

Professional Standards and the Personal Trainer

People make decisions every day. Some are relatively simple and affect only the individual: bagel or eggs for breakfast? Jeans and t-shirt or khaki pants and collared shirt? Other decisions require an individual to process multiple aspects of a situation involving others and make a decision based both in logic and emotion. In cases such as these, individuals must follow established guidelines, along with their own personal code of ethics, to help them make the soundest decision possible. Personal trainers, along with other health practitioners, find themselves making such decisions every day. It is important to keep in mind that health practitioners are held to a higher standard than the average vocation because of the uneven relationship between the professional and the patient, so trainers must be especially careful to follow ethical guidelines and maintain the highest professional standards possible.

Professional standards are necessary for personal trainers because they distill the expectations of what comprise sound and appropriate practices. Professional standards identify ethical considerations and address definitive actions associated with professional conduct. They also can serve as the foundation for judging the merit of a formal grievance or allegation relating to violations of professional or ethical principles within a vocation. In essence, defined professional standards provide an individual with guidance for appropriate behaviors, activities, and the decision-making process within the scope of their practice. An individual can examine defined standards of practice and easily implement a professional self-evaluation; these particular components of professional development are constructively developed by peers to enhance the integrity and respect of the profession.

Health professionals such as personal trainers are required to make decisions pertaining to all aspects of their responsibilities on a daily basis. These decisions could relate to any number of situations: for example, trainers must always properly represent their certifications and expertise and keep their certifications current. This last point is extremely important; legitimate certifications will require a trainer to get recertified every certain number of years (as dictated by the credentialing body). The fitness industry is an ever-changing environment, and trainers should stay up-to-date on current research. Trainers must also maintain an appropriate relationship with their clients. Not only does personal training involve a lot of one-on-one time, it can also require physical contact in an environment that lends itself to casual conversation and dress. Trainers must set boundaries with their clients to avoid any appearance of impropriety. Several high-profile trainers have been caught behaving inappropriately with their clients, and reality shows have aired the fallout of trainer-client relationships gone awry. Such antics give professional trainers the proverbial black eye, and potential clients wonder if all trainers behave the same way.

Professional standards also provide guidance for trainers who must stay within the scope of practice for personal trainers; display duty of care during emergency or safety procedures; maintain proper documentation; and properly manage participant, environmental, and professional risks. The ability to make the right decisions in these and other scenarios is developed by analytical and critical thinking that helps determine the ideal conclusion for a situation, conflict, or problem. Personal trainers require a “blueprint” of sorts that give them a

foundation from which to work from in these decision-making processes.

The following list outlines common standards of the personal trainer profession:

- Accurately assessed and documented attainment of the minimal competency and knowledge standards (i.e., passing an NCCA-accredited national board exam). There are hundreds of companies that advertise a weekend's worth of work for guaranteed certification, but in most cases such certifications do not teach people the minimal skills necessary for an individual to safely train clients. Such certifications may also encourage the use of unproven supplements or other methods by which a trainer can make money, but at the expense of the client's needs.
- Proper representation of an individual's academic achievement, skills, and abilities. People have a tendency to inflate their accomplishments, but it is an unethical behavior that at best results in the use of questionable exercises that may not hurt the client, but don't necessarily benefit him or her, either. At worst, it can result in injury to a client, and termination of employment or the loss of a client and any future referrals. If the situation should escalate, the trainer may find him- or herself dealing with legal issues.
- Practicing within the defined scope of the profession. Consuming the correct number of calories for one's needs is crucial to helping one lose or maintain weight, but trainers often step out of bounds by providing their clients with a specific diet plan. Trainers can certainly make recommendations to their clients, but in many states it is a legal requirement that an individual have a registered dietician's license in order to suggest specific choices. Similarly, trainers must be careful to avoid diagnosing injuries in their clients. While physical activity carries with it an inherent risk of injury, trainers need to be cognizant of the fact that it is in the client's best interests that they be referred to a qualified professional for an accurate diagnosis. Trainers want to help their clients as much as possible, but an incorrect assessment can do more harm than good if a trainer suggests a course of action that turns out to be detrimental to the injury.
- Commitment to continued learning and maintaining professional proficiency. Fitness is an ever-changing industry. Even the average individual who gets the majority of his information from the media will feel as if there's always a new study contradicting a previous study, so it's important for trainers to be aware of the changes in their field and stay up-to-date with new information. Not only does this allow the trainer to maintain professional proficiency, but it is also essential, in most cases, for a trainer to maintain their professional certification from year to year.
- Protection of the privacy of clients by not disclosing information to third parties unless required by law. Clients have a right to the expectation of privacy with regard to their activities. While it may be necessary to discuss a specific case in order to gain some

insight with regard to a training question, trainers should always be careful to use general terms when talking about the actual client. Much of the trainer-client relationship is based on trust; after all, a trainer is dealing with his or her clients' health. If a client feels he or she cannot trust the trainer to maintain a level of discretion, the relationship may be irretrievably broken, and lost along with the relationship are future referrals.

