

Four Ways to help Obese Clients not give up on Fitness

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As fitness professional, many of us have forgotten what it's like to start at square one. A person who is overweight or obese may not be of the opinion that "exercise feels good!" – they will in all likelihood be uncomfortable, non-euphoric, intimidated, and depressed when they walk into your gym or fitness center for the first time and see people doing things that seem impossible to them.

Knowing how to encourage and motivate your heavier clients to set reachable goals and build slowly but surely towards better fitness can be tricky, but it can be done. The first step to being a good advocate for your clients is understanding that their motives may be very different than other people who come to you for personal training.

These clients are not usually at the gym for socialization, or to have fun working out, or to get a cardio high. Chances are they are dreading the experience, and will be eager to find an excuse to not return. How can you help them overcome these feelings and support their true needs?

Focus on their Goals, not their Size

The client who is obese knows they are obese. They are always aware of it. They know it may be impacting their health. They get reminders every day. Putting themselves in a situation where they know it will be right up in their face is brave.

You can make things easier by finding ways to talk about fitness that doesn't focus on their weight or their BMI or their measurements. Instead, focus on setting goals in terms of what they want to be able to do in four weeks, ten, or twenty five.

- Run 2 miles without being exhausted.
- Lift 20 lbs. for 20 reps.
- Eat six servings of fruit and vegetables every day for an entire week.

Treat them like an Individual, not a "Fat" Person

Recent Olympic shot put gold medalist Michelle Carter taught the world that big can be not only beautiful, but powerful and strong. Recognizing that inches and pounds don't define "health" or "strength" is a great tool to use when dealing with clients both large and small.

"Fat pinching" and "skin folding" can be humiliating for an obese client, so unless they specifically say they want to track their progress via measurements of this type, don't assume that's the best way to do

it. And while the BMI is helpful in some instances, it's not a very good tool for determining health and fitness.

Modify your Routines

Fitness trainers should be aware of the challenges extra weight can cause at the start of a workout regimen. It's not just the physical weight they have to carry while working out, it's the potential balance issues, the possible lack of flexibility, and the potential for extra chafing. Pace the program to meet their ability, pushing without breaking them, and endurance will increase as you go.

Think about the size and positioning of your workout equipment, the location and visibility of workouts, and how you can make it easy for your client to feel comfortable in the workout space. Maybe they can be one of the last clients of the day, so they can shower afterwards in more privacy, reducing the potential for incidents that could lead to them not wanting to return.

Be Compassionate

Remember, even if you aren't judging, they may be wondering if you are. Make sure to offer positive reinforcement in such a way as not to sound condescending and make sure they KNOW you aren't judging them so they don't have to worry or guess if you are or not.

Be aware that hip, back, and knee pain can be common for obese clients starting a new routine, and be prepared to support them and offer mitigation techniques so they don't decide it's too much effort. Reassure them that, over time, exercise will become less painful and feel easier.

Obese clients may be more likely to end up injured by pushing themselves too hard, so keep an eye out for signs that they are overdoing it, and always carry personal trainer insurance in case a client hurts themselves and makes a claim against you.