



Self-Care:

Managing the Damage

Avoid burnout with self-care techniques that are simple and fun.

Our work as fitness and wellness professionals can be hugely rewarding. We are there on the frontlines, helping people win back their health from the jaws of obesity and sedentary living. We give loyal participants the joy of those regular exercise sessions they love. And we train some of the fittest people in the country as they strive to break through plateaus and achieve new personal bests.

You are one of us. With dedication and enthusiasm, you give everything you've got—week after week, month after month. But what about *you*? How do you tend to your own needs as you serve others?

If you hope to avoid burnout, practicing self-care is essential. Few certifications address this component in their instructor and trainer preparation courses—but incorporating some well-chosen self-care techniques into your days can not only prolong your work life but also enhance the quality of your life overall.

“Self-care” means promoting the health of one's five senses, both at work

and beyond. In the stress of the workplace, the sympathetic nervous system dominates, keeping us caught in “fight or flight” mode. Self-care techniques, on the other hand, turn on the parasympathetic nervous system, helping the body to heal itself and relax.

Victory for the Voice

As fitness and wellness instructors, we use our voices a great deal. In the morning, doing vocal exercises to wake up the voice should become a habit. You will find videos of simple voice exercises on my website, www.findlawrence.com (see the Web Extra for details).

To take care of your voice, politely require clubs to provide microphones, where appropriate, for all indoor classes (ACE 2011). Prudent use of a microphone includes knowing how to set the volume so that the *spoken* word is always audible above the music volume. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports that long-term vocal overuse, especially with-



To view vocal exercises that help you take care of your voice, go to www.findlawrence.com, click on “Free Stuff” and then “Clips, Chory and Handouts.” Scroll down to “Spa for the Soul” and select “Speech-Therapy Pathology Videos.”



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out the assistance of a microphone, can cause nodules to develop on the vocal cords and even decrease overall vocal quality with age (NIH 2012).

When you are not using a microphone (e.g., when teaching yoga or outdoor classes), learn to project the voice using a lower than normal pitch, even during moments of excitement when your volume spikes. Hydrate the voice before, during and after class with room-temperature or cool liquids, and consider keeping a glycerine-rich lozenge in your mouth when you must speak at length. Unlike liquids that you sip periodically, the lozenge will coat your throat every time you swallow.

Empowering the Eyes

We use our eyes nonstop—and not always in the best environments. In dimly lit yoga studios or dark indoor cycling rooms, our instructor eyes often strain to observe our clients' form. After class, as you go from a dark environment to a brighter area, diminish the shock to the optic nerve by gently looking outside the room (to where the light is brighter) for 5 seconds. This will allow the pupils to adjust before you step into the light. If the light control has a dimmer switch, use it slowly when changing the ambient lighting after a darker class.

Very slow blinking helps hydrate the eyes and massages the optic nerve (Rowe & MacLean 2004). For one full minute, just close and open your eyes as slowly as you can. The *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* reports that doing slow blinking in a dimly lit area while looking at a candle flame enhances the effectiveness of the exercise (Rowe & MacLean 2004).

Additionally, wearing headwear—at least around the forehead—during teaching may protect the eyes by preventing sweat, facial moisturizers or hair products from dripping into them.

Helping the Hearing

Music is a key element driving most group fitness experiences. While louder music seems to raise motivation and energy levels (Kravitz 1994), we know that music above 85 decibels can harm the ears (participants' and our own) (ACE 2011). Self-care for the ears includes keeping sound levels below the 85-decibel maximum in all our classes. Today, most smartphones have free, downloadable applications that can provide a decibel rating for ambient noise. Use one of these apps to learn appropriate volume levels and settings for music systems in classes and gym floors.

