



Non-Weight-Centric Approaches for Fitness Professionals: What Information do Certifying Organizations Share?

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Traditional focus

- Weight = Health
- Weight loss = Better health
- Ignores scientific evidence
- Ineffective and inconsistent, Stigmatizing, Health-damaging

Background and Rationale

Non-Weight-Centric Approaches

- Inclusive
- Health-promoting

Organizational Communication

- Reflects priorities and values
- Reinforces professional standards for practice

Purpose

To explore information about weight-inclusive and weight-neutral approaches communicated by organizations that certify personal trainers and group exercise leaders

Method

- 15 organizations that certify personal trainers and group exercise leaders (see Table 1)

Table 1. Organizations and Communication Outlets.

Organization	USREPS	NCCA	Certifications	Communication Outlets
American Council on Exercise (ACE)	Yes	Yes	PT, GE	ACE - Certified ACE Insights Blog
American Fitness Professionals & Associates (AFPA)	No	No	PT	AFPA Health & Fitness Blog
American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM)	Yes	Yes	PT, GE	ACSM Health & Fitness Journal ACSM Certified Blog
Athletics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA)	No	No	PT	AFPA Health & Fitness Blog
CanFitPro	No	No	PT, GE	Can-Fit-Pro Magazine
Fitness Mentors	No	No	PT	Fitness Mentor Blog
International Sports Sciences Association (ISSA)	No	No	PT	ISSA Blog
National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM)	No	Yes	PT	American Fitness Magazine
National Council for Certified Personal Trainers (NCCPT)	Yes	Yes	PT	NA
National Council on Strength and Fitness (NCSF)	Yes	Yes	PT	NCSF Blog
National Exercise Trainers Association (NETA)	No	Yes	PT, GE	NETA Blog
National Exercise & Sports Trainers Association (NESTA)	No	Yes	PT	NESTA Blog
National Federation of Personal Trainers (NFPT)	No	Yes	PT	NFPT Blog
National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA)	Yes	Yes	PT	Personal Training Quarterly
SCW Fitness	No	No	PT, GE	Sporlite 66 Newsletter SCW Blog

Note: PT = Personal Trainer, GE = Group Exercise
USREPS = United States Registry of Exercise Professionals® (USREPS); NCCA = National Commission for Certifying Agencies

- First and second authors searched organizational communication (e.g., online magazines, blogs) using the following search terms:
 - weight stigma, weight inclus*, weight neutr*, body image, and body appreciation

- 12 communications were analyzed (see Table 2)
 - 16 articles were identified and screened; 4 were removed

Table 2. Communications Analyzed.

Author and Title	Org.	Type
1. DeFilippis, C. (2022). Is body love realistic?	ACE	Online resource
2. Green, D. (2022). How to create a more size-inclusive environment for your clients.	ACE	Online magazine
3. Myers, C. (2022). Shifting weight: Is the focus on obesity making it worse?	ACE	Online magazine
4. Myers, C. (2020). Coaching your clients toward a healthier body image.	ACE	Online magazine
5. Stanfield, J. T. (2020). What is weight bias and what can we do about it.	ACE	Blog
6. Souza, B. (2015). A weight-neutral approach to health and fitness instruction.	ACSM	Online journal
7. Puhl, R. & Wharton, C. (2007). Weight bias: A primer for the fitness industry.	ACSM	Online journal
8. Hopkins, J. (no date) Being a group fitness "Inclusivity Ambassador".	AFAA	Blog
9. Stanfield, J. T. (no date) Weight bias is hurting us and here's what can we do about it.	NETA	Blog
10. Nitschke, E. (2023). Positive body image marketing in personal training.	NFPT	Blog
11. Whitehead, R., Moore, W., & Whitehead, T. (2022). Understanding weight bias among personal trainers and practical Strategies.	NSCA	Online article
12. Kooperman, S. & Rothschild, S. (2023). Body diversity: Its impact on fitness marketing.	SCW	Online newsletter

Analyses

Author and Article Information

- First and second author + 3 undergraduate volunteers
- Scientist, Practitioner, Both, Neither
- Identity as fat, HAES® aligned
- Article target audience = trainer, client, facility

Communication Content

- Descriptive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2022)
- Third author = critical friend

Images

- First and second author + 3 undergraduate volunteers
- Person, Object, Both
- Active, Passive
- Revealing Clothing, Concealing Clothing
- Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard et al., 1983)

Results

Author and Article

- 14 authors
- Practitioners = 7, Both = 3, Researchers = 2, Neither = 2
- 3 HAES® aligned

Target Audience

- Trainer = 2, Client = 10, Facility = 2
- (some targeted more than one audience)

Images

- 16 images
 - 9 included only people
 - 5 included people and objects
 - 2 included objects
- Objects
 - Scale, tape measure, cell phone, vegetables, cutting board, coffee mug, and exercise equipment
- 40 people total
 - 22 active, 18 passive
 - 27 revealing clothing, 13 concealing clothing
 - Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard)
 - Average = 4.325, range 2-6.5
 - 2-2.9, n = 5
 - 3-3.9, n = 5
 - 4-4.9, n = 6
 - 5-5.9, n = 10
 - 6-6.9, n = 11

Communication Content

- Weight stigma is bad... but so is being fat
 - High prevalence of *verweight and *besity
 - Negative consequences of weight stigma
- Actionable strategies – inconsistently reported and somewhat vague
 - Awareness and self-reflection
 - Leadership
 - Language
 - Modifications, Autonomy, Culture, Education, Body diversity, Physical space/equipment, Marketing

Awareness “Take an honest evaluation of your own body-image beliefs, the language you use and how you may be inadvertently perpetuating shame in your clients. By assessing your own beliefs and behavior, you will be even more effective in helping your clients change theirs.” (article 4)

Leadership “Acknowledging that categories of difference (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexuality, body size, etc...) affect behavior and health is important to help provide a compassionate and understanding approach with all clients. This should impact how an individual experiences health positively and is an important step to reducing bias and creating a safe, caring, ethical, and effective fitness instruction.” (article 6)

Language “...personal trainers should ask their clients the language that they prefer to help reduce unintentional errors that make the client feel stigmatized” (article 11)

Conclusions

- ❖ While some communications acknowledge weight stigma, concrete strategies for inclusive practice are sparse, inconsistent, and often lack actionable depth.
- ❖ Certifying organizations have the potential to lead change by integrating non-weight-centric values into their communications and imagery to promote truly inclusive fitness environments.
- ❖ Organizational communication shapes professional norms and expectations, making it essential that messages consistently promote inclusive, non-weight-centric practices.

