

Individualize Your Assessments

by Joe Giandonato, MS, CSCS

Service your clients better with individualized assessments.

Unless you're a newly certified, clipboard toting, wet-behind-the ears trainer at your local globo gym, you know that no two programs are created alike. A client's goals, needs, medical history, present activity level, injury history, aversions, financial and time constraints can shape the program you design for them. So why should everyone go through the same battery of baseline tests, if their backgrounds and desired outcomes differ greatly?

I've had the pleasure of working at some top-notch facilities in my career as a personal trainer. Even the assessments that were the most thorough and well thought out were not optimal for every new or prospective client that walked through the door. Of course, any assessment is better than none, which was the case at a few of gyms I worked at, including commercial gyms and privately owned studios. I've compiled a list of considerations that personal trainers should think about when assessing a new or prospective client.

The Must Haves

Health Status Profile Form

Any competent personal trainer, regardless if they are employed at a commercial facility or work independently, should have their client or athlete fill out a health status profile, which should outline personal health information that's critical to eventual programming. The information collected might note any contraindications to specific exercise modalities, such as an athlete who indicates that they have a heart murmur. This might warrant further follow-up from a cardiologist, or clearance from their physician before they begin an exercise program. We could drag this out ad nauseam by saying that most murmurs, especially those discovered in younger populations are innocuous, while murmurs found in older populations, could indicate coronary heart disease. Anyways, be sure to have these forms on hand when you schedule your assessment, having a prospective client fill one out in advance. This will prove very helpful, saving you valuable time. Time which should be spent reviewing the information they provided.

Physical Activity Readiness Survey

When working with prospective clients who are of older or diseased populations, personal trainers should whip out a survey to assess if an exercise program is medically appropriate. If a prospective client notes that they experience tightness in the chest during moderately intense activities or feel excessively dizzy during physical exertion, then you should have them consult their physician to request medical clearance before they embark on an exercise program.

Vitals and Body Composition

Personal trainers often miss this one as well, usually focusing on the weight that appears on the scale and devising ways to make that number go down, or up, depending on their client's goals. While weight management is very important, resting heart rate, blood pressure, non-fasted or fasted blood glucose reading with home blood glucose monitor, are equally crucial in determining your prospective client's health and consequent exercise programming. Take circumference measurements and be sure to measure their body composition, preferably via calipers, because I'm not sold on the accuracy of BIA devices. If you haven't gained your prospective client's trust, then BIA devices will suffice, just make sure you don't creepily gaze at them upon meeting them, so you can avoid providing them an arbitrary reading off a BIA device.

Cardiovascular Fitness Test

I don't care what test you use here, as long as it's clinically sound (Balke walking, cycle ergometry, step test, et cetera) and you use it again when you reassess your client, gauging their progress at a later date. Obviously, the test used will take into account the client's current level of physical conditioning and health state, so maximal exercise testing or a three minute box step test, would not be appropriate for an elderly individual with cardiovascular or orthopedic issues. Consider the age, health status, medical and injury history of your client and the sport or activity of choice of your athlete, before testing them. Again, be sure that the test used is duplicable and doesn't require too much technical instruction.

Flexibility Test

Again, consider your prospective client's level of physical activity, injury history, and occupation, when deciding which test to use here. Most trainers toss in the standard sit and reach test, like antique kickers and punters (Morten Anderson and Sean Landeta), never seems to go away. If a trainer took the time to consider their prospective client's background, they may find other flexibility tests somewhere deep in their toolbox to assess their flexibility.

Strength Testing

You'd never have your grandmother perform a maximal clean and jerk, unless of course she's perfectly healthy and was an avid Olympic lifter back in the day. Likewise, having your new athlete, who's a high school pitcher and quarterback, perform a maximum bench press isn't probably the wisest idea. You could consider maximal strength testing and /or strength endurance testing; however, it depends on the prospective client's current strength levels, injury status, and the sport(s) or activities they participate in.

Performance Indicators (athletes)

While I could have included strength testing here, as it is also a pillar in gauging one's performance, it's necessary that you test everyone's strength, not just athletes. Make sure that the performance indicators used are specific to the athlete's sport and furthermore their position if they are involved with team sports. Performance indicator testing involves measuring an athlete's power, speed, and agility.

Movement Assessment

With Gray Cook's FMS workshops and NASM surging in popularity, movement assessments have been abuzz in the fitness industry over the past few years. Often times, I see fellow personal trainers, overlooking all of the previously mentioned considerations, instead concentrating on movement

assessments and the like. While we're in the business in improving people's musculoskeletal make-up, we should not neglect the aforementioned components when assessing, designing, and implementing a program for our new clients. If you're not having your clients do some sort of movement assessment, reach out to a sports physical therapist in your area to familiarize yourself with them. Additionally, check out the FMS and/or NASM's material. Both have helped me tremendously in servicing my clients. While a basic overhead squat assessment is a good start and will undoubtedly put you light years ahead of 90% of personal trainers out there, it's only good if you know what the hell you're looking at.

Obtain Oral and Written Consent

Inform them on what they'll be doing and briefly demonstrate the activity they'll be tested on. First, try to test them on things they have familiarity with. I doubt most soccer moms know what a 5-10-5 drill is, and it'll be that much harder to get them to agree to do it. Keep the tests specific to their lifestyle, goals, and history and you'll get them to do it. Get a signature to cover your ass, just in case.

Other considerations, which command attention, include: the testing conditions, time of day, the prospective client's nutritional status, residual fatigue or muscular soreness from previous training sessions, hydration level, and familiarity with the test.

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