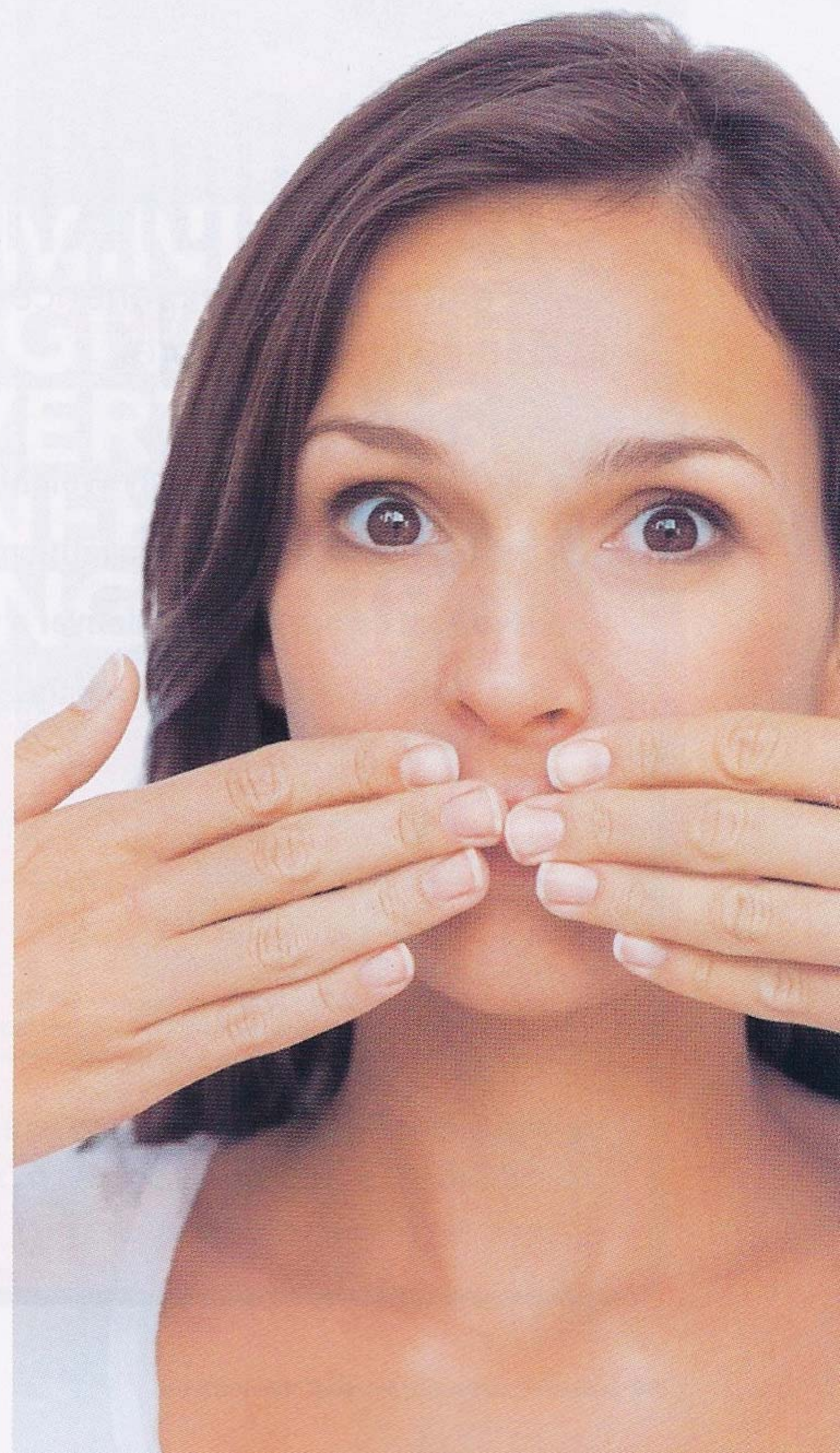
Also, consider compiling a music playlist that is *just for you*. This may protect against eardrum fatigue, according to a 2004 *JAMA* study: “having a softer volume for personal use music that is different from work music not only promotes ear health, but also helps to create a parasympathetic, relaxation response” (Friedrich 2004). Furthermore, the musical phenomenon of entrainment means that the heart will always try to beat at the rate of the music in its vicinity (Levitin 2006), so playing relaxing music when you want to recover from a busy day of training or teaching can help slow your heart rate and relax the muscles.

