



Sport and exercise psychology

Trainers' experiences: improving adherence

Nicky Lawson, Fitness Training Consultant

Got about 15 years between you experience in our industry, and what I really wanted to do was just talk about some of your experiences relating to exercise adherence. We all know that exercise adherence is a huge problem, a lot of people take up exercise and drop away. So, just really wanted to have a chat to you a bit about some of your clients that you've come across, and particularly those that lack motivation, maybe even are scared to exercise because they haven't exercised for so long. And then how they began to think about exercise, maybe how they then took up exercise, and what you guys did to basically encourage them to get their results, to keep them coming to the gym. So, Anoushka, we'll start with you?

Anoushka Mistry, Personal Trainer

Okay, in terms of somebody that's really not confident using the gym and being in front of other people, say, for example, somebody maybe really overweight, or just completely self-conscious, I've done work in the studios with them, so, taken them in there and just kind of encouraged them to be more active in their daily lifestyle, so, when they do the housework and things, and concentrating on that as a form of exercise and using the stairs more and trying to encourage them that way, so it's all about their outside lifestyle as well as what they're doing in the gym. And then gradually, you know, as they become more confident and you build that trust and rapport, you can kind of take them into the gym and it's not such a scary thing.

Nicky Lawson

How did that person even start thinking about exercise, if they're that nervous and timid, what made them go from never exercising to exercising? And then how did you encourage them? What stages would you say they went through?

Anoushka

Well, at first, you know, it was, 'no, I'm just not going to do it, it's not for me.' And then either think up every excuse under the sun why they shouldn't be exercising but then, you know, you try and make them aware that the health issues and that it's important, and that they will start feeling better, so you encourage them that way. And they think about photos that they used to have, or pictures of themselves where they were much happier, so you kind of build up on where they really want to be. So, you try and bring all the positive things into light and get them to build a big picture of that.

Nicky Lawson

So, you're changing their focus from the negative to the positive.

Anoushka

Yeah, to the positive.

Nicky Lawson

And how did she maintain her desire to continue exercising? How did you help with that?

Anoushka

Regular, even text messages, and just checking that she's okay. You have to kind of be really – you have to be there a lot. But, at the same time, I had to get her to set lots of realistic goals and keep bringing the focus back to her, and getting her to make the decisions in her life. Because if I'd said in her life, 'right, you're going to do this, this and this,' there was no way that she was going to stick to it. So, it was a slow process, and we did have those kind of set-backs but, you know, just kept bringing her back.

Nicky Lawson

And how important was support, not just from yourself, with text messages and emails, but maybe from friends, family, colleagues? Did that help this particular client?

Anoushka

Yeah, she had a lot of support from her family and friends, you know, in the nicest way possible, telling her that she was getting to a stage where she was really unhealthy. And she wasn't going out anymore. And their support was really valuable as well as, you know, in terms of nutrition. And when they used to go out for meals and things, they got a lot more support, that kind of thing, without sounding –

Nicky Lawson

And did she find, generally speaking, or do you find, as a rule, people who lack motivation, maybe self-esteem, tend to have more success with exercise adherence if they train with other people than if they train on their own?

Anoushka

For her, at first, it was a very personal thing, but then, once she got a little bit more confident, I know that she started taking part in classes, so that was a big step for her. But then once she got over those barriers, the social aspect really kept her going.

Nicky Lawson

Did she achieve her goals?

Anoushka

Yeah. She's still got a little bit to go but, health-wise, a lot healthier now, and confidence is just – she's like a different person.

Nicky Lawson

And James, what about some of your clients? What would you say, for most of them, their biggest barriers to successes are?

James Wilson, Personal Trainer

Trained some guys, basically, their biggest goal is to increase in size and confidence, and the biggest barrier is getting the courage to go into the gym and start lifting the weights and getting involved with all the other guys that are lifting maybe heavier weights.

Nicky Lawson

And what about that barrier to actually even coming into the gym in the first place? What would you say, for most people, men and women, that the biggest barrier would be? Is it something about time?

James

Yeah, it's definitely time, probably a massive confidence issue, as well. And, you know, money and things come into it, but that's probably as an excuse, it's not really the main reason why. But there is time to train.

Nicky Lawson

How would you encourage someone to find that time?

James

Sit down with them, work out a schedule, look at their day, look at their work life, their family life. Try and just work out a plan that's realistic and individual to them.

Nicky Lawson

Okay. But, Noosh, what if your client is doing exactly what James has said, and everything is going well, and something happens and they have a set-back? So, it could be an injury. What sort of method would you then bring in to help that person get back on track?

Anoushka

Just re-setting them really realistic goals and making them realise that, oh, giving them that positive reinforcement that they will get better, and that you can support them to go through those changes. You've got to get them out of that negative frame of mind. That's the most important thing. And just highlight the things that they can do, like even the rehabilitation exercise that they can do at home, even if they can't come in.

Nicky Lawson

Can you give me an example of two extremely different clients and how your methods of motivation have differed.

James

One example would be a woman who's not really exercised in her life, had her thyroid taken out, gradually put weight on, confidence dropped, work productivity dropped, her family life suffered. Came into the gym, kind of just doing this, that and the other, not really having a plan. I just bumped into her, just started chatting to her, and she was telling me, 'look, these are my goals, and I've had my thyroid taken out'. You could see by her body language and her tone of voice that she was pretty down. So just sat down with her, and just took time out of my day really because I could see that I could really help this person. I gave her a load of research on case studies and examples of people losing weight and becoming fitter after their thyroid's been taken out. Started her off very easily, just doing simple stuff, so her confidence was already knocked, so it wasn't knocked any more.

Nicky Lawson

More supportive, more hands on, different language.

James

I spoke to people in the gym that knew her as well, so that I knew that she had a network in the gym. Texting her a lot, calling her a lot, just to make sure that she knew that I was always there and that I wasn't going to leave her because she was at a very low ebb. Constantly gave her new things to work on, new handouts, and it was just the way that I had to adapt to get the best out of her.

Nicky Lawson

And Noosh, can you give me an opposite example of that, maybe someone who was a bit more motivated, how would your dealing with that differ?

Anoushka

In terms of motivation-wise, I think that, well if they're motivated you don't have to push that way, you have to push on more sides of change, keeping them interested in what they're doing, so finding new activities for them. Getting them involved socially, because that's generally where I've found they really want to be. So getting them involved more in classes and things.

Nicky Lawson

Do you find they're the sort of people who like to train hard, whereas maybe someone who's more timid and less secure is almost a more softly, softly, more gentle approach whereas some other people might be 'well actually my motivation is I want a really good session, I want to feel I've sweated'.

Anoushka

Yeah, they want to feel like they've been absolutely beasted.

Nicky Lawson

Although we don't use that word now!

Anoushka

No we don't use that word, sorry! Yeah, just they like to be pushed really hard.