

MODULE 11

INDIVIDUAL AND SMALL GROUP TRAINING STRATEGIES

Learning Objectives

1. Recall teaching strategies that are effective with older adults
2. List cueing techniques that are effective for older clients
3. List advantages and challenges to the Small Group Personal Training format

Introduction

Training older clients is fun and rewarding but it can be challenging as well. Older adults vary widely in their physical abilities and impairments. Many have little to no experience with exercise movements, equipment and terminology. Some will be fearful of trying new exercises and lack self-efficacy. A large number will be dealing with joint stiffness and discomfort as well as sensory issues such as hearing and vision loss. Some will be able to learn new movements simply from watching someone else while others will need the movement broken down into smaller parts and explained very carefully several times. Because of these, and many other, challenges it is necessary for the trainer to be an effective teacher for working with older clients one-on-one and in groups. In this section we will describe some effective teaching and cueing strategies and discuss some key differences between training a single client versus multiple clients.

The Right Attitude

The first rule for working successfully with older adults is to have the right attitude. As discussed at the very beginning of this course there are many myths and misconceptions about aging and the mature population which lead to negative stereotypes and ageism. Many of your older clients will struggle with negative beliefs about themselves and their future because they have internalized the stereotypes. It is important for trainers to have a positive view of aging and older adulthood so that they can share that positivity with their clients and develop effective programs. Aging should be viewed as an opportunity to be valued rather than a disease to be cured. Trainers should always strive to promote the many positive aspects that old age provides.

While many older adults consider this to be the best time of their lives, some older adults are suffering from age-related conditions and functional challenges. Since the older adult population is so diverse it is equally important to have empathy for your clients. It is impossible for most younger adults to truly understand what it is like to be 60 or 80; to have osteoarthritis; for their vision and hearing to start failing; to stop doing things you love to do; or to suffer with a chronic illness. Yet, it is possible to try to understand as much as possible by soliciting and valuing their feedback.

Teaching

Older adults are similar to clients of other ages in that they have a variety of learning styles. They don't all learn the same way so a trainer needs to learn a wide variety of teaching techniques, methods and strategies in order to be successful. The use of the techniques described below will depend on the client and the situation.

Break it Down: When teaching new exercise movements consider breaking them down into its parts and starting with just one piece of the movement or working on each part separately before putting them together. This is a helpful strategy to use especially with clients that are not very kinesthetically aware and have been inactive for a very long time.

Use Kinesthetic, Visual and Auditory Cues: Not everyone learns the same way but instructors tend to rely on the teaching techniques that are most useful to them. There are three basic categories of cues:

- Kinesthetic: Kinesthetic learners learn best by moving. People with high kinesthetic awareness can typically watch a movement and be able to replicate it accurately. Others may need to experience the movement for themselves by having someone else guide their movements. Tactile (touching) cues are helpful for people that learn kinesthetically. Touching muscles that are supposed to be contracting or placing an object at the beginning or end range of motion are examples of tactile cueing. Placing a piece of tape along a person's lumbar spine while they perform a hip hinge movement can help them to feel when they move into lumbar flexion instead of maintaining spinal neutral. Placing a dowel on their spine during a hip hinge serves a similar purpose.
- Visual: Some people learn more from visual cues. These can include watching someone perform the movement or watching themselves in a mirror or on a video as they perform the movement. Using a mirror provides instant feedback so that they can correct their movement patterns but some exercises are difficult to see in a mirror and may be easier to see through a video. Watching themselves can help them to better understand what they need to correct as they may think they are doing it with perfect form. Visual cues can also include using visual imagery. Here are some visual imagery cues to try with clients:

- Imagine a string is attached to the top of your head and is pulling you towards the ceiling (for posture)
- Imagine someone is punching you in the gut (for core bracing)
- Imagine you have an orange in your armpit and you are trying to squeeze it to make orange juice (for engagement of the latissimus dorsi)
- Imagine there is a can on your middle spine and you want to crush the can with your shoulder blades (for scapular retraction)
- Imagine your leg is filled with water and when you shift your weight the water flows from the full leg to the empty leg (for center-of-gravity control/weight shifting)
- Imagine your worst enemy is right in front of you and you need to punch them in the face (for a fast, powerful upper body press)
- Imagine you are shutting a file cabinet drawer behind you with your bottom (for proper hip hinging/deadlift pattern)

There are lots of different kinds of visual imagery that can be used. Experiment with different ones and see which resonate best with your clients.

