

LEARNING TO
UNDERSTAND
AND RECOGNIZE
MINDSETS
MAY HELP YOU
BECOME A MORE
EFFECTIVE FITNESS
PROFESSIONAL.

WHAT IS MINDSET TRAINING?



BY SHIRLEY ARCHER, JD, MA

Michael Mantell, PhD, has spent the past 40 years urging people to change their minds to improve their bodies. Mantell, director of behavior science coaching at Premier Fitness Camp in San Diego, shares this story:

“I worked with an obese, gay male client, who finally came to realize that he’d been [too] humiliated to go to a gym because his mindset was, ‘People will laugh at me. I look horrible naked. I can’t ever have a lover because I can’t stand how I look, so how will anyone else? I can’t ever lose weight, because deep down I know I’m a failure.’”

Mindset training helped turn things around, Mantell said.

“By confronting each of these negative guiding thoughts, this client was able to see how unfactual they were, and he could replace them with more accurate and logical thoughts. He’s now well on his way to achieving a healthier weight, sees a trainer three times a week and is currently engaged to a gentleman he met at the gym!

“It all began by recognizing, rejecting and replacing his negative mindset with the help of a simple question: ‘Is what you are believing true?’”

That’s the power of mindset. Mindset is *more* than a popular gym buzzword. It is a long-studied concept in the fields of cognitive and positive psychology that provides a foundation for a scientific understanding of how beliefs influence behavior (see the sidebar “A Quick History of Mindset Studies”).

Mindset matters for fitness professionals because it can help trainers and clients overcome the frustrations that arise as a result of people seeing the world in different ways. Think about it: Clients hire trainers and other fitness pros for help in achieving fitness and weight goals. But no matter how good we are at fitness assessment, program design and exercise instruction, some people do not respond to our efforts. Why does this happen? It may be because we haven’t addressed the clients’ *mindset*. >>

10 KEY NEGATIVE MINDSETS

Michael Mantell recommends that fitness professionals familiarize themselves with these 10 important “cognitive distortions” that affect people’s ability to stick with an exercise and nutrition program. These come from the research of David Burns, author of *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (HarperCollins 2012).

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** You look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories.
“If I can’t do all of the reps in the set, I’m not cut out to exercise.”
2. **Overgeneralization:** You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

“Since I couldn’t get the lunges right today, I’ll never be good at them.”

3. **Mental filtering:** You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
“I may have been able to hold a plank for 30 seconds, but so what? I can’t do a single-leg glute bridge at all!”
4. **Discounting the positives:** You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities “don’t count.”
5. **Jumping to conclusions:** (a) mind-reading—you assume people are reacting negatively to you when there’s no evidence of that; (b) fortune-telling—you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.
“I can tell, Trainer Vic, that you think I’m doing a lousy job.”
“I know I’ll fall and hurt myself in these plyometric jumps you want me to do.”
6. **Magnification or minimization:** You blow things way out of proportion, or you shrink their importance inappropriately.

7. **Emotional reasoning:** You reason based on how you feel.

“I feel like an idiot doing these reverse flies with supine 90–90s, so I must really be an idiot.” Or, “I don’t feel like exercising today, so I’ll put it off.”

8. **“Should” statements:** You criticize yourself with “shoulds” or “shouldn’ts.” “Musts,” “oughts” and “have-tos” are similar offenders.
“I should be able to do a kneeling overhead toss without falling over.”
9. **Labeling:** You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying, “I made a mistake,” you tell yourself, “I’m a jerk” or “a fool” or “a loser.”
“I dropped the barbell when I was doing a bent-over barbell row. *Ugh!* I’m such a jerk and a loser!”
10. **Personalization and blame:** You blame yourself for something you weren’t entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might have contributed to a problem.



Let's examine the meaning of mindset and review current scientific understanding of how beliefs affect certain behaviors. You may find that these insights hold the key to unlocking barriers to behavioral change and helping clients achieve better health and well-being.

WHAT ARE MINDSETS?

