

# HOW MINDFUL IS YOUR BODY

Enhancing your personal training business with mind-body elements

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

**T**oday's personal trainer is more evolved than ever before with developments in the camps of innovative fitness equipment, personal training continuing education and even lifestyle coaching. Clients are not only more educated, with the ability to attend a variety of classes in the group exercise arena, but they also have come to depend on an effective personal trainer who not only trains their bodies, but guides their minds as well. The evolved description of today's personal trainer, then, includes being a personal coach who incorporates an element of *mindfulness* into personal sessions. To survive—and stand out—in today's competitive business market, mind-body personal trainers offer all that the traditional trainers do, and then some, in an effort to train their clients more holistically.

## AN "INTERNAL TRILOGY"

Closer inspection of the adjective "personal" in "personal trainer" reveals the noun "person" inside. This "person" is comprised of a trilogy



of mind, body and spirit. The roots of the word “spirit” date to Latin “spiritus,” meaning “breath.” The “spirit” aspect of fitness for the purposes of this article, therefore, refers to the incorporation of a cognizant awareness of the breath with a keen sense of mindfulness, or presence of sensorial awareness. As such, the mind-body personal trainer addresses to some degree, in every session, the person’s trilogy of mind, body and breath.

### FIRST THINGS FIRST: LEARNING NEW TRENDS BY EXPERIENCING SOME REALLY OLD ONES

Nothing can be taught that is not first experienced. Personal trainers wishing to incorporate mind-body approaches to fitness must first expose themselves to a plethora of stimuli from as many different mind-body venues as possible. These personal trainers should take at least two classes in the following from different teachers each time: yoga, Pilates, T’ai Chi and Feldenkrais. While there are others, this is a point of departure for experience. The idea is not to become a completely different trainer, but both to experience classes that address more than the physical body of a client, and to learn from the cognitive teaching *approaches* exemplified in mind-body classes. Instead of learning new exercises altogether, oftentimes personal trainers glean insights for *different* methods of teaching the *same* exercises, but from a perspective that sheds light on how to incorporate mindfulness.

### YOGA

Personal trainers should pay attention to how calmly yoga instructors inject mindfulness and introspection into each pose while emphasizing either flexibility or strength benefits. Additionally, they may pick up some isometric strength training tips for their clients with unique breathing practices, called pranayama. Perhaps personal trainers can also borrow yoga-inspired *asanas* (poses) to incorporate into warm-ups with clients—both to improve balance and to develop isometric muscular strength at the specific angles of contractions involved. Learning postures like *utkatasana* (Chair) and *vrikshasana* (Tree) help develop standing posture and stability in a closed-chain exercise. The purpose of yoga *asana* is to teach standing alignment, balance, and strength of the core and distal muscles.

### PILATES

From Pilates personal trainers can extract mindful forms of nontraditional isotonic exercise. Pilates techniques refreshingly settle the controversy about abdominal and back training placed either at the beginning or end of a session, because Pilates-inspired instructors consistently challenge these core muscles *throughout* their sessions. Exercises like “hundred” and “single leg stretch” help trainers understand the importance of mindful movement and negotiation of core muscular sequencing with medial stability and distal mobility while enhancing overall strength and flexibility.

### T’AI CHI AND QI GONG

T’ai Chi, connoting “ultimate energy work,” develops not only body awareness as it relates to spatial movement, but also

contributes toward balance betterment, active flexibility, and relaxation with super-slow isotonic movement. Movements like “sinking the chi” work the deltoids and stretch the latissimus dorsi, bringing energy, or chi, into the body. Telling a client before a particular functional exercise, “Today we will incorporate T’ai Chi speed in our approach to these repetitions,” will change the more traditional emphasis on power and speed to one of slow control. Furthermore, recent research indicates that T’ai Chi can increase  $VO_{2max}$ , T cells in those with impaired immune systems and muscular flexibility.

### OTHER MIND-BODY DISCIPLINES

Classes in Feldenkrais Method and Alexander Technique can instill the benefits of slower paced movement to help clients develop a deeper sense of inner awareness. Traditional personal trainers follow the protocol “tell, show, do” in regards to explaining exercises. Moshe Feldenkrais was noted for the addition of his “tell, show, *imagine*, do,” emphasizing that trainers should encourage clients to take a moment before an exercise to imagine themselves recruiting all of their muscle fibers in the exercise. When the AFAA Personal Trainer Certification urges personal trainers to tell their clients to engage in mindful, “conscious muscle activation” before executing movement, this reflects Feldenkrais’ concept. Recent research, such as that printed in the *Annual Meeting of the Society for Neuroscience*, finds that just *imagining* muscular contraction can stimulate muscular strength (Alon).

