

Mother Nature's Gym

Science is discovering the benefits of exercising outdoors. Here's a look at ways to add outdoor activities to exercise programming.

Marie was a client who had long suffered from anxiety. I'd discovered years ago that a walk outside before a strength training workout calmed and focused her mind, resulting in a more effective workout for her and a more positive experience for both of us. When my boss found out, he went ballistic.

"If you didn't have such a long-standing relationship with Marie, I would fire you," the owner of the fitness studio told me. "Clients do not leave this gym during their workout." There I was, one of the most experienced trainers in the studio, threatened with unemployment for simply taking a client for a walk outside. Fortunately, a growing body of research is suggesting a more broad-minded approach to exercising outdoors.

It can't happen soon enough. Studies are finding that sedentary indoor lifestyles and an over-reliance on technology are knocking people's lives out of balance. Overuse of electronic media elevates stress and reduces concentration and productivity (Archer 2013). Author and teacher Max Strom outlined the challenge to fitness pros at a 2012 IDEA conference: "The time of speaking of the mind, body and emotions as three separate entities is over."

Growing numbers of clients are fighting obesity, stress and chronic mood disorders. We can help them by connecting

their organized indoor workouts with playful outdoor activity. Think of it as a natural progression of the joy of movement that led us to this profession.

The Science of the Human Brain Outdoors: What Is the "Nature Cure"?

In 2011, researchers evaluated 11 trials involving 833 adults to see whether exercising indoors or outdoors had a

greater effect on physical and mental well-being. The conclusion: "Compared with exercising indoors, exercising in natural environments was associated with greater feelings of revitalization and positive engagement, decreases in tension, confusion, anger and depression, and increased energy" (Thompson et al. 2011). Study authors cautioned that there was not enough high-quality evidence for specific recommendations, so they called for further research.

Blue Mind

Scientists responded by taking the laboratory outdoors. I met one of these

RISK MANAGEMENT

Preparation. Mother Nature is ultimately in charge in the outdoors. Minimize risk with an operation plan that addresses the following:

Skill level. Safety is the number-one factor when choosing an activity. Use health history questionnaires to determine if clients should avoid a particular pursuit.

Gear. Being prepared with the proper clothing, gear and hydration is critical for optimum physical performance and safety. Create a required-gear list for clients, and check to make sure they have everything before you leave.

Credentials. Government agencies regulate the outdoor industry and require extensive proof of qualifications before you can lead commercial outings on public land. Permit requirements may include the following:

- current sport-specific instructor certification
- detailed operation plan
- proof of registration as a state-licensed outfitter and guide
- certification in wilderness first aid

First aid. A CPR certification alone is insufficient in the outdoors. Take a 2-day Wilderness First Aid course or a 7-day Wilderness First Responder course.

Liability. Fitness-specific insurance policies don't cover outdoor activities beyond day hikes. If you plan to lead outdoor events yourself, find a broker with specialized policies.

Waivers. Clients should sign a participant agreement, release and assumption-of-risk form. Consult with an attorney to protect your business to the fullest.



researchers on a 2012 kayaking session in Veracruz, Mexico, where we shared our experiences working with aquatic and marine species and also interacting with people in outdoor spaces.

In his new book *Blue Mind*, to be released in June 2014, marine biologist Wallace J. Nichols explores the chemical reactions in the brains of water enthusiasts—swimmers, surfers, deep-sea fisherman and so on. Nichols says that swimming has a balancing affect on the stress hormone catecholamine, producing a relaxation effect similar to that found during meditation. He adds that swimming provides the greatest amount of “cognitive reserve,” the mind’s resilience to damage of the brain (Nichols 2014).

Greening the Mind

Journalist Florence Williams traveled to northern Japan in 2012 to investigate research indicating that walking in a green forest decreases physiological measures such as heart rate and blood pressure. She joined University of Chiba scientist Yoshifumi Miyazaki for a clinical

comparison of the brain activity and vital signs of 12 male college students during a walk in a forest versus a walk in an urban setting. Williams was not an official participant in the study, but she did have her vital signs measured. She learned that when she was walking in the forest, oxyhemoglobin concentrations in the prefrontal cortex of her brain declined, showing that her sympathetic nervous system had gotten a restorative break. Her systolic blood pressure had dropped 6 points by the end of the forest walk, whereas it rose 6 points during the city walk (Williams 2012).

Nature-Deficit Disorder

Author Richard Louv created a stir when he published *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin 2013). Since then, he has been an outspoken advocate for getting children (and parents) outdoors to create their own nature experiences. In the book, Louv makes two suggestions that speak directly to the health, fitness, and sporting goods industries:

- “The outdoor equipment and sporting goods industry faces diminished sales if the divide between the young and nature continues to widen.”
- “In the ongoing search for answers to [childhood] obesity, [health practitioners] should advocate contact with nature as integral to healthy development and emphasize free outdoor play, especially in natural surroundings” (Louv 2008).

Talk to any outdoor sport enthusiast and you will hear what science is just beginning to discover: Being outdoors feels good. As the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy, an environmental lawyer, said, “We’re part of nature . . . and we have a role in nature, and if we separate ourselves from that, we’re separating ourselves from our history, from the things that tie us together” (Louv 2008).

