Wouldn’t it be awesome if your clients could recapture at will the focus they experience during their regular yoga workouts? How about recreating the confidence they exude during relaxation exercises in their t’ai chi classes? In fact, wouldn’t it be exciting if your students could be more focused all of the time?

Most regular exercisers know that mental preparation is essential to improving physical performance and enjoying physical activity. Yet too few know how to hone their powers of concentration to advance beyond their current fitness level. The good news is that, as a fitness professional, you can teach people the skills they need to become more aware during all stages and all types of exercise. And these skills can be transferred to and will enhance other areas of your clients’ lives. This article will provide you with some practical strategies you can employ to help clients attain a higher level of concentration.

BY TOM SEABOURNE, PHD
Getting Focused

Many people already know how to concentrate on a single thing when exercising. For example, a client will focus on following a particular cue during a step routine or on maintaining correct form during a specific resistance training set. This single-minded concentration is exclusive in nature. That is, everything other than the center of attention is of lesser consequence. Concentration of this kind can be likened to a photograph in which only one part of the image is clearly defined and the background recedes in a blur.

A higher form of concentration—what some might call mindfulness—is possible. While narrow concentration is exclusive, mindfulness is all-encompassing. Rather than making any one item the primary focus, the goal of mindfulness is to mentally stand back and see the bigger picture in an objective, nonjudgmental fashion. This requires clients to remain in the present moment when exercising, instead of fretting about their next movement or how many calories they are burning. Extending the photograph analogy, mindfulness is more like a panoramic view of the entire landscape, where no one object is more in focus or important than the others. This kind of enhanced concentration can be taught to clients in the same way you teach proper form and movement. And it can be applied to all phases of a workout and to different exercise modalities, such as indoor cycling, yoga and kickboxing.

Sports psychologists use several different techniques to help athletes attain mindfulness. These strategies include association, dissociation, visualization, progressive relaxation and activation. For more information on these techniques, see “Moving the Mind” in the January 2001 issue of IDEA Personal Trainer magazine.

Warming Up to the Concept

To introduce your clients to the concept of mindfulness, start your next class or session by calling attention to breathing and posture at the start of the warm-up. Begin by having your clients take a collective deep breath from the diaphragm while raising their arms overhead. Then cue your clients to exhale and lower their arms, allowing all their muscles to relax. Have the class continue to inhale with arms up and exhale with arms lowered until participants feel relaxed and become aware of their breathing patterns. The goal is to get to the point where they are no longer thinking about the position of their arms or their breathing. At this point, your clients will begin to experience mindfulness. Ask them to continue to cultivate this relaxed focus throughout the remainder of their workout.

Next, focus on posture. Ask clients to become aware of their spinal alignment while assuming a neutral position. While this may sound simple, staying in neutral takes practice and muscular endurance. Have your clients spend five minutes at a time during the warm-up in a neutral position. Each week, tack on two more minutes until they can remain in neutral spinal alignment during the entire workout. Throughout your class or session, remember to provide postural cues for each exercise. And be sure to emphasize the importance of maintaining proper posture when not exercising. Suggest that your clients become more mindful of their posture while sitting and standing at different times of the day at work and home.

Mindful Cardiovascular Training

Mindfulness is vital during every aspect of the cardiovascular segment of the workout. Numerous distractions can compete with your cues and instructions, vying for your clients’ attention. Many of these distractions are created by your clients themselves as they draw comparisons with their counterparts (e.g., “Everyone is faster than I am”) or even with their own past performance (e.g., “I was faster last week”). Such distractions can become automatic, and your clients may not even be aware they are creating them.

Make it a ritual to begin each cardiovascular segment of class by helping clients become more mindful. Do this by showing them how to replace their negative thoughts with positive affirmations. You can and should teach your clients to pay attention to their self-talk before, during and after their cardiovascular exercise.

The trick here is to try changing those negative thoughts to positive ones before they snowball. Tell clients that if they start to
they can relax the whole body at will. With practice, people learn to combine the muscle groups so sis is on contracting and relaxing each muscle group separately; the difference between tension and relaxation. First, the empha- relax different muscle groups until the clients feel and understand nique. This technique teaches clients to mindfully contract and class or session is to use a modified progressive relaxation tech - work on a scale of 1 to 10. 2. Estimate your ability to remain mindful during today’s workout on a scale of 1 to 10. 3. Compare your workout rating to your mindfulness rating. After a while, clients will notice that certain patterns become visible during workouts. Ultimately, clients will become proficient at rating their thoughts, feelings and actions, and this ability will help them replicate desirable focus levels during future workouts.