F.M. Alexander taught his students and musicians to engage deep core musculature with eyes closed to train mindfulness, active muscle recruitment and proprioception. Further, he taught more about breath manipulation during movement than about any single piece of exercise equipment. The mind-body personal trainer wishing to incorporate an Alexander Technique tip will remember that the ultimate final progression challenge for any exercise shall be to perform that exercise with eyes closed, when and where prudent and appropriate.

Attending such mind-body classes benefits the personal trainer in two ways. First, the personal trainer gains an understanding of *how* other classes train the body. Second, mind-body classes can teach personal trainers different *approaches and techniques* for dealing with clients. Traditionally, a personal trainer greets a client, obtains the client’s records, pats the client’s back, and escorts the client toward the first exercise. Various mind-body instructors handle this encounter differently. Yoga instructors, for example, tend to greet each student individually with a sincere “Namaste” at the door, a Sanskrit word connoting “my inner peace meets, greets and salutes your inner light.”

The aforementioned techniques can assist personal trainers to glean an insight into the growing business of mindful personal training.

### PRACTICAL STEPS TO MINDFULNESS

The acronym **N-A-M-A-S-T-E** can help the mind-body personal trainer implement mindful training techniques into sessions. The **N** stands for *nurturing* the training of the client’s internal trilogy

# SUGGESTED READING

- Alon, R. *Mindful Spontaneity, Moving in Tune With Nature: Lessons in the Feldenkrais Method*. New York: Prisma Press, 1990.
- Alter, M.J. *Science of Stretching*. Champaign: Human Kinetics Books, 1999.
- Carrico, M. *Yoga Journal's Yoga Basics: The Essential Beginner's Guide to Yoga for a Lifetime of Health and Fitness*. New York: Henry Holt, 1997.
- Crompton, P. *The Elements of Tai Chi*. Dorset, England: Element Books Limited, 1991.
- Etnyre, B.R. "Antagonist Muscle Activity During Stretching: A Paradox Re-Assessed." *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 20, No. 3 (1988): 285-98.
- Fox, J. and Gould, P. *Yoga 101, A Practical and Fundamental Guide*. Avon Books, 1999.
- Glisan, B. and Hochshuler, S.H. "General Fitness in the Treatment and Prevention of Athletic Low Back Injuries." In S.H. Hochshuler (Ed.) *The Spine in Sports*. St. Louis: Mosby-Yearbook, Inc, 1990, (pp. 31-41).
- Kendall, F.P., McCreary, E.K. and Provance, P. *Muscles, Testing, and Function*. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1997.
- Mingwu, Z. *Chinese Qigong Therapy*. Jinan, China: Shandong Science and Technology Press, 1988.
- Quinlan, P., Lane, J. and Aspinall, L. "Effects of Hot Tea, Coffee, and Water Ingestion on Physiological Responses and Mood: The Role of Caffeine, Water and Beverage Type." *Psychopharmacology*, 184, No. 2 (1997): 164-73.
- Ricci, B., Marchetti, M. and Figura, F. "Biomechanics of Sit-Up Exercises." *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 13 (1981): 54-9.
- Seabourne, T. *Mind Body Fitness*. YMAA Publication Center, 2000.

of the mind-body-breath connection. Nurturing often commences when the trainer just *invites* clients to be aware, not only of how they are feeling in terms of body ("How's your energy level today?"), but in terms of brain and breath as well, such as, "How's your concentration level today?" and "How's your breathing been this week?"

Take-home example: Imagine giving a client a copyright-authorized article describing the benefits of meditation, with a highlighted list of local meditation classes attached. In this way, the mind-body trainer nurtures the client's mindfulness by assigning homework to further the client's total approach to wellness.

The A stands for *aligning* the body with both mindful concentration (the brain) and breathing. Perhaps we can greet clients with something that will work their mind, such as posing a fitness fact, quiz or riddle that may be appropriate to the tasks to be accomplished during the session. Brain games that address short- and long-term memory, cognitive skills and problem solving (like math) are all examples of possible *aligning* techniques.

Take-home example: While warming up a client on a treadmill, for example, the trainer has the client repeat, "Today we will work our biceps," adding another muscle. When the trainer repeats this, she may add, "Today we will work our biceps, our quads (what the client added), and our anterior tibialis (the trainer's addition)." This continues until the list contains seven items (the number of digits of most telephone numbers) because this appropriately tests short-term memory. During the workout, the trainer asks the client to recall the list of seven muscles to continue the mental aspect of the training as short-term memory can evolve into longer term memory.

