swing, Broadway, classical, jazz, social dance (e.g., mambo and lindy) and even Motown are usually good bets. Depending on your class makeup, country, pop, disco, rock, Latin and Top 40 may also be well received.

Health Histories

Liability is of concern to all clubs, but the policies with respect to collecting health histories may differ widely between clubs. Some may collect detailed information, others may require none. "In an ideal world, instructors would have a health history

Motivation & Communication

DO:

- * Make Fitness Fun.
- * Look for underlying social needs that may not have been articulated.
- * Ask what brought each person to class.
- * Say your name and learn participants' names.
- * Ask how people prefer to be addressed (some prefer to be called by their surnames).
- * Notice and comment on progress of any sort.
- * Be sincere, enthusiastic, caring and compassionate.
- * Have a sense of humor
- * Act in a trustworthy manner so that you gain partici

pants' trust.

- * Build relationships over time by acknowledging birthdays, hosting outings, celebrating milestones, taking class photos, etc.
- * Respect participants' physical limitations.
- * Dedicate portions of the class to members' specific concerns. For instance, tell participants, "Today we'll focus on the back for a few minutes because Clyde is saying his back has been bothering him."
- * Make eye contact with each participant at some point during class.

DON'T:

- * Be dismissive about clients' concerns.
- * Forget to welcome new participants immediately.
- * Neglect to revisit participants' goals periodically.
- * Assume personality alone will keep members coming back; educate yourself on their needs and desires.
- * Play favorites or get involved in gossip, as this will destroy participants' trust in you.
- * Be patronizing or condescending. (Would you want someone to shout or talk baby talk to you?)
- * Promise that the workout will be really easy.

of each participant," says Linda Freeman of Green Bay, Wisconsin, who created the S.A.F.E. (Seniors and FUNCTIONal Exercise) Ball Program. "But this is the real world." Here are a few basic, yet essential, things you should consider before accepting new senior participants.

Individual Touches

Each of our experts does something extra to make their older-adult classes special, and you may want to start thinking about how to add your own special touch. Ellen Coven, MA, of Jericho, New York, former chairperson of IDEA's exercise and aging committee, takes a class photo of each of her older adults and attaches it to an emergency contact card. Eckmann shares thoughts and jokes during her classes. Buchanan celebrates each participant's birthday by making a tape of his or her favorite music. Freeman uses a memory game in which each person has to add a word in alphabetical order while participants pass a ball back and forth. For her Boston-based participants, Josie Gardiner--the 2002 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year--creates name tags that list pertinent medical information on the back. And Alan takes the time to hug his older participants, knowing that that might be their only human contact during the day.

Here's What's in It for You

Whether you're actively pursuing becoming a teacher for the older-adult market or just contemplating it as a future option, you should know that our experts were

Health Histories

DO:

- * Ask about previous exercise history.
- * Find out if they have any injuries or pain that exercise could exacerbate.
- * Ask about medications, chronic diseases or any factors that might affect a workout.
- * Ask how recently a physician performed a checkup.
- * Determine whether your club requires or recommends obtaining a medical release or informed consent document.
- * Stay current on CPR at a minimum; being certified in first aid is better.
- * Know your company's emergency policy and the location of needed equipment.
- * In the absence of an official club emergency policy, rehearse your own course of action.
- * Stay within your level of competency.
- * Teach participants how fitness level affects certain body functions and health issues (blood pressure, obesity, etc.).
- * Ask clients who have a "Do Not Resuscitate" (DNR) medallion to wear it to class. (Drowning emergencies are exceptions to the DNR orders, so familiarize yourself with the rules regarding reviving someone in the pool.)
- * Educate yourself on the major diseases and medication risks that afflict seniors; these include diabetes, broken hips, shoulder and knee injuries, pacemakers and beta blockers.

