

**"I-N-T-E-N-S-I-T-Y"**

One of the hottest words in fitness this decade now permeates all group fitness programs, personal training routines, and H.I.I.T. programs such as CrossFit. A glance at the promotional advertisements of any pre-choreographed fitness class or piece of equipment across the globe reveals serious faces, sweat and "extreme" elements. To be sure, intensity figures among the most essential factors of determining one's desired outcomes in the F.I.T.T. acronym of Frequency, Intensity, Time and Type, but the current industry focus on intensity brings with it a few cautions. This article explores some of the strengths and weaknesses of the intensity craze.

# Our Propensity Toward INTENSIFY

Achieving the appropriate intensity is paramount for all populations, regardless of their fitness levels because, to produce a change, one must seek to overload the cardiovascular, strength and/or flexibility systems. To accomplish this, the AFAA guidelines for group exercise state that instructors can choose from a variety of methods selecting intensity and overload for both health and fitness benefits.

Industry Experts  
Speak Out on the  
Current Craze

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

## HEALTH CRITERIA

For *health* benefits, adults should perform at least 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 min) a week of *moderate-intensity* activity, or 1 hour and 15 minutes (75 min) a week of *vigorous-intensity* activity (e.g., running), or an equivalent combination of *moderate-* and *vigorous-intensity* activity.

Cardiovascular exercise should be performed in episodes of at least 10 consecutive minutes, but the intensity does not have to remain consistent, and the *total* minutes don't have to be in one bout (AFAA).

Adults should also engage in classes that include moderate- or high-intensity muscle strengthening activities, and involve all major muscle groups on two or more days a week since these exercises provide additional health advantages (AFAA).

## FITNESS CRITERIA

For *fitness* benefits, adults should perform 300 minutes (5 hrs) a week of moderate-intensity activity, or 150 minutes a week of *vigorous-intensity* activity, or an equivalent combination of *moderate-* and *vigorous-intensity* activity. Figure 1 offers a few popular ways to define "intensity" in the group fitness arena today.

For all types of individual classes, the normal question that follows is "At what intensity should I be working?" Figure 2 displays the current AFAA group fitness guidelines

for intensity. Instructors should be familiar with these options, and also keenly aware that protocols apply to the *current* fitness levels of individuals, so no classes should presuppose that first-timers, less conditioned, and athletes in the same class can follow the same actual choices for

intensity. "Problems ensue when instructors do not encourage these guidelines," says Dr. Len Kravitz, coordinator of exercise science at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. "Students have to progress gradually," he claims, because "too many people try to do too much, too hard and too fast, leading to injury and potentially other unhealthy consequences."

## THE APPROACH

Instructors should therefore encourage individual intensity choices, and the secret sauce ingredient is the instructor's approach. One of the most intensity-craving group fitness places this author has encountered is New

York City. Steve Feinberg, creator and founder of the ultra-packed, successful Speedball<sup>SM</sup> Fitness, trains his instructors to make "multi-level class experiences because, with a plethora of individual abilities in each class, instructors must continuously demonstrate a Level 1 and a Level 3—even though they teach at Level 2—to ensure that all participants who come to class have a successful, yet safe, workout."

Oftentimes students confuse intensity with perspiration, erroneously labeling "effective" instructors versus "ineffective" instructors based on how much they fog up the mirrors in the classroom on intensity-rating sites such as rateyourburn.com. Feinberg cautions: "Sweat is often a measure of humidity, not intensity, so we have to remind them that just walking into a sauna makes you sweat, but you're not getting any fitter just by sitting there and sweating. Conversely, you can work really hard and, even if you barely perspire, your heart rate monitor, perceived exertion rating and talk tests may prove otherwise."

Another New York City group fitness icon, Violet Zaki, creator of Power Trip and ZENCombat, agrees, advocating that instructors encourage students to choose their own appropriate daily intensity. "They need to learn to distinguish what doesn't feel right on their body, and I often tell my students not to compare themselves to others, which is a huge issue in a prime location at a prime time."

With all of these things in mind, this author inserts a gentle reminder into the introduction of any class he teaches: "I'm going to ask you an hour from now if you chose the appropriate intensity today, for *you*."

Lashaun Dale, Senior National Creative Manager of Group Fitness for Equinox based in New York, has been responsible for training instructors for more than 20 years. She reminds all instructors that intensity is individual-specific. "Teach them to choose intensity options based on their goals, *why* intensity is important, and on their realistic energy levels—such as what bandwidth do they have to make it happen on that day, especially if they [are] currently overtaxed at work, at home, or not able to get enough sleep or eat properly to give fully to their intensity choices. Just adding intensity to an already intense life is a recipe for injury."