Incorporating Outdoor Activity Into Exercise Programming

Nichols, the marine biologist, believes the ideal workout for yielding maximum benefits to physiological and cognitive



HOW TO PARTNER WITH THE OUTDOOR INDUSTRY

Don't let all the risk management requirements stop you from accompanying clients on fun outdoor activities. Stay true to your fitness focus by partnering with licensed outfitters and guides or tour operators to run an outdoor excursion for you. Consider the following options:

Become a pied piper. Look for a tour operator who will work with you to create a profitable business partnership. For example, in exchange for bringing 10 guests on a cycling trip, the tour operator may agree to offer the 11th seat to the trip leader at a discounted rate.

SELECT THE RIGHT PARTNERS

Think local. Visit the official travel and tourism webpage for your state to find a detailed listing of licensed outfitters and guides.

Take a trip. Search the Web for tour operators, hoteliers and travel agents who specialize in the sport and regions that interest you.

Work with a hotel. Look for hotel sales managers who will offer a discounted room-and-meal package to groups. As the trip leader, you will be responsible for marketing the trip and collecting the money.

function would comprise an outdoor setting, more than one person and a problem-solving component (Nichols 2014). He also says that while exercise in green space is good, adding blue is even better (hiking a trail next to a river or the ocean, for instance), and indoor gyms can accomplish a similar effect by bringing blue spaces indoors.

The practical questions for practitioners boil down to how we extend our exercise programming into outdoor spaces while remaining within our scope of practice.

For some instructors, the connections are obvious. Indoor cycling instructors can join forces with cycling tour operators to lead real outdoor bike trips anywhere in the world. Swim coaches can team up with swim adventure programs to lead masters teams on open-water excursions. Whatever your fitness specialty, you can apply frequency, intensity, time and type (FITT) principles to create an effective training modality.

Designing a Program With FITT

Try these guidelines when developing an outdoor exercise program:

Frequency. This will vary by location. Geography and time commitments will dictate whether you incorporate the outdoors on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis. Talk to your clients to determine their interest level and availability.

Intensity. Select activities in venues that provide a safe challenge while highlighting clients' physical capabilities, not

diminishing them.

Time. For beginners, make the first session a maximum of 90 minutes. Experts can progress to longer sessions and even sport-specific multiday trips.

Type. Choose outdoor activities that complement the movement patterns and objectives of your clients' indoor training programs. For example, clients who like water and want to improve their balance may enjoy testing their fitness with a lesson in standup paddling.

Program Design Exercise Format

Warm-up. A warm-up fosters a mind-body connection and eliminates distraction. Budget 15–30 minutes before the lesson to lead dry-land training with a focus on each of the large muscle groups. Perform 2 sets of 12–15 reps each of bridge, boat pose, prone back extension, plank position, squat and lunge. Modify the body positioning in the second set to progress the intensity.

Outdoor activity. Perform according to FITT principles outlined above.

Cool-down. Finish with 10–15 minutes of stretch and relaxation exercises and a conversation about the experience.

Water-Based Training Options

Paddle sports options include canoeing, kayaking and standup paddling.

Benefits. All these options develop upper-body and core strength, endurance and balance. Rhythmic stroke patterns yield meditative effects. Paddle sports may be good for someone with lower-extremity issues like knees and ankles.

Risks. Standup paddling is a poor choice for someone with diabetes, severe kyphosis, inner-ear problems or poor balance. Kayaking and canoeing may exacerbate discomfort from back problems.

Locations. Rivers, ponds, lakes and oceans are all possibilities.

Land-Based Training Options

Hiking and cycling are the top land activities.

Benefits. They develop cardiovascular and lower-body strength and endurance.

Risks. Hiking and cycling long distances may exacerbate certain ankle, knee and hip problems. Mitigate discomfort by selecting the appropriate grade and distance. Make sure bikes are correctly fitted.

Locations. Hiking can be done anywhere with an increase in grade. Cycling locations should be carefully selected to maximize safety; choose roads with either dedicated cycling lanes or large shoulders. Keep things simple, and avoid routes with many traffic stops.

Parting Thoughts

As fitness professionals, we can effectively increase the overall health and well-being of our clients by expanding fitness programming to include outdoor activities. We can lead and inspire others to engage

in their communities and environment in a way that creates a sustainable lifestyle for future generations. Applying the FITT principles of exercise programming and partnering with the outdoor industry will allow us to remain safely within our professional scope of practice. With a wide world of options to choose from, only a limitation in our own adventurous spirit and creativity can hold us back. ■

Melanie Webb, CPT, is an ACE-certified personal trainer with 25 years of experience in fitness and athletics. A former wildlife biologist, she shares her passion for the outdoors by leading multisport trips through her company, Sol Fitness Adventures, and by working to bridge the gaps between human beings, nature and health. Contact her at www.solfitnessadventures.com.



Take the Quiz

www.idealifeit.com/may-2014-quizzes or mail the quiz on page 82.

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