



# trilogies of fitness

How to develop creative,  
effective programs

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Today's fitness professional requires an almost innate sense of numbers. From thinking and counting in terms of even numbers, to grouping muscles in oppositional sets of two with agonists and antagonists, the profession seems to be based on concepts that are divisible by two. Be that as it may, the odd number three offers several ways to view the fitness profession via some refreshing trilogies—important wellness concepts based on three cornerstones each.

Fitness professionals have a plethora of responsibilities: from safety, to coaching, to dealing with individuals with a range of special needs and abilities. Whether reviewing safety responsibilities—such as staying on top of AFAA's Basic Exercise Stan-

dards and Guidelines—or developing creative exercise programming, learning to view the profession with an eye on these “bigger picture” trilogies will help keep a refreshing outlook.

**Trilogy 1: How We Move**

The first fitness trilogy that unites all humans is the foundation for movement itself, as depicted in Figure 1.

The words “stability,” “mobility” and “ability/agility” summarize this author’s conceptualization of all group fitness as viewed by a movement specialist. “Stability” connotes the foundation of movement. From posture to preparing the set-up of an exercise before adding mobility, this word summarizes the precursor of movement itself. As babies, we experiment recruiting enough motor neurons to be able to hold ourselves up in a quadruped position long before adding mobility toward crawling. Research tells us that stability, then, is the precursor to mobility (Brownstein). Improper biomechanics, postural deviations, and inappropriate exercise, and even lack of proper breathing mechanics all can lead to instability.

*Stability* not only involves proprioception and balance, but also muscular strength, endurance, ergonomics and even controlled mobility. Stacey Lei Krauss, founder of “The willPower Method,” agrees, stating “stability training...in ‘willPower & grace’; addresses stability by working barefoot, requiring a recruitment of the many intrinsic muscles of the feet, which are typically supported by a shoe. If we become stronger from the ground up through our entire kinetic chain emphasizing stability first, our mobility quality will be more efficient and effective.”

Fundamentally, *mobility* not only involves movement, but also grace, muscular efficiency, flexibility and even dynamic stability. Successful, pain-free movers are able to add mobility to a strong sense of what this author terms “stability validity” in order to create the third point of this trilogy, ability and agility. Activities of Daily Life (ADLs) are a combination of both abilities and agility training in some form (Wolf). Kraus says that her programs focus on the stability-mobility relationship as individuals develop skills to “maintain a stable core while engaging in mobility in order to control deceleration.

We need to manage both our own body weight stability and our movement while gravity takes hold.” ADLs occur, then, from the interdependence of the cornerstones of this trilogy.

“Ability” refers to our ADLs, and “agility” includes being able to react to the unexpected forces of life, like avoiding a swerving car when walking. According to the Surgeon General of the United States ([surgeongeneral.gov/library/](http://surgeongeneral.gov/library/)), achieving safe *ability* should be everyone’s goal as each should strive to avoid a sedentary lifestyle.

