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Creating More Inclusive Exercise Groups

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Introduction

Recreational facilities and individual instructors often promote group exercise classes as welcoming to all. Even if all people are, in theory, welcome to participate, will the class (i.e., the instructor, other participants, class format, and the available equipment) provide a comfortable and supportive environment for all?



Indoor cycling class participants in action.
Source: Recreation Services, University of Alberta

People can feel excluded from group exercise classes because of their gender, body weight, body shape, clothing choices, or coordination. Furthermore, people who experience disability often find it difficult, if not impossible, to participate. Instructors may be trained to provide adaptations for participants with osteoporosis or osteoarthritis. However, people with diagnoses such as spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis are often viewed as outside the instructor's scope of practice, and thus, these individuals are left out of mainstream group exercise offerings.

Within the domain of group exercise, inclusive service delivery is rarely considered. Literature searches for the most part highlight that group fitness opportunities for individuals who experience disability are segregated. Even when people who experience disability are participating within a local recreation facility, the programs are typically individual in nature (e.g., personal training) or applicable group programs are designed for people with a specific diagnosis (Learmonth, Paul, Miller, Mattison, & McFadyen, 2012; Pang, Eng, Dawson, McKay, & Harris, 2005; Salbach, Howe, Brunton, Salisbury, & Bodiam, 2014).

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This gap is problematic as it legitimizes segregation and reduces the responsibility of facility managers and instructors to provide inclusive programming. Furthermore, this situation limits choice for individuals who experience disability in terms of which programs they can participate in, who they can participate with, and when they can participate.

An Experiment in Inclusive Group Exercise

As a Lecturer, I specialize in the area of adapted physical activity. I have also been a group exercise instructor certified through the Alberta Fitness Leadership Certification Association (AFLCA) for 13 years. The combination of these two worlds led me to pursue the development of an inclusive group exercise class in 2012. For the past three years, I have been the instructor of an inclusive indoor cycling class where participants, who do and do not experience disability, participate alongside one another.

Adaptive equipment, such as hand cycles set up on indoor cycle trainers, is provided for those who require it. Participants have included people diagnosed with spinal cord injury (paraplegia and quadriplegia), cerebral palsy, amputation, stroke, multiple sclerosis, congenital limb deformities, or autism spectrum disorder, as well as individuals who do not experience disability. Enrollment for this class has continued to be strong with approximately 20-25 people participating each week and many repeat participants across successive sessions.

Recommendations

Based on my experience, there are three main factors which help to create inclusive exercise programs.

1. Community partnerships are vital

The indoor cycling class was made possible through collaboration between Recreation Services at the University of Alberta and the Paralympic Sports Association (PSA).

Recreation Services provides support by:

- including the class in their fitness program offerings;
- providing space to store the hand cycles in the cycling room;
- scheduling the class with time to allow for set-up and take-down of the equipment; and
- reducing the enrollment cap so that some upright bikes can be removed to make room for the hand cycles.

The PSA provides the hand cycles. These hand cycles are normally used during their spring and summer outdoor programs, but our class is able to use them at other times. The PSA also takes care of hand cyclist registration for each class and coordinates the volunteers. Each class has 3 or 4 volunteers who help with set-up and take-down of equipment, and participant transfers to and from the hand cycles. The volunteers also respond to participant needs during the class.

2. Instructor knowledge matters

As the instructor of this class, I require specific knowledge in the realm of adapted physical activity, i.e. how to create inclusive environments, use of disability-appropriate terminology, and an understanding of the specific concerns associated with different diagnoses.

My background has adequately prepared me to feel confident leading this class. However, I have still had to learn a lot about leading participants who use different types of bikes and rely on different muscle groups, developing drills that are inclusive, and utilizing cueing that is concise and effective for the whole class.

3. Creating a sense of community within the class

The underlying strength of this program lies in the sense of community that has developed within the class!

With this class — more than any other group exercise class I have ever taught — I am acutely aware of the importance of my interactions with all participants and of providing ways for participants to interact with each other. This occurs through team drills, incorporating class input into drills, and through informal chats before and after the class.

Doing what I can to ensure that all participants feel they have a valued role in the class is critical to creating an environment of acceptance and appreciation of differences.

Approaches to Launching Inclusive Group Exercise Classes

Are you (or your program or facility) ready to begin a conversation about holding more inclusive classes? Based on my experience, here are a few basic tips:

- Talk to the members of your facility who experience disability and ask them about their interests in group exercise. For instance, ask them if they would join a class if they knew they would feel welcome in the class and the instructor was prepared to adapt as necessary to meet their needs. Also ask what types of classes would be most appealing.
- Consider the logistics of the class for participants who experience disability. This may include time of day, availability or means of transportation to and from the facility, accessible parking, accessible change rooms and washrooms, specialized equipment, and pricing.
- Encourage group exercise instructors to seek training in working with individuals who experience disability. For example, the Steadward Centre at the University of Alberta offers annual training on this topic.

Encourage group exercise instructors to learn from their participants regarding adaptations. The participants are the experts about their own bodies.

Three factors supporting an inclusive class:

- *community partnerships*
- *instructor knowledge and confidence*
- *a sense of community within the class*

Conclusion

Group exercise classes are often described as inclusive, but to realize more inclusion, many changes are needed in the group exercise landscape. A starting point is to begin the conversation about inclusion by thoughtfully engaging with disability communities and individuals about their needs and wants. Finally, it is important to remember that creating inclusive group exercise opportunities is a shared responsibility of facilities, instructors, and class participants. 

References

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Alberta Centre for Active Living or the WellSpring Advisory Committee.

Useful Links

Paralympic Sports Association (Edmonton):
<http://parasports.net/>

The Steadward Centre for Personal & Physical Achievement:
<http://www.steadwardcentre.ualberta.ca/>