"Mindsets can be thought of as psychological orientations that shape how we view the world around us," says Derek D. Rucker, PhD, professor of entrepreneurial studies in marketing at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Rucker points to the popular analogy of people seeing a glass of water as either half-empty or half-full. Mindset is why two people look at the same facts and draw opposite conclusions.

Mantell adds: "Mindsets describe a collection of thoughts or beliefs that guide all behavior." More specifically, he says, mindsets "comprise inclinations and tendencies toward behaviors and attitudes that drive how we react to daily events, conditions, circumstances, people and situations."

For study purposes, mindset researchers have identified different constructs or "frames of mind" in which contrasting views of an identical situation can directly influence perception. This explains why two otherwise similar people in similar circumstances (like two different clients) can reach opposing conclusions about the right way to respond to those circumstances. This is significant because a trainer may use the same coaching technique and achieve great success with one client, yet be unable to help another and be unable to identify the reason.

PROMOTION VS. PREVENTION MINDSETS

Science has identified two distinct mindsets—**promotion** and **prevention**—that have a direct impact on setting and achieving goals. "In the promotion versus prevention model, a promo-

"IN THE PROMOTION VERSUS PREVENTION MODEL, A PROMOTION-FOCUSED PERSON MIGHT EXERCISE WITH A FOCUS ON IDEALS AND GAINS ASSOCIATED WITH LIVING A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE. ANOTHER PERSON MIGHT EXERCISE WITH A PREVENTION-FOCUSED MINDSET. THIS PERSON MIGHT FOCUS ON AVOIDING BECOMING FAT AND [ON THE] MEANS TO PREVENT THIS FROM HAPPENING."

—DEREK D. RUCKER, PHD



A QUICK HISTORY OF MINDSET STUDIES

While the term *mindset* has been around since the 1920s, Carol Dweck, psychology professor at Stanford University and author of the best-selling book, *Mindset: the New Psychology of Success* (Random House 2006), has recently popularized it.

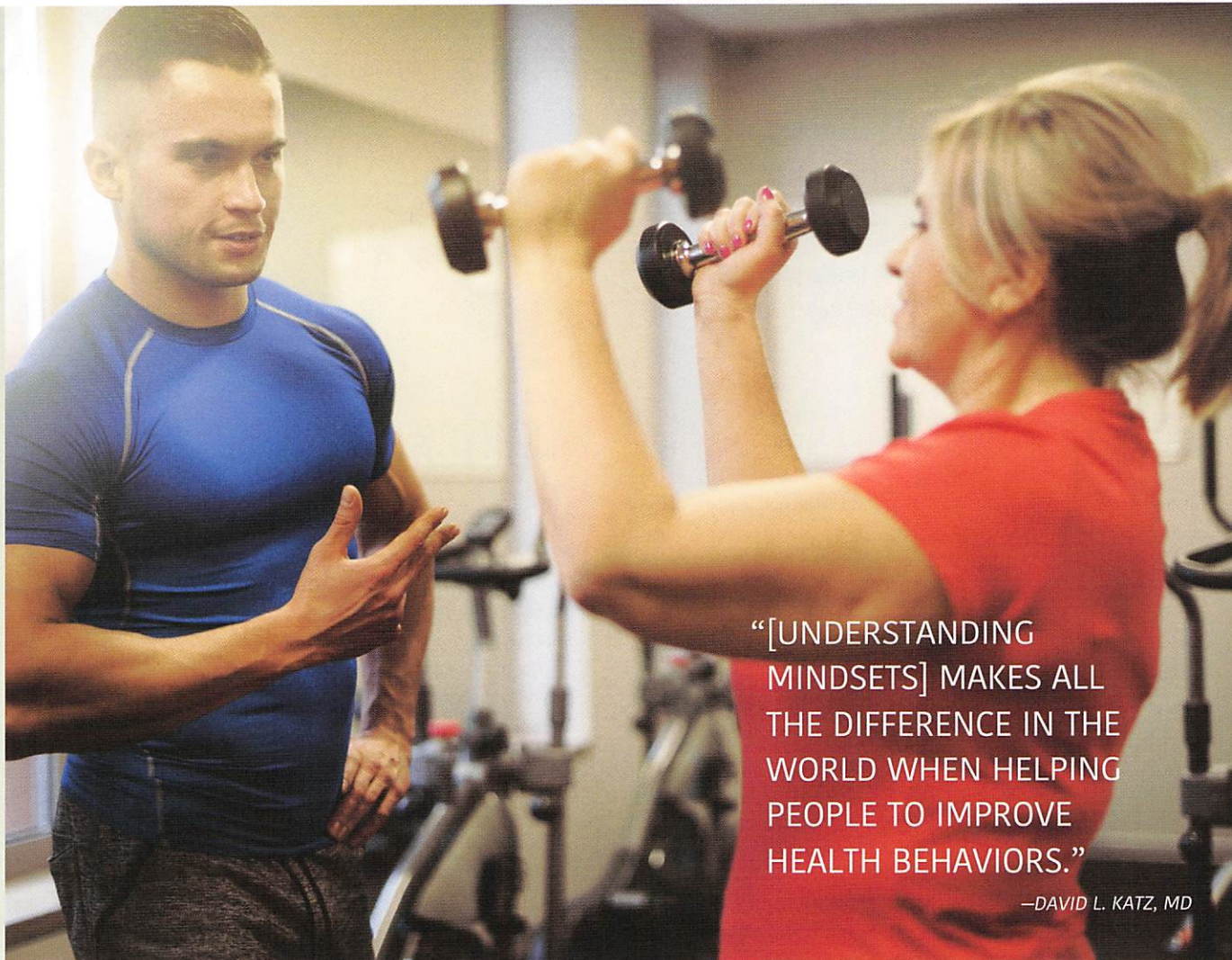
The science of mindsets is rooted in the field of cognitive behavioral therapy pioneered by Albert Ellis, who called his work Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy. Ellis believed in actively working to change a client's self-defeating beliefs and behaviors by demonstrating their irrationality, self-defeatism and rigidity (Ellis & MacLaren 2005).

