

Psycho-social Considerations of a Personal Training Course Practicum

by Steve Libreri

It is a misconception to believe that the relationship can be a success simply because the client chooses you. This will be an important factor, no doubt, but is not absolute. Apart from my aspiration to become a personal trainer, I am a social worker. There, too, relationships are crucial to the success of our interventions. Coincidences rarely occur. A relationship is organic, and the professional generally must create the conditions for engagement.

Taking this experience for the course, I was not chosen. The opposite took place. The scope was not driven by the client. The scope was my need to conduct an exercise for assessment. Yet a connection was not impossible. As was rightly pointed out in the notes, the starter point for most people is driven mainly by extrinsic goals. My client, for instance accepted to participate in the program because she felt this was a good chance to address her body size. It had been a wish of hers, and the thought of losing inches was a strong motivation to participate. Problem is; aspirations are generally beautiful but hard to attain. Reaching goals usually means working hard.

As the Prochaska & Di Clemente model implies, change requires a particular mental state to be achieved. This model is often used in addiction settings which also look at people who desire to be clean from substances, but seem unable to maintain their focus to do it. This is where the key professional, or in the case of fitness, the personal trainer comes along.

The human brain is generally design to avoid pain and stress. Exercise creates the condition where the body is placed under stress. In fact, this was my goal for the program; making it intense. At this level the brain would begin to form thoughts which discourage the person for the exercise to stop or be avoided altogether. Words of encouragement, albeit being important, can fall short to reverse this. As the client 'suffers' along the workout, words of encouragement may sound like lack of understanding, thus triggering a sense of frustration rather than motivation.

What I did to address this situation in my session was to invest more in the engagement phase with the client. Admittedly, I should point out that I knew the client. We shared a relationship before, so this process was considerably facilitated. We had trained together before, so I knew her reactions during workouts. What was important in this phase was that the client had a preconceived idea about me. She always thought highly of me and believed that I could be someone who could help her achieve her goal. Discussions about the strategy to reach the goal were kept factual. I avoided words like, "you don't need to lose weight there" or "your push ups are great". Actually my strategy was to be **scientifically** honest. I focused on regions and made remarks about forms. And this strengthened the conviction in the client in me in two ways; I became someone who gave feedback of use; and I was not afraid talk about the problems. She could trust me.

Trust is not something to be taken lightly. Trust is useful when you want to break some bad habits. You need to make confrontations. The client will not be happy about bad news, thus a good relationship is required to sustain such conversations. Trust is also useful for motivation. In the helping profession we have a saying, "the body cannot do what the mind does not believe to be

possible". Think of a moment where I as a trainer say, "you can give me one more". It is only because of the trust which exist with the client, that the client may believe that this is possible.

At this point, I wish to make clear that I consider genuine positivity to be another major building block for change. Any form of behavioural change will occur only if two conditions exist; constructive feedback; and positivity. Albeit I claimed that I want a relationship which can sustain confrontation, which I find to be a necessity for any change to happen, I still want the conversations to end with a good feeling. Research has proven with a high degree of corroboration that discouraging language, feedback which is destructive and even simple negative language such as "don't" or "can't" do not create characters who do things. In fact, this is a fundamental philosophy in parenting courses. The same can be applied in fitness.

As I went through the program with the client, I made sure to avoid cues which used negative language like "don't bend your knees too forward". I used positive language. I said "shift your weight in the heels". Although both seem similar, and none can be considered pejorative, the second cue gives the person a sense of what she can do. And this is the crux of motivation.

Keeping the client in the schedule for long enough will inevitably create a sense of accomplishment. The client may conduct re-tests and realise the improvements in endurance and strength. She can finally dress the jeans that she was unable to fit into before. It will be those rewards that will propel the client into more intrinsic goals. She will then connect with the feeling of satisfaction, happiness and pride. Unfortunately we live in a society which discourages and adults have a greater sense of what they cannot do rather than what they can achieve. My job was to keep the client in the workout long enough for her to get a taste of these feelings. My workout offered her a chance not only to feel like she managed to finish a workout, but it also offered her the chance to feel accomplished that she finished a highly intense workout. In moments when she felt down I simply reminded her that when the going got tough, she kept going.

Motivation is not about removing discomfort. It is about helping the person survive through the discomfort.