

WHY CLIENTS TERMINATE TRAINING WITH A PERSONAL TRAINER

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The results of this research are an attempt at looking at what can go wrong in the personal training industry. These results can help personal trainers avoid the behaviors, or lack of action, that can lead to client termination. The following is a brief report on the results that were found and also the implications for the personal training industry.

History of why previous research has not worked

Previous research into why clients terminate training has been done using questionnaires. The results that were attained from this research were superficial in nature. When clients are given options to say why they terminated, they often choose the easy options. Previous research also allowed clients to list socially acceptable reasons for terminating. Factors most commonly reported were : lack of time, lack of money, not getting results, did not like gym atmosphere, injury and moving away. These are the reasons clients give trainers for stopping but they are not always the “true” reasons. When I initially interviewed trainers and gym owners about why they thought clients terminated, the above were the most common reasons given. Only one gym manager actually gave reasons why clients terminated that were not the socially acceptable or materialistic reasons. The gym manager said that clients may drop out due to the client and trainer not getting along and the two of them not developing a positive training relationship.

I decided to do this research from a different perspective. Rather than providing clients with answers to choose from on a questionnaire, I wanted the clients to tell their stories. I wanted to understand the clients experience in depth. Psychological interviews were conducted with clients who had previously terminated training with a personal trainer.

The importance of the client-trainer relationship

Initial results revealed the importance of the client's relationship with their trainer as a vital component of achieving their goals. We proposed that the client-trainer relationship formed the platform on which the whole personal training model is delivered. We suggest that the issues of poor communication, inter-personal and trainer's agenda all add together to form a factor of “non-facilitative relationship”.

Aside from the client-trainer relationship, there were two major themes that emerged from the research. One is how the client contributed to their own eventual termination of training and the second is how the trainer contributed to the client terminating training.

How clients contribute to termination

Discovering clients contributed to themselves ending training was a surprise finding. The major finding was that clients had a lack of awareness about what personal training was meant to be like, or what to expect from a good personal trainer. Due to not knowing what to expect, clients failed to object when trainers forced them to do activities that they did not want to do or when trainers were behaving inappropriately. Due to this lack of knowledge, clients failed to act and work things out with their personal trainer, resulting in less than optimal training. Clients' own lack of awareness and resultant inaction, added to their termination of training.

How trainers contribute to termination

The major finding was how personal trainers contribute to client termination. Multiple themes emerged that showed how a personal trainer could influence a client terminating. The first was the **inter-personal relationship** that a client and trainer have. Results showed that the types of personal issues

that were present between the client and trainer negatively influenced training. Issues like the client and trainer becoming friends, the trainer not being interested in the client, relating to clients as a paycheck, trainers not providing emotional support or enthusiasm for the client and the client not feeling comfortable around the trainer. Such interpersonal factors significantly influenced the clients experience of not liking the trainer subsequently stopping training. The second factor was the **communication** that the client and trainer have with each other. This theme contained the type of ineffective communication the clients received from their trainer plus the lack of communication they received. The two way communication was an issue by being non-effective (negative, non-supportive, or unethical) or there being a lack of communication in general (trainer did not talk to client enough, client did not communicate their needs) or lack of communication about exercise (no discussion of goals, no explanation of technique or benefits). The third factor was the perceived **lack of attention** that the trainer gave to the client. Clients reported receiving a lack of attention from their trainer and the trainer would not pay attention to what they were doing. Some clients reported that their trainer would chat with other people whilst training the client. This resulted in the clients feeling like a number, rather than a valued person. The fourth factor that contributed to clients terminating training was the **trainer's style**. Clients reported that their trainer's style did not suit them as well as not providing them with what they needed. Trainers failed to match the style of training to what clients needed or wanted. Trainers failed to provide clients with the support and tailoring they needed. Alternately, trainers were overly aggressive with clients and yelled or harassed them. Clients also reported that their trainer **lacked professionalism**. Clients reported various types of trainer behavior that could be labeled as unprofessional. Clients told of their trainer using them for social benefit. Other clients reported that their trainers had personal or life issues that influenced the training. Other trainers excessively pressured their clients or broke confidentiality and told other staff personal factors about their clients.

Finally, one of the biggest factors that emerged was the overwhelming presents of the **trainers agenda**.

All clients reported that their trainer imposed their own personal agenda onto the client. Clients said they desired to do certain types of activities but the trainer forced them to train in a style that suited them. For instance, a trainer who was into body building and made their client do the same, even after the client asked for something different. This shows how the trainer's focus was on themselves, rather than the client.

Implications for practice

The major implications from this research are the need to educate both clients and personal trainers to increase their awareness. Clients reported not knowing what personal training was supposed to be like. Due to the clients not having criteria on which to base an assessment, they failed to provide their trainer with feedback to allow for improvement in exercise sessions. If clients can be educated at the start of their involvement in personal training about what personal training is and how they contribute to the personal training relationship, then they may increase their likelihood of achieving their fitness goals. There is also a need to increase the education of personal trainers, especially with reference to their relationship with their clients. Very little, if any, of the content of this research is spoken about in personal trainer education programs. Personal trainer education focuses on physiology and exercise prescription. Very little time is spent on the "soft skills" needed. By including some of these research findings into education programs, personal trainers may increase their self-awareness and sensitivity to variations in clients' needs and may decrease unprofessional behavior.

In conclusion, this research is the first conducted where clients have been interviewed in depth about their negative experiences with personal trainers. The results that emerged show how clients perceived that some personal trainers' behavior falls short of providing the service that clients desire

and occasionally clients suggested that personal trainers could be unprofessional. This research has shed light on what clients needed to achieve results with their trainer and what they desired from their trainer, a valuable initial qualitative expedition into the darker side of personal training.

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