Aaron T. Beck, another pioneer, developed cognitive therapy primarily to treat clinical depression. His work influenced Martin Seligman, a contemporary leader in positive psychology, and David Burns, a psychiatrist and best-selling author of *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (HarperCollins 2012) and *The Feeling Good Handbook* (Plume 1999).

tion-focused person might exercise with a focus on ideals and gains associated with living a healthier lifestyle," says Rucker. "Another person might exercise with a prevention-focused mindset. This person might focus on avoiding becoming fat and [on the] means to prevent this from happening. Both individuals are pursuing the same behavior, but via distinct approaches."

Rucker and a colleague conducted a research review of mindset studies to examine how mindsets might affect portion control (Rucker & He 2016). Some researchers have concluded that a prevention mindset may help more with portion control, since prevention-minded people are better at resisting temptations when pursuing a goal. People with a promotion mindset appear more sensitive to making gains and more responsive to success feedback. In contrast, people with a prevention mindset are motivated by failure feedback, which intensifies their determination not to lose ground and strengthens their commitment to their goals.

Study authors noted, however, that mindsets are not fixed: The same person may have a different mindset depending on the situation. And one mindset is not necessarily better than another. For example, a promotion mindset may be helpful in initiating a goal of changing a behavior (e.g., eating healthier



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—DAVID L. KATZ, MD

WHY FITNESS PROS NEED TO UNDERSTAND MINDSETS

Experts agree that trainers who want to genuinely engage clients in a collaborative process of change need to understand mindsets.

“Our belief system ultimately provides our ‘big picture’ motivation and ability for action toward anything,” says Brett Klika, CSCS, CEO of SPIDERfit Kids in San Diego. “Psychology trumps physiology every time. Regardless of our programming, motivational slogans or teaching style, our clients’ deepest belief system about themselves is the most important factor in the change process.”

David L. Katz, MD, MPH, FACP, FACLM, director of the Yale University Prevention Research Center and clinical instructor in medicine at Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, agrees. “People who are driven and motivated can do extraordinary things. People who are discour-

aged can be undone by trivial things. [Understanding mindsets] makes all the difference in the world when helping people to improve health behaviors.”

