



IS IT TIME TO INCORPORATE SMALL GROUP TRAINING?

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In the fitness industry, there are often times when we do not have the ability to demand what we want from the public so we are forced to lower the benchmark. As personal trainers, we understand the benefit of a personal training and how it can improve our clients' lifestyles, but we are powerless when a client cannot meet the financial demands of the service. It is under these circumstances that the popularity of small group training has emerged.

As club owners or fitness professionals, we must understand that some members cannot financially afford to purchase a private one-hour session with a personal trainer.

This is why we began offering half-hour sessions in the late 1990's. As a personal trainer, I resisted this concept early on; however, as a program director I can see the financial benefits. The shorter sessions are more cost efficient for members, thus allowing more members the financial flexibility to experience personal training -- hopefully leading to an upgraded hour session in some cases.

Small group training is PT with a group of less than 4 or 6 clients (depending on the size of your facility) at the same fitness level. This method of training is more affordable for the client and usually more lucrative for the personal trainer and the club.

IDEA listed small group training as 9th in the Top Ten Programming Trends for 2011. A trainer was quoted stating she feels clients receive the same or better-quality training from the small group. If the trainer is the constant then the only “better-quality” training received would have to come from the participants. Therefore matching the participants successfully is the key. Hence, a benefit of the small group setting is that the members of the group can motivate the other members promoting high accountability. The downside could be that each member may receive less individual attention.

Many people wonder what the difference is between small group training and group exercise. I like to compare it to riding in a chauffeured limo versus riding in a bus. However, there’s more that differentiates the two programs than just number of participants. The main benefit of one-on-one personal training is the program, where every workout is customized for an individual client and can be adjusted for improvements, illness or work schedules.

Small groups tend to focus more on the actual workout. Some fitness goals require specialized equipment and acute exercise variables that must be closely matched to reach those particular goals. This is very difficult to obtain in a small group unless the participants not only have the same goals, but are at the same level in pursuing those goals. This is where the success lies with the instructor. A good instructor can modify an activity very quickly to serve the participant who is having difficulty completing the task or when the task has become too easy for the participant.

In order to modify, the instructor must

either perform a thorough fitness evaluation (that includes both static and dynamic movements) or be able to spot compensatory movement patterns or boredom quickly and modify the activity on the fly – which is generally not recommended and you must have extensive education and experience to do so.

When planning a program we must remember the four components of any workout:

- Strength
- Cardiovascular
- Proprioception
- Flexibility

Like four legs on a table, they must be conceptually balanced for the client’s specific goal. Some goals may require more of one or two components based on clients’ goals and bodies, but a trainer must always keep clients’ bodies in line with these components for optimum overall health.

My suggestion for small groups is to create specific guidelines in a macro-cycle for general-specific goals. Remember, a macro-cycle is usually greater than 6-8 weeks but could be as long as a year. Selling personal training in macro-cycles also allows you to present long-term packages over a period of a year; which is really the way we all should train.

Keep in mind, it won’t be possible to properly address certain fitness goals in a small group. For example, it is very difficult to strength train in a group, unless you have a lot of time and control over the equipment. Sport-specific training will also be a challenge, unless everyone in the group is interested in the same sport. Also, remember to

have plans for what the others in the group will be performing if they can't all be using the same equipment at the same time. I recommend using one to two pieces at most or other gym members may be upset they can't use the equipment.

I also recommend using time instead of repetitions so everyone can challenge themselves accordingly, but finish in the same amount of time. If you go by repetitions, you might have some participants finishing much faster than others, leaving them with empty time.

Here's an example of a circuit for four participants, each performing each exercise for one minute:

Squat 1 minute

Crunches 1 minute

Dumbbell presses 1 minute

Jumping jacks 1 minute



Each participant performs a lower body exercise, an upper body exercise, a core exercise and an aerobic activity in a little over four minutes. There will need to be some extra time for them to transition between exercises.

Of the four components of a workout, we've not really addressed flexibility or proprioception in this example. Depending on the macro-cycle, you might add these two components in another 4-minute circuit or in a different period of the macro-cycle.

The squat and crunches chosen are performed in the sagittal plane, and the dumbbell presses and aerobic activity are in the frontal plane. You may consider the planes of motion in your program design based on the goals of the group.

You may also decide to create an introduction to the small group training and teach the participants how to foam roll, stretch, perform a few yoga moves, posture exercise or some preparatory moves, with warm-up and/or cool down to be done on their own. Below are two examples of a macro-cycle for a small group training program.

MACRO-CYCLE 1 (8 WEEKS)

Stability and aerobic exercise is the focus. This example uses one exercise and progresses over the macro-cycle for a small group meeting three times a week. The group begins the exercises on stable ground and slowly progresses to unstable surfaces.

- Week 1: Stability ball wall squat
- Week 2: Two-legged body weight squat
- Week 3: Back squat with a bar
- Week 4: Squat on a balance board
- Week 5: Squat on a ½ foam roller

- Week 6: Squat on a dyna disc
- Week 7: Squat on a BOSU ball
- Week 8: Asymmetrical squat (descend with both legs but ascend with one)

As you can see, there is a progression. If a participant were to join the group in Week 5, they might not be able to perform this type of exercise.

Here's another simple example of progression using a basic exercise like the dumbbell press while keeping the goal of stability in mind.

- Week 1: Lift with both hands standing with the legs at shoulder-width wide stance.
- Week 2: Progress to a single-handed or unilateral lift. Keep the dumbbells in both hands, but only lift with one arm at a time.
- Week 3: Now drop one of the weights, and lift with only one arm at a time.
- Week 4: Stand with a wide stance and lift one leg off the ground. Begin by pressing with both arms.
- Week 5: Now progress to lifting with one arm and one leg; right foot is off the ground and right arm is pressing, however, you still have weights in both hands
- Week 6: Still loaded on both sides, progress to the opposite arm over the unsupported leg.
- Week 7: Now, drop one of the dumbbells and repeat the same progression as above. Right arm over the right stance leg, then left arm over the right stance leg.
- Week 8: Begin the entire sequence from the

top with the non-dominant eye closed then repeat the entire sequence with the dominant eye closed.

Small group training is a win-win for the club owner, the personal trainer and the client. It's a great way to attract a different group of people and get them to exercise. With good planning and effective matching of the participants you'll be able to:

- Have participants motivate each other
- Have them look forward to their next macro-cycle
- Create a fun environment for participants and staff
- Personalize the exercises
- Increase your client base
- And for the fitness manager or club owner -- easily substitute personal trainers when needed.

All good stuff! Remember, one of the most critical pieces for effective small group training programming is to make it much different than just a group exercise class with fewer participants.



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