- **Auditory/Verbal:** Trainers spend a lot of time explaining how to perform exercise movements correctly so it is important to be able to do so effectively. For verbal instruction to be effective, the learner must understand what the instructor is trying to communicate. In most cases, the least amount of words that you can use to communicate your instructions the better. More words and longer explanations tend to lead to more confusion and distraction. Therefore, it is typically more effective to keep instructions short and concise while using terminology that most people can easily understand (including terminology related to anatomy, physiology or biomechanics). Over time, longer and more detailed instructions can be condensed into a few key words or a short phrase. For example, you may want to teach clients to how to not look at their feet or the floor during gait activities. At first you may need to explain to them how to stand with a tall posture, keep their head in a neutral position and find a spot at eye level across the room to focus on. It would also be helpful to explain how this will be beneficial to them. Eventually, though, all you may have to say is “eyes up” (or a similar term) in order to recall all of those instructions.

Here are some additional tips for becoming an effective teacher with older adults:

- Think of your voice as an instrument. Speak in an elevated tone since some (not all) mature clients don't hear quite as well. Be loud, authoritative, vary your voice tone and pitch, and, most importantly, speak clearly. Because of hearing issues many participants will rely more on seeing you visually demonstrate the exercises.
- Clearly verbally outline and demonstrate the steps for each exercise as you do them. Then watch your participants perform the exercises to see that they understood your explanation then demonstrate the movement again if necessary which often will be the case early on.
- Make directions personal whenever possible. For example, cue "move your arm" rather than "move the arm". Select visual terms and words such as "let your arm rise and reach" so it's something that they can understand as opposed to "lift your arm" which is not clear on which direction they should be moving.
- Use the participants' names. It is very important with mature clients that you learn and use your clients' names. This is essential when you're training in groups and with one on one training it should obviously be a given.
- Observe nonverbal behavior in your training sessions. Pay attention to things like fatigue, grimaces, and overly flushed faces. They may be giving you warning signs that they're not even aware of.
- Practice flexibility and be ready to change teaching strategies if the client isn't getting it. Modify it, make it simpler, break it down into its pieces. You want your clients to have a sense of accomplishment not overwhelm them.

- Encourage your participants (by name of course) as you see them performing exercises correctly to affirm when they are performing well. This will help to reinforce your teaching and give them a boost of confidence.
- Recognize and affirm that it is okay for them to stop and rest when necessary. Sometimes your clients will need breaks to get a drink or catch their breath.
- Give positive reinforcement especially for clients that are intimidated by the whole exercise process. This can be done nonverbally or verbally – smile, give high-fives, give them a pat on the back, even hug - any encouragement to support their participation and their efforts.

Becoming an effective teacher and communicator takes time and purposeful practice. Intentionally put these skills and techniques into practice with as wide a variety of clients as possible in order to get better. There is no better substitute than experience.

Small Group Personal Training

One on one (personal) training is a proven method for significantly improving an individual's level of health and fitness. Yet it can be inefficient and expensive for impacting a large number of people since many people are not able to afford it. Large group training can also be effective with mature clients but it is difficult to individualize the programming and provide appropriate progressions and regressions for each participant. Small group training, loosely defined as one trainer with three to six clients, is able to combine the benefits of one on one training and large group format exercise training while also overcoming the deficiencies of each. It's really the best of both worlds. Small group personal training (SGPT) can be especially useful when training older adults although it has its challenges as well as its advantages.

Compared to one-on-one training, a major advantage to small group training is that it's a far more efficient use of time for the trainer. A trainer has a finite amount of time to spend with clients.

Working with clients one-on-one significantly limits the number of people any one trainer can help. Working with small groups allows a trainer to magnify their impact 4-6-fold. Small group sessions are typically 30-45 minutes long instead of the typical hour that most one-on-one sessions are allowing to serve even more clients. SGPT is more financially efficient as well.

From the client's perspective the training becomes cheaper but the trainer ends up making more money per hour. For example, a trainer may charge \$60 USD for a one-hour one-on-one session but \$15 for a 30-minute SGPT session (per client). With six clients per group the trainer would make \$180 per hour compared to \$60 per hour. The cheaper cost to the client means that more clients are able to access and afford your expertise which further broadens your impact.