Michael Mantell, director of behavior science coaching at Premier Fitness Camp in San Diego, puts it this way: “Once you understand [someone’s] mindset, you have an understanding of the drivers in his or her life. Mindset is ultimately the way a person thinks. . . . Once you understand [individuals’] self-talk or mindset, you understand the way [they] stop themselves or advance themselves with their type of thinking.”

See the sidebar “10 Key Negative Mindsets” for examples of typical types of distorted thinking that apply to exercise.

Klika adds, “For most of our clients, mindset has nothing to do with ‘Go hard or go home,’ ‘Rise and grind’ or any of the other ridiculous T-shirt [slogans] or

social media memes that many in the fitness industry use in a failed attempt to ‘connect’ with a potential customer base in terms of mindset. Mindset is related to an individual’s belief that [he or she has] the capacity to create positive change. As fitness pros, we cannot assume that ‘positive change’ means ripped and heavily oiled six-pack abs. I see memes with half-naked and starved fitness models with slogans like, ‘Do you want it bad enough?’ Want what? This makes no sense to me.

“Mindset is about change, not about how ‘hardcore’ you can be. A 50-year-old executive who has stuck to an exercise program for a year and has seen health improvements has just the same success with mindset as someone who exercises 3 hours a day for photo shoots. They both believe that they can create change. And they do.”

foods), while a prevention mindset may be more effective in maintaining the behavior once the goal has been achieved (e.g., avoiding junk foods) (Rucker & He 2016).

University of Minnesota researchers compared how well people with promotion and prevention mindsets succeeded at sticking with their decision to quit smoking or to lose weight. At the 6-month follow-up, promotion-minded people proved to be more successful at quitting smoking and losing weight. But a 1-year follow-up found that people with a prevention focus were more likely to be smoke-free and maintaining their weight loss. The researchers concluded that encouraging the more helpful mindset for the specific task—i.e., changing behavior or maintaining behavior—might produce the greatest success over time (Fuglestad, Rothman & Jeffery 2008).

FIXED VS. GROWTH MINDSETS

Scientists have also learned a lot about the difference between fixed and growth mindsets—particularly in the context of education. People with a growth mindset see the world as changeable, while people with a fixed mindset see it as unchangeable.

In a weight loss context, people with a growth mindset were more successful because they believed that their behavior affected their weight, and also that they could successfully change a behavior (e.g., exercise more) and lose weight. In contrast, people with a fixed mindset believed that no matter what they did, their weight was beyond their control. Consequently, they were less likely to make any effort to change behaviors (Rucker & He 2016).

If people think they have a fixed body type, we can help them change their mindset, observes Rucker. It's critical that a health professional who is supporting a weight loss candidate be able to identify the person's mindset.

MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

Research shows that understanding mindsets is a key to helping people change their behavior. Rucker concurs: "Once you understand the mindset, you can either work with it or you can work to change it."

Jessica Matthews, MS, senior adviser for health and fitness education for the American Council on Exercise and assistant professor of health and exercise science at Miramar College in San Diego, notes that people's lack of knowledge about healthy diets or exercise techniques is not the only thing holding them back. "That may be part of it, but it's not the full story," says Matthews, who notes that other factors have a huge influence on success—for example, people's belief in their own capabilities; past experience with health and wellness; perceived barriers, individual strengths and personal values; and readiness for change. >>

CONTRASTING MINDSETS

PROMOTION VS. PREVENTION

- A promotion mindset tries to encourage a behavior in order to achieve a goal.
- A prevention mindset tries to avoid a specific outcome in order to achieve a goal.
- Each of us can have both mindsets, depending on our goals.
- Promotion mindsets can be better for earning short-term gains, while prevention mindsets can be better for keeping gains over the long haul.

GROWTH VS. FIXED

- A growth mindset believes that conditions can change and people can improve themselves.
- A fixed mindset believes that one's fate is permanent, as if etched in stone.
- Trainers can move clients from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset by introducing small, gradual changes that help people believe they can change their lives.



