
Helping your clients achieve their goals requires effective communication and active participation. Your role as the Fitness Professional is to guide your clients' decisions because they will ultimately have to make changes in certain behaviors to reach and maintain their goals. Effective change and problem solving happens through active listening, communication, and education. It is a learning experience for each person and as they gain new knowledge, skills and insights, they will begin changing behaviors.

Listen Actively

One of the most important coaching skills is active listening, which helps develop rapport and trust between you and the client. Active listening is more than just hearing words. Pay attention to the person speaking, to their facial expression, voice tone and body language to gain insight to how they're feeling. Use eye contact to let your clients know you are listening to them and avoid the temptation to interrupt while they're speaking. When finished, ask questions if you do not understand or want to clarify what is being said. You can also help your client feel more comfortable by not folding your arms over your chest or multitasking— both can be interpreted negatively. Try to make your client feel like they have your full attention.

Communicate Effectively

Effective communication can be the key to your clients' success. Communication skills are essential for strengthening relationships and motivating the individual to successfully complete the program.

Communication is defined in many ways, but in a broad sense communication includes all methods that can convey thought or feeling between persons. First, communication is the process of sending and receiving messages. Second, for the transmission of ideas to be successful, a mutual understanding between the involved parties must occur.

When you're speaking to clients, it's important to be aware of both your verbal and nonverbal communication. Verbal communication would be the actual words you speak. Some positive, supportive verbal communication skills include

- Stating the facts in a descriptive rather than judgmental manner
- Focusing on what the client has accomplished
- Offering solutions to challenges rather than criticizing or giving orders
- Being respectful and treating the receiver as an equal, AND
- Being empathetic rather than neutral toward the receiver

Nonverbal expression refers to the manner and style in which you deliver the message. The most important nonverbal cues are facial expression, tone of voice, eye contact, gesture and touch. Social scientists believe that the image a person projects accounts for over half of the total message conveyed at the first meeting. You've heard the saying – you only have one chance to make a first impression, and often your body language speaks louder than your words. Try to have a relaxed facial expression, make frequent eye contact and avoid appearing closed off by crossing your arms across your chest. Clients will often mirror your energy – so make it a priority to be positive and upbeat.

Keep in mind that as you speak clients often listen to what is being said and also think about how they are going to respond. They could also be reacting physiologically to the message. As you coach your client, be aware of their appearance and demeanor and adjust your communication accordingly. For example, if your client makes a negative facial expression - that would be a cue for you to adjust your tone, make eye contact or use simpler language or rephrase what you said. Engaging your client in the discussion by asking them questions often creates a more positive response.

Question Productively

Productive questioning is one of the tools that can help you become aware of your clients' behaviors and challenges and to help solve problems. The way questions are stated can either successfully or unsuccessfully illicit a beneficial response towards constructive change.

Why

Using the word “why” implies judgment or a negative connotation.

Here are some examples: Why aren't you exercising? Why did you eat the whole bag of chips? Why don't you weigh yourself? As you can probably sense, stating why can make a person feel defensive and rarely leads to behavior change.

What or How

“What” and “how” are less judgmental, more probing, less intimidating, and more thought provoking. Knowing what has happened and how it happened is much more conducive to the process of change than why it happened.

For example, you could ask

- What are some of the obstacles that are preventing you from exercising?
- What happened that caused you to eat the bag of chips?
- What is keeping you from weighing yourself?

Wording your questions in a telling way can help you and your client explore the reasons that destructive or unconstructive behaviors occur. By identifying the cause of behaviors “what” and “how” they happen, the process of problem solving can take place and lead to productive change.

Goal Setting

Setting proper long term objectives and short term goals are necessary skills for your client's success. It is important to distinguish the difference between objectives and goals. Objectives are the end result, like a target weight or finishing a marathon, while the goal is the process or how the objectives will be accomplished.

Several key characteristics make up effective goals. Short term goals should be

- Realistic
- Specific
- Flexible and forgiving

Realistic means within reach or attainable. For example if a person is sedentary, maybe a realistic goal would be to walk 10 minutes a day. Many times when clients are trying to lose weight they set goals that are too strict or difficult to comply with.

Specific would be a clearly defined, measurable goal such as a time. Walking everyday at lunch for 10 minutes would be a specific, measurable goal. Often areas of improvement are identified as goals but they are vague and nonspecific. An example of a nonspecific goal would be, “I need to exercise more”.

Flexible and forgiving allows for re-evaluation of established goals. Despite the best intentions, circumstances sometimes prevent successful execution of the goal. This characteristic enables the client to realize that no one is perfect and to set the goal that is more reasonable.

Summary

Your most important job as a Fitness Professional is to communicate effectively with your client to help them achieve their goals through their active participation. Let them know that you understand how difficult and challenging changing lifetime habits can be. Exercise and changing eating habits requires constant attention and self regulation of behaviors. Be understanding and explain that you do not expect them to be perfect nor do you expect them to change everything overnight. Instead you expect them to take an active role in their personal weight control program. Being active means they will decide, with your help, what goals to set, what behaviors to target, and what plan of action to take. They should be confident that you will not judge, ridicule, belittle, or insult them in their journey.

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