Getting Pumped
Like the other components of an exercise session, resistance train- back to a workout they would prefer to forget. Were they exhaust- ing can be enhanced by applying mindfulness. Some ways to ed, uncomfortable, in pain? Were they simply overdoing it? Cue encourage this include:
• teaching your clients to exhale through pursed lips during each repetition
• cuing them to focus on their form and action rather than on how tired they feel
• having them imagine themselves strong and powerful
• having them pretend that others in the room are an apprecia- tive audience and then draw energy from them
• not allowing clients to get too relaxed between sets (keeping them aggressive)
• continuing to challenge clients when they are lifting well, so they do not become complacent

Mentally Cooling Down
One way to encourage mindfulness at the end of an exercise class or session is to use a modified progressive relaxation tech- nique. This technique teaches clients to mindfully contract and relax different muscle groups until the clients feel and understand the difference between tension and relaxation. First, the empha- sis is on contracting and relaxing each muscle group separately; with practice, people learn to combine the muscle groups so they can relax the whole body at will.

After your clients have finished their cool-down exercises, tell them to get comfortable on the floor and breathe from the diaphragm. Some may prefer a side-lying position, while others will want to assume a supine position. Have them close their eyes and enjoy resting for a minute or so. Tell them to accept any emerging thoughts and let these pass by like leaves floating on a creek. Tell them not to ponder, brood or daydream. If an important idea surfaces, they can return to it later. Now ask them to mentally select various muscle groups within their body. Then have them contract and relax the muscle groups in order, either from head to toe or from toe to head. Have them tighten each muscle group, hold the tension for about three seconds and then relax for about 30 seconds. Cue them to take deep breaths to enhance the effects of progressive relaxation; with each exha- lation, muscular tension will release. Tell your clients to notice the difference between a tensed state and a relaxed state. As they do this, ask them to focus their inner perception on the muscles they have just contracted. They will begin to see that the relax- ation process progresses after they release their muscles. Allow your clients to let this process happen and enjoy it.

After they have targeted each muscle group, ask them to keep their eyes closed and enjoy the rest a little longer. Then tell them to take a deep breath, exhale and move their fingers and toes play- fully. Have them continue to breathe deeply and stretch, opening their eyes whenever they feel like it. If any of your clients fall into deep slumber, let them snooze until class is over. If they do not awaken on their own, gently wake them and assure them that falling asleep was perfectly acceptable because it signaled that the body needed rest.

Kickboxing It Up a Notch
Specialized classes such as kickboxing, yoga and indoor cycling are all excellent venues for honing mindfulness. A kickboxing class is intense and fast. Punches and kicks happen spontaneously according to the instructor’s cues. Imagery can help your kick- boxing clients get through an intense workout.

Tell your kickboxing participants to visualize an imaginary opponent. Have them sit with eyes closed and imagine themselves
kicking with perfect posture, maintaining this posture throughout each set of kicks. Tell them to visualize and feel the muscle groups they are preparing to train. Cue them to imagine all their muscle fibers (e.g., hip flexors, quadriceps and hamstrings) recruited for each kick. Suggest making use of as many senses as possible; cue clients to feel, for example, the extension of their knee or their exhaled breath through pursed lips. Instruct clients to focus their gaze on their phantom sparring partner’s midline with a soft, vague awareness while remaining aware of your verbal cues. Then have them begin to physically shadowbox with some easy punches, kicks, strikes and blocks, attacking and defending against their imaginary opponent. This kind of mental preparation will prepare the clients, both mentally and physically, to begin to physically slow and become lighter. Tell them to inhale deeply from their diaphragm, with shoulders back and down, ensuring that the low back maintains a natural arch in neutral spinal alignment. Ask them to become especially aware of any tension in the upper body and let the muscles in that area relax.

