

How to deal with a number-obsessed client

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How often do people complain about their weight? Even seemingly healthy people's moods are often greatly affected by the numbers on the scale. If it's not their weight, it's their pant size, the number of calories they burned on the treadmill, or the amount of times they lifted a certain amount of weight that determines success, or failure. Are these external measurements the best way to gauge our achievements?

Unfortunately, we are programmed from a very young age to measure our accomplishments by numbers. From the grades on our report cards indicating our academic success, to the score on the soccer pitch indicating whether we are winners or losers, it is all too often external cues that are used as the measuring stick.

Consequently, as a trainer, it is often difficult to convince clients that it's more important to tap into intrinsic feelings rather than letting those external cues, or numbers, be the sole measure of success.

Of course, numbers can be a great motivating tool - for the sprinter who just ran faster than ever before, or the golfer who just broke 80 for the first time, numbers can be a valid indicator of progress. The idea is just not to let the numbers overshadow what's going on intrinsically. Did the sprinter gradually get stronger and more powerful before running their personal best? Did the golfer improve their swing and short game over the course of many months (or years!) before they eventually shot their best score? Just like the client who will likely experience a host of benefits prior to noticing a difference in the numbers on the scale or a change in clothing size. The key is to get people to notice these more subtle changes in their health and fitness levels.

Basically, if we as trainers want to discourage our clients from being obsessed with numbers, we have to do the same. Here are some ideas to help encourage a more intrinsic, or feelings based mindset when working with your clients.

1) Assessments

Stop weighing clients during assessments - At many fitness facilities, the protocol for assessing clients includes putting the client on the scale. Most people weigh themselves too often and are slaves to what the numbers read yet we all know that weight is not the most accurate indicator of one's health.

Avoid measuring clients - At these same gyms, the assessment protocol also calls for wrapping the measuring tape around various parts of the client's body. First of all, no one likes this. Secondly, if there is substantial improvement once training has begun, the client will notice that their clothes are fitting differently. Beyond that, is one or two centimetres really going to change that person's life?

Instead, why not make the focus of assessments on functional fitness - posture, muscle imbalances, stability, core strength, mobility, balance, and flexibility - things that actually matter.

2) Goal Setting

Yes, clients should have measurable goals but there is nothing wrong with discussing and including goals such as an increase in energy level, stress reduction or just an increase in general feelings of well-being.

3) Fitness programming

Allow clients to choose and adjust the amount of resistance or weight lifted - Give the client guidelines but allow them to judge how hard they are working - halfway through a set, the exercise should be getting difficult with the last two or three repetitions, quite challenging. This forces the client to monitor how the exercise feels as opposed to worrying about the amount of weight being lifted. Does it really matter if that number isn't an exact percentage of their one rep max?

Give ranges - There is no rule that says that weights need to be lifted in 3 sets of 10 repetitions. If clients are given a range (i.e. 2-4 sets of 8-12 reps) they will again be forced to monitor how they are feeling during each set of exercise. If on that day the sets feel easy, they can do more. If the workout feels very challenging, they can do less sets or repetitions but still benefit from working within those ranges.

The same can be applied for cardiovascular work. If a range of time is given in the program (i.e. 20-40 minutes), clients will be more likely to complete the workout duration relative to how they are feeling on that day rather than measuring by a specific time (like a robot that must do 30 minutes on the treadmill). On the days they are feeling a bit sluggish, they can do less and still feel like they've accomplished what is within the limits outlined in their workouts. And on the days they have more energy - they can just go!

4) Consulting

Direct conversation away from numbers, focus on feelings, and remind clients of the positives - Clients may not even realize that since they have begun training, they have more energy, feel less stressed, are sleeping better, feel less pain, are more productive, have better posture, are eating better, feel more limber, are standing taller, or feel stronger, until you ask them.

The bottom line is that our job as trainers is to inspire people and make them feel good about what they are doing. One of the easiest ways we can do that is by encouraging our clients to listen to their bodies and focus on how they are feeling rather than worry about what a bunch of numbers are saying.

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