

# TEACHING FITNESS PRINCIPLES *for Lifelong Health*

By Michael Sergi

**W**hy do the activity levels among high school and college-age students decrease as they progress into adulthood? Many different sources, including the media, the medical profession and public health agencies, encourage consistent exercise and healthy eating. Might it be, then, that the real challenge for college students is not in finding motivation to exercise, but in deciding which activity to choose and deciding how to get started?

Many colleges and universities offer numerous activities in a variety of settings such as intramural sports, group fitness classes and physical education classes. It is also common to find some of the most comprehensive exercise facilities in the nation on college campuses. Though high schools do not offer as much physical fitness variety as do universities, structured physical education classes are still the norm, in addition to a varsity athletic offering. But despite all the opportunities to maintain and improve physical fitness, statistically, college and high school students do not meet the minimum recommendations for physical activity. Furthermore, many of those students who are physically active during high school and college discontinue regular exercise once they finish school. The opportunities are there, but the information to create healthy habits and exercise plans does not accompany the activities mentioned. Providing basic information for individuals to perform fundamental exer-

cise-training routines is key to long-term success and achieving healthy living goals. This article discusses ways to provide this basic information to secondary education and college-age students.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that nearly 80% of U.S. adults ages 18 to 64 years old are not meeting the minimum recommendations for aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities. Additionally, they reported that more than 70% of high school students are not meeting the overall minimum recommendations for general physical activity (CDC, 2017). This lack of consistent exercise coupled with poor nutrition leads to a higher risk for many diseases, including heart disease, stroke, some cancers and type 2 diabetes, along with psychological problems like depression. Individuals who exercise consistently have a lower risk for disease and other health-related problems. Fitness enthusiasts also report having a greater sense of happiness and self-satisfaction (Powers, Dodd, & Jackson, 2017).

The resources are there. Everyone knows the importance of proper nutrition and consistent fitness training, yet most people still do not meet the recommended minimum levels. Part of the reason could be the challenge of creating new healthy habits. Most people are aware that they should be doing something, but most do not know what to do or how to get started. As health educators, it is our responsibility to supply students with the requisite knowledge to lead a healthy lifestyle once they leave our tutelage.

Many people have a distorted image of health and fitness. Achieving a healthy body weight and improving fitness does not mean becoming a body builder or a professional athlete. Setting realistic and achievable process-specific goals will have a greater effect on outcomes than will outcome-specific goals. Process should always be stressed over product, and goals should always be specific, measurable and reasonable.

The first step to fostering lifelong exercise training and creating process-specific goals is to take initiative and simply get started. To start, a goal could be to do some form of exercise, any type, every other day of the week for the first few weeks. Students should be well versed in the concept that planned exercise should be a regular part of their weekly routine, as it creates the healthy habits needed for lifelong participation. The idea here is to promote positive behavior change through a simplified approach.

Next, students should learn the five basic components of fitness, which are cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility and body composition. Once the basic components have been learned, students should be taught how to connect these areas of fitness to an actual exercise routine. Cardiorespiratory endurance training consists of activities that are rhythmic and continuous, while resistance

training consists of activities that involve pushing and pulling weight. Brisk walking, jogging, cycling and swimming are effective forms of cardiorespiratory endurance activities. Resistance training can be done with free weights, weightlifting machines, body-weight exercises and resistance bands. Flexibility activities range from basic stretching before or after a workout to yoga or Pilates classes. Body composition is the study of nutrition and body-fat ratio, and how it relates to overall body improvement.

The third step is for students to learn how long to exercise during each session, at what level of difficulty, and what form of exercise to do. Health educators and fitness professionals refer





to this as the FITT principle (frequency, intensity, time and type). Frequency is the number of days per week an individual should exercise. Intensity refers to the level of difficulty per training session. Time is how long each exercise session should last. Type refers to the kind of fitness training to be performed (Powers et al., 2017).

Research has shown that performing regular cardiorespiratory activities like brisk walking and jogging three to five days per week for a minimum of 20 minutes to 30 minutes per session at approximately 60% maximal heart rate will reduce the risk for heart disease while improving health and fitness. Muscle-strengthening exercise requires less time. Frequency of training can be as little as twice per week for 10 minutes per session, which equates to one set of 12 to 15 repetitions per exercise per major muscle group (Hesson, 2012).

Beginning any new endeavor has its challenges and brings about some anxiousness. This is especially true when it involves performing activities outside of one's comfort zone, which

might be the case for many of the activities described here. Providing teenagers and young adults with this fundamental information early in life may increase their probability of maintaining consistent exercise-training habits into adulthood.

## References

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### Submissions Welcome!

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