CHANGING A FIXED MINDSET

Brett Klika, CSCS, author of *7 Minutes to Fit* (Chronicle Books 2015) and co-founder and CEO of SPIDERfit Kids in San Diego, provides a prime example of dealing with a fixed mindset: “I had a client who came to me at the end of her health rope. While she was relatively young, she was morbidly obese and defeated. Her attitude appeared to be, ‘Everyone told me I need to do this, so I’m here.’ She believed she got the short end of the stick in life. Her family, genetics and relationships defined who she was. It was almost as though she was seeking a personal trainer to show everyone, ‘See, nothing works!’

“Instead of a diet-exercise journal and kick-butt approach, we approached our work as, ‘Okay, let’s get some energy today.’ We’d walk, talk, do some exercises in her comfort zone

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—BRETT KLIKA, CSCS, CEO OF SPIDERFIT KIDS

and establish a connection with, ‘If I want to feel better, I can move and even exercise.’ She slowly began to realize that she was in charge and could create changes in her situation.

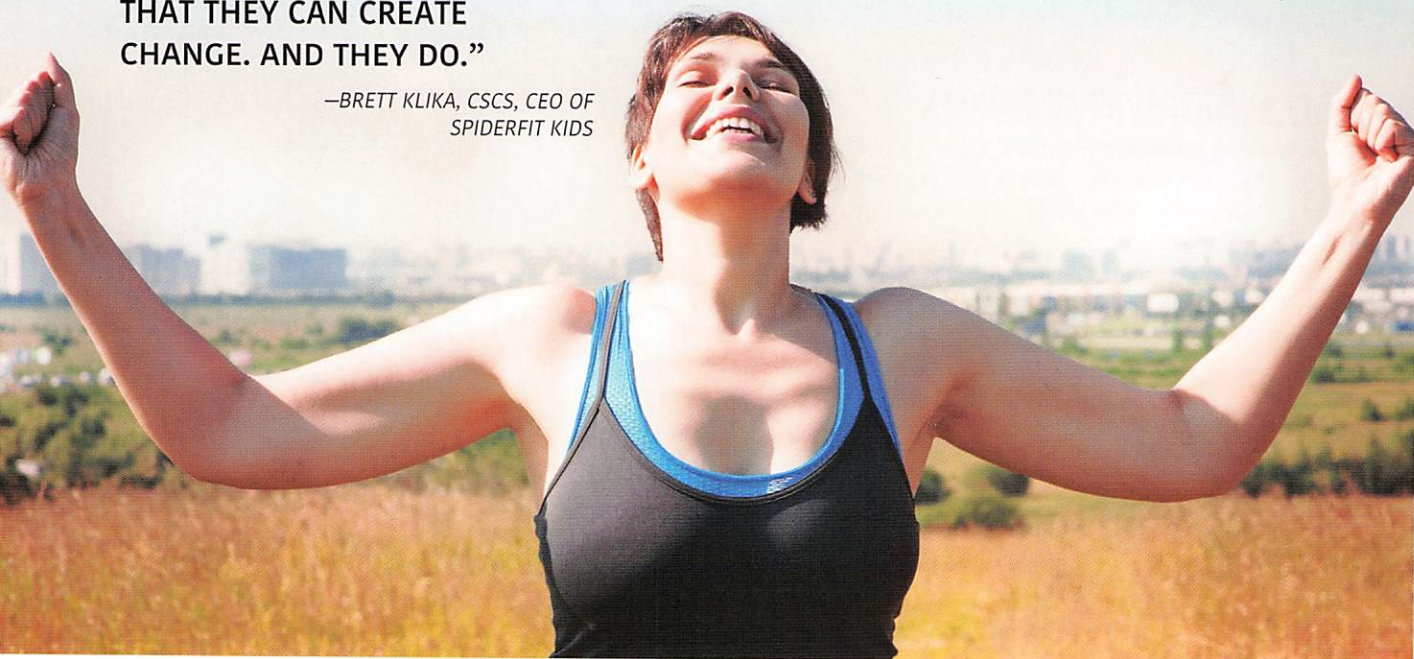
“After she connected with the belief that she was capable of making small changes, such as eating handful-sized food portions, watching TV on an exercise bike and increasing the challenge of training sessions, and that the result was relevant in her daily life—she felt more energetic, less depressed, more engaged with life—bigger results began to appear.