Bernadette O'Brien, aquatic instructor and founder of the group Aqua Stars America, based in New Jersey, agrees:

“I have playlists of special songs that I love, and no matter how much I want to share them with my classes, I keep those songs just for my home life, my dinner parties, my long baths on Sunday nights when I let my body recover from teaching.”

Tapping Into Touch

While we spend our lives helping others maximize the efficiency of their muscles, rarely do we learn about taking care of our own muscles. Managing the damage to muscles from everyday stress



requires regular self-massage or myofascial release, as these techniques help “clean” the muscles by getting rid of knots and dispersing built-up collagen. Just using a tennis ball every evening to massage larger muscles can help them recover from the stresses of teaching exercise classes.

If you have time to focus on only one area of the body, let it be your feet. As fitness and wellness professionals, we spend more time on our feet than we spend working any other muscle group. Furthermore, from gravity alone, toxins accumulate in the feet. Add to that the current trend of barefoot fitness, and you have three salient reasons to massage your feet regularly. Ideally, you want to attend to your feet every night—but even once per week is better than never.

For more information on self-massage, consult sites like www.meltmethod.com (for guidelines on myofascial release) and www.acefitness.org (for foot care programs). Paul Galloro, YogaFit® trainer and

presenter based in Toronto, says, “I always spend a few minutes every night massaging my feet in order to free up the free radicals accumulated there. I try to do it daily, because I notice the difference when I do not spend time [caring for] my feet.”

Nurturing the Nose

In our line of work, we often experience very unpleasant olfactory sensations! Our noses must tolerate a range of odors, from rusting metal to sweating bodies. In the presence of smells we would rather avoid, the sympathetic nervous system of the brain sends messages to the body to inhale and exhale less deeply, and, consequently, this keeps us from being more relaxed. Over time, the negative side effects of shallow breathing include overuse injuries, fatigue and even insomnia (Farhi 1996).

To enhance the sympathetic nervous system, experiment with using aromatherapy. When our environment smells great, we breathe more deeply, so

doing something as simple as adding a few drops of lavender oil to the driving wheel of your car will help you breathe better when rushing between classes.

When you are not teaching, take just a few full breaths to promote deep, conscious breathing. Consider burning an aromatherapy soy candle near your computer when checking email so that you deepen your breathing even though the rest of your body may not be working. Placing an aromatherapy teabag or herbal sachet in your gym bag can help it smell better. Finally, adding a few drops of essential oil to your own body moisturizer may help you breathe more fully as you are hurrying from the shower to your next class.

Just as I recommend having music that you reserve exclusively for you, I encourage you to have aromatherapy scents that you refrain from using with classes so that your brain never associates them with the work environment. Jessica Matthews, exercise physiologist with the American

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Council on Exercise, agrees: "I have a few special scents on candles and incense that I use at home. They help me recover after a long day at work and teaching yoga. Just a few minutes around these scents helps me to feel more relaxed and allows me to truly tune into my breathing."

Inspired Service Starts With Self-Care

As someone who was deaf for months as an infant, was blind in 1972, had no voice for weeks in 2011, and learned about compassionate touch while managing massage therapists for 13 years, I have by necessity gleaned lots of self-care techniques during my life. I felt compelled to share some of these with my colleagues for one simple reason: if we do not show love and care to our five senses, they cannot continue to show love and care to us as we keep on giving of ourselves in the ongoing effort to Inspire the World to Fitness®. ■

Lawrence Biscontini, MA, is an IDEA presenter and multiple-award fitness winner who managed fitness in the spa environment for over 13 years. Creator of the IDEA Biscontini Scholarship, he works as a mindful movement specialist and creative consultant. Find him at www.findlawrence.com.

For more information on fitness self-care, explore the "Practical Pointers" course on the American Council on Exercise website, www.acefitness.org/CEC, available soon.

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