Weight loss, improved mood, increased energy levels, and ability to live life to the fullest: these are the goals of young and old alike. Yet, instructors often teach to older populations differently. Aside from the obvious - generational differences and possible contraindications - older adults take classes for the same reasons as their younger cohorts.

One of the most effective ways to improve fitness levels of this population is in the pool. The water provides relief from joint pain and an opportunity to go beyond one’s normal capabilities on land. The water provides a supportive environment that significantly reduces the risk of falling (a concern for many older adults) during exercise. Older populations can realize significant improvements in aerobic capacity (Kravitz, 1996) and strength (Mazzeo) with well-designed exercise program. The water provides the perfect environment to challenge all participants with appropriate modifications.

Below are some key areas where instructors can make a difference when leading group aquatic fitness programs for older adults:

**Warm Up/Cool Down**

The warm up and cool down are especially important for an older population. A longer warm up (10-15 minutes) ensures that joints are properly lubricated and body temperature is sufficiently increased. A gradual movement-based cool down offers functional range of movements and helps increase flexibility. The warm up and cool down segments are excellent opportunities to allow for social engagement that may be eliminated during the cardiovascular and strength training segments of class.

**Intensity**

It is important to teach your class about intensity, especially if you are ‘amping’ it up. In addition to using the “talk test” and rate of perceived exertion (RPE), find creative ways to describe the sensations that accompany hard work. Example statements: “This exercise should feel challenging, but you can continue for another minute” or “This should feel like moving in quicksand”. During every class, intensity checks should be conducted two to three times using a scale of 1-10 RPE (1 = easy, 10 = extremely challenging) with a goal RPE 5-7.

**Self-Paced**

Additional educational conversations should take place before and after class to clarify what it should feel like to work at an appropriate intensity. Remind the class that it is called a ‘workout’ because of the work that is required. If an exercise session was easy, it would be referred to as an ‘easyout’. With multiple ability levels, group exercise classes must encourage a self-determined pace. This approach can work with an assortment of class designs including add-on, circuits, timed intervals, and 32-count phrasing. Each participant should adjust his or her pace to achieve an appropriate challenge.
Pushing Further

Participants should always be exercising in a pain-free range of movement and follow any doctor directives. Ideally, the instructor is aware of participants’ limitations and injuries. To achieve their goals and see the results (i.e. weight loss, improved strength or endurance) participants must exercise at an appropriate level of training. Our bodies adapt to the challenges that are presented and find the easiest way to complete the task at hand. Instructors need to be able to guide participants past the normal “comfort zone”, in safe ways, and motivate them to work at a higher level if continued progress is to be realized.

Hydration Breaks

Water intake is especially important with this population. Encourage participants to bring water bottles to class and offer plenty of water breaks during class. Submersion puts additional pressure on the kidneys, so encourage participants to use the restroom before class and make mid-class breaks less awkward by reminding members that they can leave to fill their water bottle at any time.

Fun Factor

Add in your personality, incorporate exciting and engaging music, allow for partner work and offer variety in classes. Smiling, eye contact, acknowledging a person by name ensures that everyone is engaged and is eager to attend. Identifying everyone’s roles in the class can be helpful. Remind participants that you are there for them and be open to their suggestions.

Achieving Goals

After six to eight weeks, participants should start to notice results: better sleep patterns, increased energy, body changes (the way their clothes fit) and increased strength, endurance, and flexibility. Encourage your participants to write down their goals and share them with a supportive person on a regular basis – quarterly or semi-annually. Follow up to see how goals are progressing and encourage them to share goals and accomplishments with each other.

Do not be afraid to challenge your participants, no matter their age or ability levels. Just because a class is hard, does not mean that you will lose all of your older participants. In fact, be prepared. They might bring in the spouse/partner or friend because of the inclusiveness of the class. Older adults have been living in their bodies for a long time and are able to recognize limitations. By providing options and modifications everyone can achieve their goals – together!

Reference


Author

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