DON'T:

- * Ask newcomers for their health histories within earshot of other class members.
- * Assume you've been told everything; people forget details.
- * Depend solely on the forms filled out when people first join; things can change rapidly with this population.
- * Wait until something goes wrong to learn what to do.
- * Let your CPR certification lapse.
- * Be afraid to ask questions about a participant's health.
- * Neglect to ask members to get a doctor's consent before they participate in your class.

unanimous in their assessment: The rewards of teaching this special population far outnumber any extra effort involved. This is a group of people who are grateful, consistent, loyal and supportive and who truly want to learn. As Gardiner puts it, "This is the most wonderful and satisfying work in the fitness profession. Have a passion for what you do and the people you work with, and you will be successful."

Alexandra Williams, MA, of Lake Oswego, Oregon, is working toward her goal of becoming an older adult. She thanks the participants in her older-adult classes for keeping her going!

RESOURCES

Music

Aerobeat Music, www.aerobeat.com, (800) 536-6060

DynamixMusic, www.dynamixmusic.com, (800) 843-6499

Multitrax Music, www.multitrax.net

Muscle Mixes Music, www.musclemixes.com, (800) 52MIXES (526-4937)

Power Music, www.powermusic.com, (800) 777.BEAT (2328)

ProMotion Music,

www.promotionmusic.com, (800) 925-5669

Books

Program Design for Older Adults, IDEA Resource Series book, available from IDEA member services (800-999-4332, ext. 7, or 858-535-8979, ext. 7) >>

Music

DO:

- * Ask about music preferences and favorite singers/songs.
- * Go to garage sales, library sales and used-music stores to find tapes and CDs at discount prices.
- * Use professional fitness music companies' recommendations.
- * Buy professionally mixed music that targets this age group, such as selections produced by Alan's AerobeatMusic (see "Resources"). Your purchases will create a demand in the market, which will encourage companies to make more!
- * Ask at the start of class and every time you change selections if the music and microphone volume are okay.

* If you can turn on a cooling fan, check the music volume again.

- * Bring in and share the lyrics to favorite songs.
- * Encourage everyone to sing along.
- * Occasionally tailor your moves to the music (do-si-do works great on land and in water for country songs).
- * Respond to requests regarding both volume and music styles.
- * Consider using a slower cadence (beats per minute) than you use in standard class formats.
- * Ask participants if certain songs trigger memories from their youth and ask them to share their recollections with the group.

DON'T:

- * Play rap or techno/electronic music, which many older people dislike.
- * Worry so much about being on the beat; instead, emphasize moving comfortably *with* the music, not *to* the music.
- * Play anything you really can't bear to listen to yourself.
- * Pretend to turn down the volume.
- * Yell into your microphone.
- * Keep playing music they hate, hoping that they'll get used to it; they won't.
- * Be afraid to try new music occasionally.

The Essentials for Senior Fitness

Instructors, Human Kinetics, 2003.

Seniorobics: The Fitness Guide for

People 55+ by Ellen Coven, MA, available from FitWise Programs Inc., PO Box 759, Jericho, NY 11753 (\$7.95 plus \$3 shipping and handling)

Video

"Straight Up to Fitness" (techniques to improve alignment and balance for seniors) by Ellen Coven, MA (\$19.95 plus \$3 shipping and handling) (see "Books" for contact information)

Choosing the Right Class Name

The name you give a class can entice or repel older adults, so choose carefully. The preference now is to use the term *older adult* rather than *senior* because of the negative connotations associated with the latter term. However, trial and error will give you a better sense of what works best at your club.

Here are some real class titles used by the experts consulted. Note how each title aims and succeeds at being creative, descriptive and inclusive.

- * Prime Time
- * See Life: Shallow Water for Blind and Low Vision
- * BYOB: Build Your Own Bones
- * S.A.F.E. Ball
- * Better Balance: A No-Falls Approach to Balance
- * Chairobics
- * Easy Does It
- * Gentle Fitness
- * Walkin' and Talkin'
- * Forever Young