



Are You Taking Care Of Yourself?

By Lawrence Biscontini

In today's unique economy, group fitness instructors need to be as versatile as possible so that we can teach a wide variety of classes and create a financially rewarding career. Sparse are the true "full-time positions" with health benefits for instructors, and far more common are the instructors that teach in multiple facilities with little full-time benefits.

Consequently, burnout rises high

among group fitness instructors because rarely do training programs dedicate themselves to teaching instructors how to exercise their own self-care. To that end, here are a few tips for instructor and personal trainer self-care.

A unique, new buzzword of this century is "self-care." This refers to putting the necessary parameters in place to ensure that our career machine, the body, which takes so much abuse from class to class, receives routine maintenance and service. Examples

of such overwork abound from teaching in facilities without microphones and less than ideal acoustics, to teaching in facilities with improper temperature control, to having to over-teach in an effort to meet financial requirements, and even to pay for medical benefits or exist without them. Proper instructor self-care encompasses treats for the five senses. The following outlines practical steps instructors can take.

"Self-care" means promoting both the relaxation response and recovery. When we live in stress, the sympathetic nervous system keeps us active. This is called the "fight or flight" syndrome. This is the nervous system that keeps us on our toes when we teach and train. Unfortunately, it is also the system that keeps us in stress. Conversely, the body's ability to heal itself consists of the parasympathetic nervous system. This turns on when we put attention into any of the little exercises outlined in this article.



phone, be sure to adjust the volume accordingly so that the spoken (not shouted) word is sufficient. Second, when using the voice without a microphone, be sure to project from the diaphragm. Lowering one's voice assists with this projection. As instructors teach, the sympathetic nervous system often dominates, and voices tend to rise in both volume and pitch. Instead, remembering to project with a lower than normal pitch when teaching assists in maintaining vocal health.

When using a portable device such as a "boombox," placing it far from the teaching positing reduces the instructor's tendency to scream over the music. For example, speakers may be placed behind the students, facing the instructor, at the opposite end of the area.

Whenever possible, after a class that is cueing-intensive, consider planning some time for the voice to recover where you can be in silence. Also, sipping on cool water or other appropriate beverages and teas to promote throat health (available at most

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VOICE (and TASTE)

Avoiding vocal overuse proves impossible in our industry. Nevertheless, taking care of one's voice is paramount to health so that proper curing will be possible. First, prudent clubs provide microphones for all teaching environments, especially where sound tends to be an issue and acoustics are less than ideal. Cycle rooms, pools, and group fitness rooms figure among the most common examples. When using a micro-



health food stores) will also help the throat recover from strong use.

Two nutritional issues often arise since instructors often eat on the go, including while driving between classes and clubs. The first issue is not taking the time for proper nutrition. The second issue is the time crunch. The Slow Food Movement Organization tells us that eating in a hurry not only prevents the body from extracting the total amount of calories from food, but it also can defeat the body's ability to enjoy the full sensorial approach to feeding.

When appropriate, take a moment to savour a snack. Eat in silence and in darkness for a few minutes because removing the other senses enhances awareness of taste buds. Try to chew each mouthful slowly until the food becomes liquid. Commence with a single-flavour food, such as a piece of fruit or vegetable. Gradually work up to complex snacks.

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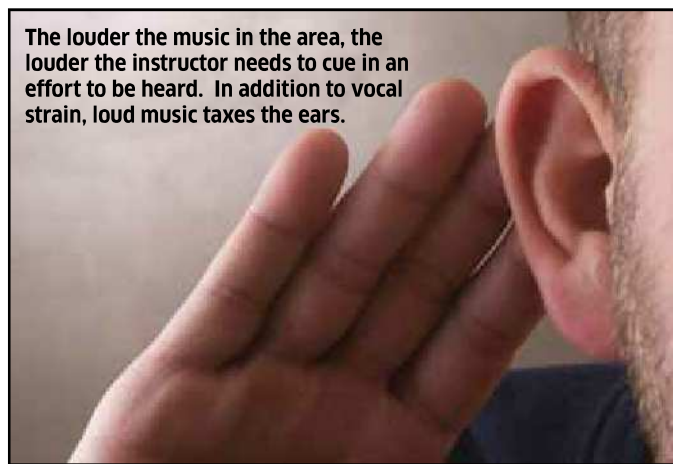
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EYES

The most commonly overlooked sense that instructors need to rest is sight. From the moment we press play, we scan our rooms constantly with keen eyes, unendingly evaluating the postures and movements of each class participant.

When not teaching, two simple daily exercises for eye health can work wonders to bring relaxation to both the eyes and the optic nerve. First, closing the eyes for two minutes refreshes the eye's functions. Additionally, slowly blinking the eyes for one minute also rests the eyes. The Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) reports that, if possible, doing both exercises in a dimly-lit area with only the light of a candle enhances the effectiveness of the second exercise.