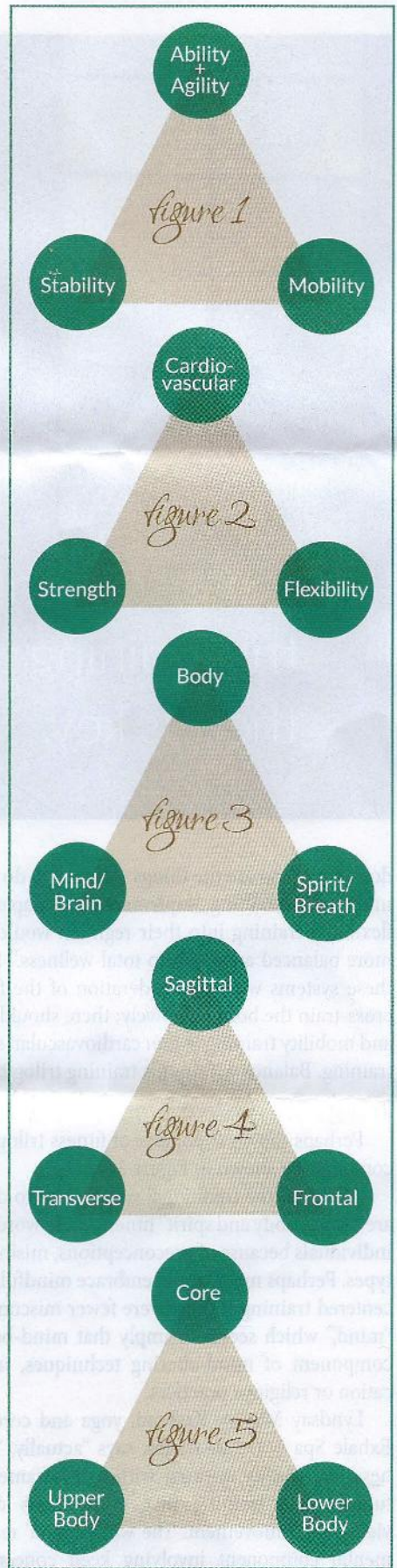
A lack of discipline in this trilogy can yield injury. Says AFAA Provider Jamie G. Smith of the “Latin Blaze” craze. “[Participants] get injured during *mobility* with dysfunctional body mechanics. We achieve movement by training both isometrically and isotonicly because together these two methods mimic the stability and mobility of life, respectively.” Training the body, then, means developing *ability* by training both the *stabilizing* and *mobilizing* systems of the body, through both isometric and isotonic training, where appropriate.