## TEMPER INTENSITY WITH SAFETY

It can truly be dangerous when instructors presuppose that "one size fits all." Just because a majority of students show up at class with a "kill me" mentality toward high-intensity and results-driven programming, instructors may forget that there will almost always be a variety of physical fitness levels present. "Too often in intensity-driven boot camp classes," remarks Noel Chelliah, creator of DailyMuscle Body Transformation Camp, based in

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## FIGURE 1: SOME (NOT ALL) POPULAR METHODS FOR DETERMINING INTENSITY DURING GROUP FITNESS

- Dr. Borg's Perceived Exertion Original Scale (6–20)
- Dr. Borg's Perceived Exertion Revised Scale (1–10)
- Talk Test
- Heart Rate Monitoring using devices (e.g., heart rate monitors)
- Accelerometers (e.g., Nike + FuelBand, fitbit)
- Measurement devices (e.g., MPower™ computer console on Schwinn cycling bikes measures mph, distance, watts, heart rate and calories burned)

## FIGURE 2: AFAA GROUP FITNESS GUIDELINES FOR INTENSITY

### Cardiovascular Fitness

#### Intensity Recommendations:

- HR max: 64–94%
- HRR: 40–85%
- RPE: 6–20 scale: 12–14 (moderate to somewhat hard); 15–16 (hard) or 10-point scale: 4–6 for moderate and 7–8 for vigorous.

### Strength/Endurance

#### Intensity Recommendation:

- To the point of muscle fatigue while maintaining proper form; typically 8–25 repetitions, 1–4 sets, depending if focus is strength or endurance.

### Flexibility Intensity Recommendation:

- To the end of range of motion, to the point of tightness, without discomfort performing 1–4 repetitions.

## FIGURE 3: JESSICA MATTHEWS' SUGGESTED METHODS FOR MANIPULATING INTENSITY VARIABLES

- Variables such as base of support (e.g., narrow stance vs. wide stance, unilateral vs. bilateral)
- Lever length and center of gravity (e.g., adding arm variations to movements, increasing range of motion, taking arms overhead)
- Adding movement/mobility to traditionally static exercises (e.g., Plank and Side Plank)
- Working from an unstable surface (e.g., using a BOSU® Balance Trainer, or BOSU Ballast Ball)
- Adding load (e.g., dumbbells and medicine balls)

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, “instructors try to match the people to the movements instead of vice versa. Because of the intensity focus, which unfortunately sometimes supersedes safety, we’re starting to talk about things like rhabdomyolysis, which is the breakdown of muscle fibers that leads to the release of muscle fiber contents (myoglobin) into the bloodstream, becoming harmful to the kidneys and causing kidney damage.”

Ultimately, to promote the safest, most intense experience possible, the experts agree on offering options. Being able to progress and regress any complicated movement in any type of class guarantees a successful experience for all, while coupling intensity with safety (Heydari).

Finally, if we only advertise extreme intensity in our programming, there may be a limit to the number of newcomers and deconditioned people we can attract.

Shannon Fable, 2013 IDEA Instructor of the Year and Director of Exercise Programming for Anytime Fitness Corporate based in Boulder, Colo., cautions against using impact for intensity. “Individuals should bear in mind that intensity doesn’t have to equal impact. There are MANY ways to get ‘intense,’ [which is] a feeling in your heart and your lungs, not in your joints. Try range of motion (get lower, go bigger), try speed (go faster) or add weight. Going hard *can* be done by most anyone, but jumping and doing high impact moves is what makes me nervous, as it’s just not right for everyone.” Jessica Matthews, an adjunct professor of exercise science at Miramar College in San Diego, agrees, stating that “A successful high-intensity class should be programmed using a variety of exercises with regressions and progressions, moving away from the notion that high intensity equals high impact, as plyometric exercises may or may not be appropriate for all students.” Figure 3 offers safe options for manipulating intensity beyond impact.

Certainly the educated instructors advocate working out *smart* first, *intensely* second. Linda Shelton, fitness consultant and exercise video producer based in Thousand Oaks, Calif., urges exercisers to work out with the intent of getting the full benefit of a perfectly executed move (e.g., no frenetic thrashing). “Working out with skilled technique actually contributes to creating a higher intensity. In other words, integrity trumps intensity, every time.”

Throughout fitness history there has never been such a plethora of intensity research and wisdom from which the group exercise instructor may draw. Helping students learn to concentrate on the quality of their movements over the preoccupation with intensity may ultimately assure that everyone enjoy not only a more intense workout, but a safer one as well.

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