Additionally, proper headware during teaching may assist keeping the eyes void of dripping sweat and facial moisturizers that tend to flood the eyes with perspiration resulting from more intense movement.



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EARS

Some instructors describe music as the soul behind every group movement class. With the exception of mind-body disciplines, instructors often play loud music to create a sense of energy in the class. As effective as this is, a nasty cycle occurs. The louder the music in the area, the louder the instructor needs to cue in an effort to be heard. In addition to vocal strain, loud music taxes the ears. The BBC News reports that, when we fall into the habit of using our personal listening devices to listen to songs we use for work at the same volume, the tendency to adversely affect the health of the eardrums increases because we fail to let the eardrums relax.

A 2004 JAMA study reported that, to avoid this fatigue, many ear, nose, and throat doctors recommend not only listening to per-

sonal music at a lower volume than used in classes, but listening to different types of music all together. This study reported that "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. If you play work music (to which you sweat and work out intensely) for personal time (where your body is more relaxed), it is quite possible for your body's systems (like heart rate) to speed up because of the physical association and "memory" of the work environment.

For so long, scientists been interested in both the relaxing and healing powers of music, but only recently has science made headway at documenting its benefits. Known as "The Mozart Effect," the unique properties of music directly cause physiological and emotional responses in the body which can translate into changes in blood pressure, relaxation response, depth of breathing, different states of sleep, and, most interestingly, increased mental powers.



Use touch to relax the body by practicing myofascial release.

TOUCH

Daily, instructors and trainers help others enhance their kinesthetic awareness. Unfortunately, hectic work schedules often prohibit that they, themselves, "check in" with their own kinesthetic awareness. Classes like Feldenkrais offer a plethora of tips for instructors to help them learn how to take care of themselves through touch. This author schedules private Feldenkrais lessons with practitioner Valerie Grant, randomly throughout the year to assess breathing, posture, and movement patterns. According to Grant, "Feldenkrais lessons promote self-care because they help instructors find greater ease and more efficient mobility for muscles. Patterns of habitual, unconscious muscle engagement lead to strain and injury, and Feldenkrais helps us discover our imbalances and learn to make movement choices that can prevent these parasitic patterns."

If finding a Feldenkrais practitioner does not prove possible for you, use touch to relax the body by practicing myofascial release. This is a gradual-to-deep self massage of muscle fascia and tissue that gets overworked as we teach and train. Start with a self-massage for five minutes of each foot. If you do not know how to massage the feet, just start with gentle squeezes all over the foot area for two minutes per foot. If possible, work up to using a foam ball or foam roller to massage muscles, release bands of collagen, and rehydrate the muscles.

SMELL

Oftentimes in the gym environment, instructors face unpleasant smells. Subconsciously via the sympathetic nervous system, the brain sends messages to the lungs to inhale and exhale less deeply to avoid the pungent odours. Donna Farhi, in *The Breathing Book*, reports that such shallow breathing can prevent the body from recovering sufficiently between classes because cells do not receive the proper amounts of oxygen they need to carry nutrients for repair. Consequently, overuse injuries, fatigue, and even insomnia can occur.



Pungent odours may cause you to inhale and exhale less deeply.

Taking just a few steps to promote deep, conscious breathing between classes from aromatherapy can heighten one's recovery between workouts. Long known in the spa environment, the more pleasant the smell, the stronger the parasympathetic nervous system's role is to lengthen the inhalation and exhalation response. Examples of aromatherapy to induce a deeper breath response for instructors and trainers include:

- Lighting an aromatherapy candle when checking email at a desk area
- Placing an aromatherapy sachet into a backpack or gym bag
- Getting an ionizer for the car to neutralize smells and generate that "after-the-rain" fresh smell
- Creating an aromatherapy spray made of appropriate essential oils in a base of green tea for spraying on the chest and wrists between classes when taking a full shower isn't appropriate
- Adding a few drops of appropriate essential oils to give aromatherapy to after-shower moisturizing lotion or oil

Learning to practice self-care is crucial for today's versatile instructor and trainer. In our efforts to be versatile, often overlooked is our own health to rest as hard as we train. Consider the effective techniques for each of the five senses to assist you in staying healthy while giving so much service to others.

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A mindful movement specialist, Lawrence made fitness history as the first recipient of multiple awards from ACE, IDEA & Inner IDEA, canfitpro, and ECA. He's currently serving as Senior VIP Consultant for Group Programming for the American Council of Exercise. Lawrence creates group fitness and personal training programming internationally for clubs and spas, including Equinox, 24 Hour Fitness, Gold's Gym International, Bally, and Golden Door Spas, where his creations received Conde Nast Traveler Awards recognition.



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