“Over 70 pounds [of weight loss] later and after experiencing a whole host of improvements in health and relationships and reducing her medications, she’s been exercising regularly. What was once, ‘This is just the way I am,’ transformed into, ‘I can be what I want to be,’ by shifting her belief in the ability to change.”

WORKING WITH A PREVENTION MINDSET

While Rucker notes that substantial research will be needed before we know the most effective ways to apply our understanding of mindsets to help people achieve healthier behaviors, this does not mean we cannot do anything. Matthews provides a good example of how working with a client’s prevention mindset helped to bring about dramatic changes in the client’s life:

Beth, a 52-year-old client diagnosed with prediabetes, told Matthews she wanted to begin an exercise program because she feared developing type 2 diabetes. Matthews interviewed Beth, using motivational-interviewing strategies such as open-ended questions, affirmations and reflective listening, to find the root of her fear. It turned out she had seen for herself how uncontrolled type 2 diabetes devastated the health of her mother, who had foot amputations, impaired vision, and kidney failure to the



point of requiring dialysis, all of which limited her physical functioning and level of self-sufficiency.

Beth knew the seriousness of diabetes and her personal susceptibility to it, given her recent prediabetes diagnosis. Fear for her own health made her want

to engage in more healthful behaviors, like exercise.

Client-centered conversations helped Beth weigh the perceived benefits (“pros”) of exercise as well as the perceived barriers (“cons”). Matthews also explored Beth’s personal values, strengths and

beliefs, and her vision of what her best future would look like—one where exercise had improved various facets of her life and was minimizing her diabetes risk.

Exploring positive psychology and using strengths-based coaching strategies helped to boost Beth’s self-efficacy (her belief in her own ability to succeed). Embracing the physical, mental and emotional benefits of exercise and adopting activities she truly enjoyed (such as yoga and power walking) increased Beth’s intrinsic motivation to be physically active. That, in turn, empowered Beth to adhere to a regular routine of physical activity, which she has now been following consistently for 18 months.

Beth’s case shows that trainers who understand mindsets can become more client-focused and figure out what their clients really want and need, and why.

Of course there are limits to what trainers can do with knowledge of mindsets, says David L. Katz, MD, MPH, FACP, FACLM, director of the Yale University Prevention Research Center and clinical instructor in Medicine at Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut. “We can influence someone else’s mindset, but not control it,” Katz says. “The client must take control. So recognition of the importance of mindsets calls for humility. We are coaches, not bosses. We must also recognize that [mindsets] come first—and that when mindsets need adjusting, it is not one-size-fits-all. We must be empathetic and go where the client is, to be most useful where [he or she needs] our help.”

Mantell urges fitness professionals to look at their own biases about mindsets. If a trainer believes that understanding mindsets is only for psychologists and not for trainers, this bias can block clients’ progress, he says. Experts agree that the most effective training happens when efforts are client-focused and the trainer creates a program that meets both the vision and the physical, mental and emotional needs of individual clients.



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MINDSETS, MINDFULNESS AND THE FUTURE OF FITNESS

The contemporary fitness profession is coming full circle to understand the criticality of integrating mind and body in every aspect of training. Fitness specialists are no longer limited to exercise instruction and program design. Instead, by incorporating knowledge of mindsets and behavioral change, exercise instructors become true wellness professionals

who can support people with diverse goals—from the weekend athlete or bodybuilder to the busy corporate executive or the person with arthritis and back pain—in becoming healthy and fit.

Mindfulness is also important, not only for clients, but also for trainers, as we all raise awareness of the mental biases that stand in the way of success. As Mantell emphasizes, “The link is what you think.” Empowered with an understanding of mindsets, fitness pros can

both inspire and be transformational facilitators for clients on the path to total well-being. ■

Shirley Archer, JD, MA, is IDEA's mind-body spokesperson and 2008 Fitness Instructor of the Year. She provides training, public speaking and mind-body resources to help people achieve health, happiness and optimal well-being. She's an award-winning author/co-author of 15 books, including Pilates Fusion: Well-being for Body, Mind and Spirit, and is based in Los Angeles and Zürich. Find out more at www.shirleyarcher.com.

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