As your clients pedal, tell them to focus on their breath. Cue them to take deep breaths by inhaling through the nose and exhaling through pursed lips. Have them breathe through the diaphragm while inhaling through the nose for four pedal strokes. Cue them to let their breath fill their lower, central and upper chest (in that order). Then have them take eight pedal strokes while exhaling through pursed lips. As a visualization exercise, suggest they imagine their oxygen-filled blood cells nourishing the muscles in their legs.

Teach your clients to pedal and relax simultaneously by using each pedal stroke as a mantra. Each rhythmic revolution should relax both mind and body so clients can pedal automatically, easily and efficiently. But remember to allow participants to pedal and breathe at their individual cadences. Emphasize that this is not a competition and that the clients determine their own timing. Once they decide the level at which they wish to pedal, let them pedal and breathe without any distractions.

As your clients focus on pedaling, ask them to monitor their body mechanics. Are the knees over the toes? Is anyone mashing (i.e., pressing too hard on) the pedals? Challenge participants to stand and pull from their hamstrings on each upstroke. Recruiting the hamstring muscles will introduce a new sense of power to the ride.

**Powering Yoga Moves**

People who are new to yoga can sometimes have difficulty remaining focused, especially if they are accustomed to the quicker pace of traditional group exercise. One way to help these clients is through imagery. Ask them to stare at a photograph of a perfect yoga pose for one minute. Then have them close their eyes and try to “visualize” the pose. Next ask them to contract their core muscles as if preparing to execute the pose. Tell them to focus on their breath and let their torso muscles symmetrically contract almost imperceptibly. Even with eyes closed, your clients should be able to visualize the movement beginning from their core.

Breathing is another way to establish focus for novices during a yoga class. Cue clients to close their mouth, pull air in strongly through their nose, and then exhale the same way. This increases the airflow sensation inside the nostrils and gives people something to concentrate on. Once they have relaxed, have them count their breaths until their breathing cadence slows and becomes lighter. Tell them to say “in” as they inhale and “aah” as they exhale. Soon the breaths will blend to a point where inhalation and exhalation seem to differ very little.

**Indoor “Psychling”**

Pedaling an exercise bike can reduce stress, but mindful indoor cycling goes one step further. When your clients pedal a stationary bike, they simulate the stresses they face every day and promote the relaxation the body requires. Hard pedaling stresses the body, whereas pedaling at a relaxed cadence can produce profound relaxation. Practicing mindful cycling drills will allow your clients to experience a continuum of extremes in a controlled setting.

It is important for your indoor cycling clients to relax before, during and after their ride. Have them warm up and cool down with a relaxed attitude. Teach them to enjoy muscle relaxation throughout their workout so they remain focused during each pedal stroke.

While they are in a seated position on the bike, ask them to pedal gently and relax. Cue them to breathe from the diaphragm, with shoulders back and down, ensuring that the low back maintains a natural arch in neutral spinal alignment. Ask them to become especially aware of any tension in the upper body and let the muscles in that area relax.

**STAIR CLIMB TO HEAVEN**

While most of the strategies outlined in this article have targeted group fitness classes and sessions, it is also possible to become more mindful when using exercise machines. Next time a client jumps on a stair climber, suggest this mindfulness strategy:

1. Select the “manual control” program and set the timer for 10 minutes. Start climbing and concentrate on breathing deeply from your diaphragm. Feel your rib cage and abdomen expand with each breath. Count your steps on each inhalation and exhalation. Focus only on the relationship between your steps and your breath.
2. Feel the sensation of your feet as they press into the platform, and continue to focus on the rhythm of your breath.
3. Allow your awareness to include your gluteals and quadriceps. Feel the power of each step and notice how your breath energizes each step.
4. Concentrate on a spot a few inches below your navel; feel how each step begins and ends there.
5. Close your eyes and visualize yourself climbing each step with confidence and control.
6. Notice how great your form is and how wonderful you feel.
A Sharper Image
One way to ensure that clients keep exercising is to help them attain new heights and see improvements. By using the strategies outlined here to enhance focus, you can show clients how becoming more mindful can take them to the next level.

Tom Seabourne, PhD, is a professor of sports psychology and physical education at Northeast Texas Community College in Mount Pleasant. Certified by ACE, ACSM and NSCA, he is a frequent industry presenter and the author of many books.

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REFERENCES


