

By Lorna L. Francis, PhD

the power of intention

Teach clients how to set an effective intention and stick with it.

Every person attending an exercise class or using the services of a personal trainer does so with an intention in mind. Quite simply, an intention is a commitment to achieve some specific purpose. The intention of an exerciser might relate directly to improving health or enhancing physical appearance—or it might be limited to making social contacts. Since only the client can realize his or her own intention, you as the fitness professional must be keenly aware of your client's intention so that you can offer appropriate expertise and support.

Setting an intention is a good starting point for a client. However, staying committed to the intention can be challenging. You can help your client succeed at each stage: first, by making sure the client has stated the intention in the most effective way for producing results; second, by encouraging the client to use strategies that will support a commitment to this intention.

Set an Effective Intention

Intentions are most effective when they remain broad. An intention that is too specific may be harder to achieve, thus leading to disappointment—and possibly even exercise noncompliance—if the intention is not realized.

In the beginning stages of setting an intention, it is useful not to get bogged down with *how* the intention will be accomplished. The details will become apparent in time. If the intention is prematurely specific, the results may be disheartening. On the other hand, if the client sets a broad intention (for example, to develop a healthy body composi-

tion), any positive outcome resulting from exercise will satisfactorily achieve the intention. This in turn can encourage exercise compliance.

For example, suppose a client named Sara sets the intention to lose 5 pounds in 1 month by attending a cycle class four times per week and by working with a personal trainer in the weight room three times per week. At the end of the month, Sara feels healthier, her clothes fit more comfortably, and she looks better. However, when she steps on the scale, she has not lost a single pound. Despite her improved body composition, she is bitterly disappointed not to have realized her intention of losing 5 pounds.

While Sara did lose a significant amount of body fat through aerobic exercise, she also gained muscle mass from her strength training program, accounting for the improved body composition with no weight loss. Had Sara started out with a broader intention—to achieve a healthy body composition—she likely would have been happier with her results. Instead she feels that she has done a tremendous amount of exercise without the benefit of weight loss.

Since life can never be predictable, no one can know exactly how an intention will play out. When a client is intently focused on the outcome of a very specific intention and fails to realize the desired result, the person may decide that exercise is not worth the effort. Holding the big picture and not worrying about the details allows the specifics to unfold within the natural flow of a client's life.

Focus Attention on the Intention

One of the most effective ways a client can

stay committed to an intention is to focus *attention* on the intention as often as possible. This is a useful strategy for keeping an intention in one's consciousness.

How can a client keep attention on her intention? By thinking about the intention as often as possible. You can help by encouraging your client to remember her intention. Since she is not yet in the habit of focusing attention on her intention, she may require some "attention reminders."

For example, imagine that a client named Robin sets the intention to develop healthy eating habits. To remind Robin of her intention when she is around food, Robin's personal trainer recommends that she make a 2- by 3-inch place card that says "Eat mindfully" and that she put it in front of her plate before each meal. Her trainer also suggests that she stick notes that say "Choose mindfully" inside the food pantry and the refrigerator. Robin may even want to create a shopping list that says "Shop mindfully" at the top.

Here's another example of how to use "attention reminders." Suppose Jeff has recently learned from his doctor that his neck soreness, severe headaches and occasional tingling in his fingertips are all caused by degeneration of the cervical spine. During a posture examination, a physical therapist observes that Jeff often slumps his shoulders forward and pushes his chin up and outward. She shows Jeff how to maintain proper spinal alignment. Jeff's intention now is to maintain a healthy posture to retard any further degeneration of his cervical spine. However, he is finding it hard to remember to check his posture regularly.

His personal trainer assists Jeff by suggesting that he write a "P" (for posture) on several 2- by 2-inch sticky notes and place

them in locations where he spends a lot of time sitting (for example, the notes could go on his computer screen, his TV, and the steering wheel of his car). His trainer also recommends that Jeff wear a rubber band around his wrist as a reminder to check his posture when he is walking.

Imagine How Good It Will Feel

Another way you can help a client or class participant stay focused on an intention is by taking a few minutes at the start of each exercise session to have the client imagine what it would feel like to be living that intention right now.

This activity serves two functions. First, the good feelings created when a client imagines himself living his intention right now can be motivating and inspiring. Second, the activity reminds

in order to maintain a pace that will improve his cardiovascular fitness. If John loses focus by being lost in thought about a project at the office, his pace will more than likely slow to his natural walking cadence, which for most people is too slow to enhance cardiovascular fitness. Through appropriate cuing, John's fitness instructor can remind John to focus on skills like forcefully pushing off the balls of his feet or driving the elbows backward, thus keeping John's attention on walking at a pace that produces the health benefits he intends for himself.

Bolster Exercise Compliance

While every participant has a purpose in starting an exercise program, how successfully that purpose is realized depends on

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Resources

Dyer, Wayne W. 2004. *The Power of Intention. Learning to Co-Create Your World Your Way*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House Inc.

strategy for staying committed to an intention

There is a saying that "what one focuses on, expands." This means that what clients choose to put their attention on is likely to be realized. In fact, if your clients want to know where they tend to put most of their attention, they need only look at their daily lives. The current state of their lives is a good indicator of their primary focus. For this reason, it is important that clients put their attention on what they want, not on what they "don't" want.

For example, it is far more productive for Suzie to focus on "being a healthy weight" than on "not wanting to be heavy." Focusing on being heavy is a constant reminder to Suzie that she is overweight. When Suzie puts her attention on being heavy, she tends to feel hopeless about her situation. Her discontent often leads to the destructive habit that made her overweight in the first place—overeating. On the other hand, if Suzie puts all her attention on being a healthy weight by imagining what that would be like, she will be more likely to engage in supportive behaviors, such as eating healthy foods and consuming fewer calories.

As a fitness professional, you can encourage class participants and clients to focus on what they want by helping them reframe all statements that focus on what they don't want to statements that focus on what they do want. For example:

Rather Than Saying

"I don't want to get old."

"I don't want to be stiff all the time."

"I don't want to be physically dependent on others."

"I don't want fat thighs."

Clients Can Say

"I want to age gracefully."

"I want to be more flexible."

"I want to be physically independent."

"I want shapely thighs."

the client why he is in the exercise session in the first place. This will help him stay focused on the various physical activities throughout the exercise session.

For example, if John's primary intention is to reduce his risk of heart disease by participating in a fitness walking class (his Dad and uncles all died prematurely of heart attacks), John will need to keep his full attention on his body mechanics

how effectively each person sets an intention and how well he or she maintains attention on that intention. As a fitness professional, you have the opportunity to guide your clients in setting effective intentions and in helping them stay focused on their intentions throughout each exercise session. Successful realization of an exercise intention is an important key to exercise compliance.