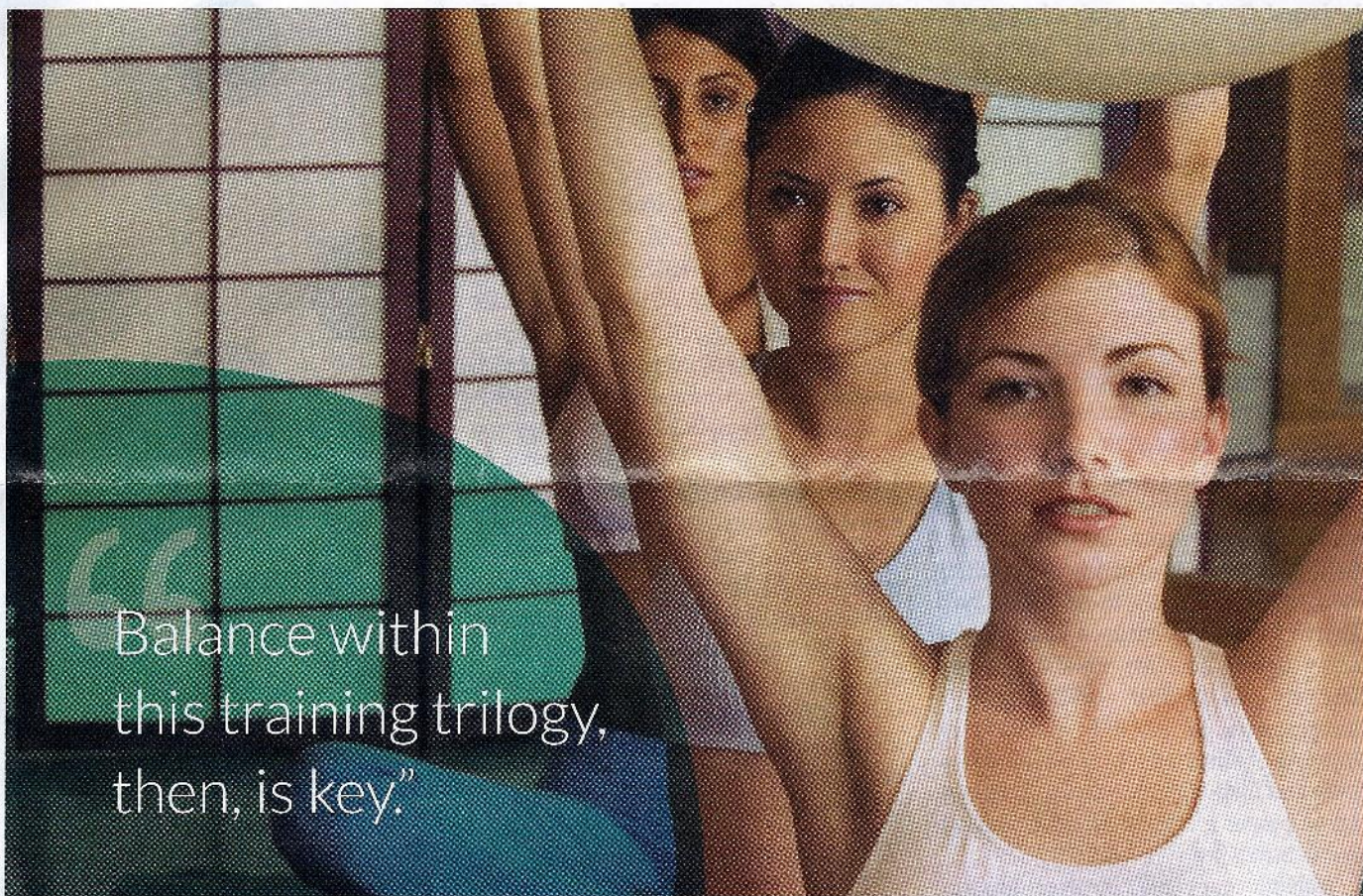
**Trilogy 2: What We Need**

If our first fitness trilogy explains *how* humans move, then the next trilogy (depicted in Figure 2) illustrates *what* humans need to train when they engage in movement.

Whatever one’s particular niche in fitness, everyone needs to train cardiovascular, strength and flexibility to some degree. While this may be the most easily recognized of fitness trilogies, oftentimes it is the most imbalanced. For example, instructors of cardiovascular exercise frequently miss out on adequate training in flexibility and strength, because they spend their work time just doing cardiovascular work.

All movers interested in their own health should ask themselves what they could improve in their own training regarding this trilogy; for their clients, personal trainers and instructors should advocate a complete balance in overall training, perhaps by merely recommending group fitness classes that train their weaknesses. AFAA Certification specialist Jay Guillory, based in Houston, teaches strength classes regularly and also notes “I remind my students not to short-change themselves by always doing what is familiar. Sometimes, the things we





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don't like to do are the things we need to do more of. If they enjoy my strength training, implementing a couple of days of cardio and flexibility training into their regimen would help them achieve a more balanced approach to total wellness.” Furthermore, training these systems with a consideration of the first trilogy also helps cross-train the body effectively; there should be aspects of stability and mobility training *within* cardiovascular, strength and flexibility training. Balance within this training trilogy, then, is key.

#### Trilogy 3: Who We Are

Perhaps the most popular of fitness trilogies today involves the combination shown in Figure 3.

Although the traditional words used to describe this approach are “mind, body and spirit” fitness, these words can disconcert some individuals because of preconceptions, misinformation and stereotypes. Perhaps more would embrace mindfulness and “whole-istic” centered training if there were fewer misconceptions for the word “mind,” which seems to imply that mind-body fitness includes a component of mind-altering techniques, influencing communication or religious practices.

Lyndsay Murray-Kashoid, yoga and core fusion instructor of Exhale Spa based in Dallas, says “actually, ‘mind-body-spirit’ fitness just means working within the framework of acute mindfulness, and training that mindfulness during movement to yield richer movement. The word ‘mind’ really refers to a strong mental component involving keen concentration on, and co-

ordination of, the other two ends of our triangle, the breath and body.” To help allay common fears, many replace “mind” with “brain” to make the concept seem less threatening and more related to traditional fitness.