- Maintaining appropriate filing systems and documenting all professional activity. Maintaining physical and written records of activities performed during a training session can protect a trainer should a liability issue arise. An organized documentation system reflects positively on the trainer, as it implies professionalism and a commitment to proper training practices. Often, trainers have a full load of clients, and it is next to impossible to remember everything one does with each individual client. Having clean, organized notes to which the trainer can refer back when a question arises simplifies progressions and can answer questions about past sessions.
- Implementing proper screening and evaluation, and acquiring medical clearance when required for the safety of the client. New trainers must often take a step back when working with new clients and remind themselves that individuals are at different fitness levels when they begin a new routine, and oftentimes their physical conditioning is far below that of the trainer and the trainer's colleagues. It is essential that

trainers establish baseline data to determine the safest regimen with which to start a client; this helps limit the likelihood that a trainer will try to use exercises for which the client is not ready. While medical clearance may feel like an additional obstacle to beginning an exercise routine, a certain segment of clientele will be best served by getting physician approval before starting an exercise plan. For example, morbidly obese individuals should always have medical clearance before beginning an exercise routine; the physician will be the best person to determine if the client is healthy enough to begin such a regimen. It is also important to obtain medical clearance if a person has diabetes, high blood pressure, or other conditions that may preclude his or her ability to perform certain exercises successfully. Trainers should always make sure their clients obtain medical clearance if necessary, as it can protect both the trainer (from possible liability) and the client.

- The referral of clients to the appropriate health care practitioners when needed. This leads back to practicing within the defined scope of the profession. Trainers are skilled at providing effective exercise programs to their clients, but generally they lack the skills and technology to diagnose disease or injury. Clients often ask their trainers questions that trainers are not qualified to answer; it is important that trainers remember to always act in the best interests of their clients, rather than try to have an answer for everything.

- Establishing and delivering the highest quality services. Trainers have an obligation to themselves and other trainers to provide the best service of which they are capable. Shoddy training, or a spurious routine designed by an inexperienced or poorly instructed trainer, reflects badly on the industry as a whole. A trainer who does not have the trust of his clients is not going to be able to maintain a roster of clients, nor is he going to benefit from word-of-mouth referrals that so often make up the bulk of a trainer's clientele.
- Implementing risk management strategies and services in accordance with evidence-based criteria. A trainer who works for a gym will often have a written code of conduct to follow in the event a situation escalates beyond standard operating procedures, but trainers who are self-employed should also establish guidelines that should be followed in the event of a problem. In both cases, it is best for the trainer to avoid trying to reinvent the wheel. More than likely, an experienced trainer will have encountered a particular situation, and through trial and error has set up effective guidelines that list the best course of action. Of course, a trainer must also follow his or her own internal moral compass, so it is important to take all the information into account before making any decisions.
- Avoiding conflict of interest, improper distribution of information, or any other false representation. Supplements can be a source of huge profits for many gyms,

but selling supplements because it is a requirement of employment and not in the best interest of the client is a clear conflict of interest, as is accepting supplements or other products from a company with the expectation that the trainer will encourage his or her clients to use them. Once again, clients must be able to trust their trainers, but pushing product use without a justifiable reason can create a rift in the relationship from which there is no regaining of trust.

- Calling attention to unethical, illegal, and unsafe behaviors by other professionals. This may be one of the most challenging aspects of a professional code of conduct. No one wants to feel as if they are "ratting out" a fellow trainer, but a trainer who risks injuring their clients by having them perform contraindicated exercises such as behind-the-neck pulldowns, or sells their clients unnecessary supplements, makes all trainers look incompetent or in it for the money. Trainers should not confront another trainer in front of a client, but they should be professional and respectful when pointing out egregious errors in training.

Professional standards allow personal trainers to maintain a level of respect even without explicit licensure criteria or more restrictive requirements beyond the high standards established through obtaining a legally defensible certification. By complying with defined standards, personal trainers can run safe and effective practices that focus on the best interests of the client and maintain the integrity of their vocation.