Another advantage is that SGPT is much more social and naturally includes more social support. The clients in each group end up becoming friends which motivates them to attend training sessions and often leads to regular communication outside of the gym. Finally, SGPT opens up more training options compared to one-on-one since there are a variety of partner and group exercises and even games or competitions that can now be included in the programming.

Compared to large group training, a major advantage to SGPT is that the instruction is far more personalized since the idea is to perform personal training but in the context of a small group. Each client should still receive personalized recommendations and corrections during the session. It's less intimidating than group fitness (and for many it's less intimidating than a one on one personal training session) for many clients. People do not want to be embarrassed in front of a lot of people when they cannot perform a movement correctly or make a mistake. The supportive and more intimate environment of the small group session helps to alleviate these concerns. It often provides much more support and accountability than a large group model because there's a deeper connection to the others they are working out with.

There are challenges to small group training as well. Small groups require a bit more space and equipment compared to one-on-one training so a facility may be able to accommodate 3-4 personal trainers working with clients at a time but may not be able to accommodate 3-4 groups of 4-6 people at one time. The trainers also need to be excellent teachers, communicators and organizers. It is much more difficult to closely watch 6 people exercising at one time while providing meaningful feedback. Therefore, this also requires more interpersonal energy. Clients can distract one another and often, for example, when you get a group of four or five women in their seventies together it can become social hour. The social aspect is really important and will keep them as raving fan clients for years because they love being together but the social aspect should not interfere too much with the training. So don't dismiss the social aspect, just keep in mind they can distract each other.

There also may be a wide level of skill among participants. You might have a 50-year-old that can do 50 pushups and a 70-year-old that can't do a single one (or vice versa). This may seem like a daunting task but it is very possible to train an 80-year-old next to a 50-year-old and structure the training session to meet their individual needs. However, it is highly recommended that you group clients according to their functional levels so that you avoid having clients in the same session who vary widely in their abilities. This makes it easier for the trainer and less intimidating for the clients.

Launching a Small Group Personal Training Program

One method for building a great small group training program and a great small group training philosophy at your facility is to build it around a current client and their friends or a small group of friends that already workout together. We've all had a client that wants to refer friends, couples, sisters, coworkers, people that love to work out together, so that's a great way to start small groups.

Another option is to let your one-on-one clients try out small group training for free on days they are not training with you. Most one-on-one clients who try SGPT prefer it and do not want to back to training one-on-one.

Mid-morning is probably the best time to initially offer small group training sessions. Promote several different time options for people until the slots are full. Put clients that are interested in joining but cannot do it at the offered times on a separate list noting the times they are available. Once you have 3-4 people (the minimum) that can make a particular time slot then you can launch a new group.

Most trainers use 30-minute sessions for their small groups. Clients tend to like the shorter, focused sessions. In order to make the most of the shorter time frame it is beneficial to have the clients warm-up on their own beforehand and stretch on their own afterwards. The trainer can give guidance to each client as to what to do.

As mentioned earlier it is highly recommended that you group clients together that have similar functional abilities and needs. Therefore, each client should go through the same screening and testing process that one-on-one clients go through (which have been described earlier). The clients do not have to be in the same functional category (according to the Hierarchy of Functional Aging) but should be grouped in more general categories such as lower, average and higher functioning. Within these categories you may find it useful to further separate clients according to their deficits. For example, one lower functioning group may need a larger focus on balance training while another lower functioning group may need a larger focus on strength and power training.

The screening and assessment process also allows the trainer to make sure clients can be successful in a small group format. Some clients require one-on-one training due to their low level of

functioning, diseases or conditions they may have or even their goals. For clients that need one-on-one training the goal should almost always be to get them to a point where they can join a small group.

When first launching SGPT it is difficult to group people functionally but as more groups get started and more clients join it becomes easier. During this process it is always necessary to shift some people around so that clients can be with others that are more similar to them. This can be a little challenging since that may mean that clients have to change their workout times which may not be optimal for their schedule.

Conclusions

The programming strategies and techniques included in the Functional Aging Specialist program can be used one-on-one, in SGPT or in large group classes although most of the focus has been geared to one-on-one formats. For more specific strategies for small and large group formats see the Functional Aging Group Exercise Specialist certification program. While small group training is an efficient, effective and valuable format, all three - one on one, small group and large group - have their place and usefulness. You may have a facility that can offer all three or you may only focus on just one. Whatever you choose the Functional Aging Training Model can be used safely and effectively to improve the lives and well-being of your older clients.