Similarly, common misconceptions for “spirit” include thinking that this refers to a particular cult, sect, or religious organization or affiliation. The word “spirit” at its most elementary level refers to an acute focus on breathing, because the etymology derives from the Greco-Latin “spiritus,” meaning both “breath” and “energy” (Casey). If the word “spirit” may result in alienating some individuals from the real message of “mind-body-spirit” fitness, some professionals adopt the alliterative “brain-body-breath” to convey more physically the emphasis of this trilogy.

Today, many healers and life coaches, like Melissa Baumgartner, an AFAA international specialist and owner of Wellness Speaks, recommend both an awareness of, and training for, mind-body-spirit fitness. “Doing something each day for not only your body, but your brain and breath as well, can really improve the overall quality of your life,” she says, “by keeping you grounded to the present and staying aware of what is important.” Baumgartner recommends “taking time to pause throughout your day, breathe deeply, and connect with how you feel physically and emotionally....When we connect mindfulness to movement, we carry the habit of awareness into our everyday lives. This translates to more mindful choices, or... better choices more often.”

#### Trilogy 4: Where We Move

The fourth trilogy pertains to where all movement occurs—the planes of movement.

One of the most interesting aspects of movement is how all mobility possibilities occur in only three planes: sagittal, frontal and transverse. Trainers can easily fall into the trap of training movements in the same planes. For example, while flexion and extension always occur in the sagittal plane, the muscular *movement pattern* does not have to occur in the same plane each time. “Changing up the way I train my clients to avoid training plateaus is part of my philosophy,” says Smith. “In creating change to exercise design, I try to include the planes of motion as training variables as well. I may have my clients try elbow flexion repetitions with their arms out to the sides at shoulder height to add frontal plane mobility as a progression involving the deltoids as stabilizers. Similarly, I may add transverse plane rotation to clients holding a side plank, having the upper arm reaching under and through the body in a ‘thread-the-needle’ fashion.” Using the three planes of movement as variables, then, avoids training plateaus because different planes make the muscular system respond with different neuromuscular stimuli.

#### Trilogy 5: The Way We Move

The last trilogy addresses the way fitness professionals can view training the body, separating it into upper body, lower body and core. It is no coincidence that the AFAA Primary Group Exercise and Personal Trainer certification examinations address the body in this way. Helping fitness educators understand how the distal body parts (the upper and lower extremities) connect to, and coordinate with, the proximal (the core) remains one of the most important messages of the AFAA certification process. Figure 5 represents this view.

Keli Roberts, owner of Keli’s Real Fitness, Inc., based in Pasadena, Calif., finds that sometimes dividing up training this way can be highly effective. “I like to focus on regions of the body with compound movements and exercises that target multiple muscles. For example, I teach workouts with a lower body, upper body and core focus.

Every pattern involves triplanar movement patterns and integration with a core connection, regardless which body part we are emphasizing at any one moment.”

Other instructors agree that focusing on this trilogy helps keep classes functional. Valerie Nosenzo, group exercise coordinator for Frito-Lay, realizes the importance of running an ever-changing group fitness schedule. She says, “I always start by thinking about the relationship between the upper and lower body connecting through the core when deciding if an exercise is functional or not. We avoid isolation exercises because they usually forget the core, but exercises that integrate either the upper or lower extremities with core activation keep intensity high and stay functional simultaneously.” The illustration on the right shows some practical examples.

Using this trilogy as a checklist for total body exercise design, then, can serve as an additional tool for instructors asking themselves how to be sure if movements are appropriate for a class. “Almost everything we do,” says Nosenzo, “is either upper body plus core exercise (e.g., plank push-ups and side planks), lower body plus core exercise (standing lunging wood-chops with core rotation), total body exercise including the core (e.g., supine single leg bridges with shoulder pullover).”

As group fitness instructors and personal trainers strive to keep their programs fresh, developing strategies for change in an effort to train the whole person can prove challenging. Contemplating the five trilogies mentioned in this article yields at least 15 considerations for trainers when devising change. As outlined with the figures, sometimes the *odd* number three can offer much to keep the training of our clients *even*. AF

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