The M stands for *motivating* clients to pursue their integration of mind, body and breath. An ultimate goal of mind-body personal trainers should be to plant the seeds of motivation so that their participants pursue mind-body fitness and integration on their own. To motivate, trainers can use clippings from the media and Internet that show how mind-body fitness is helping to round out the total approach to well-being. Involving clients in new, ongoing research, if appropriate, or at least including them in the latest available results, builds encouragement. Many motivational books, such as the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, serve as excellent sources for motivational stories of people who have overcome physical limitations to embrace fitness successfully.

Take-home example: A mind-body personal trainer who offers a client a group exercise menu with certain mind-body classes highlighted as homework can motivate the client to take a more integral role in his or her mind-body-breath connection. Furthermore, starting online brain game apps competitions with clients with smartphones also motivates competitive clients. Personal trainers with regular clients may wish to hold weekly joint sessions in which all clients are invited communally to a mind-body class or similar event that the trainer also attends.

The second A stands for *appraising* the client's integration of mind, body and breath. Trainers may wish to keep files on clients' feelings as well as their measurements, and track these over time with an interest to see emotional progress related to fitness level. For example, instead of merely weighing in the client and tracking

measurements, record a few adjectives to describe how he or she feels regarding energy, concentration and breathing. Watch how these change over time, and share the journey with the client periodically.

Take-home example: Include the following table when assessing your client and track the numbers over time:

TABLE 1		
RECORD YOUR NUMBER INSIDE THE BOXES (1 BEING THE LOWEST AND 10 BEING THE HIGHEST)		
	At session start	At session finish
What is your energy level now?		
What is your stress level now?		
What is your happiness level now?		

The **S** stands for *starting* sessions. Think about beginning your personal training session with the word “Namaste,” thereby invoking hundreds of years of mindful greeting between teacher and student. Starting sessions with a mind-body approach also means asking the client how he or she feels in terms of energy, stress and happiness.

**T** stands for *transitioning*. This refers to how trainers spend their time with clients moving between and among exercises and equipment. Personal trainers can begin incorporating these mindful exercises as transitions between more traditional machine repetitions, making a “mind-body super-set.”

Take-home example: After a super-set of exercises involving abdominal flexion and other core work, having the client in some variation of the yoga “Bow” posture, called *dhanurasana*, not only stretches those muscles worked, but also stimulates core activation, intestinal function and improves posture as well. Furthermore, in-between abdominal crunches on a ball and spinal extension exercises on a machine, the personal trainer could invoke the yoga postures of “Cat” and “Cow,” to use postures without equipment. This becomes an example of mind-body cross-training because yoga complements the machine-based work.

The final letter **E** stands for *ending*. Mind-body personal trainers can incorporate mindful techniques at the conclusion of each session just by saying “Namaste,” and explaining its significance. In addition, giving a client homework and recommending wellness classes are other examples. Petra Kolber, named 2001 Group Fitness Trainer of the Year by IDEA, says that clients will “always remember and take away their first and last five minutes they spend with their trainer. In many ways, those moments are

the most crucial for behavior change, so plan ways to affect their minds as well as their bodies.” In planning how sessions will end, trainers wishing to incorporate mindfulness must remember that the most effective session between personal trainer and client is one after which a client remembers how he or she has trained, not only the body, but the mind and spirit as well.

Take-home example: Use Table 1 again at the end of the session, not only to point out any changes with the client during that session, but to help track behavioral changes in clients over cycles. Jeremy Koerber, mind-body personal trainer and author of the book *101 Ways to Improve Your Personal Training Business* (Healthy Learning, 2010), and his staff at BJC WellAware Center in St. Louis, Mo., offers green tea to clients after training sessions. This proves a mindful exchange of an ancient discipline invoking mindful conversation between client and trainer, introspection (while waiting for the tea to cool), and a general slowing down from what otherwise could be a rush to the showers and out the gym door (Quinlan and colleagues).

Given the expanding job description of today’s personal trainer, mind-body techniques abound. Drawing from ancient mindful disciplines, mind-body personal trainers incorporating mindfulness into the training regimens of their clients sacrifice nothing from traditional approaches; they only bring *more* added value to their sessions. Furthermore, these approaches include showing clients how to achieve their realistic goals through programs that allow them to grow successfully, both by working *in* as well as in working *out*. AF

.....  
**LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA**, is an AFAA Contributing Writer and Certification Specialist. He has established fitness history by winning multiple Instructor of the Year Awards from ECA (2010, 2009), IDEA (2004), Can Fit Pro (2004) and ACE (2002). Lawrence works as Mindful Movement & Wellness Specialist and Creative Consultant. Find Lawrence at [www.findlawrence.com](http://www.findlawrence.com).

THE MIND-BODY PERSONAL  
 TRAINER ADDRESSES TO SOME  
 DEGREE, IN EVERY SESSION,  
 THE PERSON’S TRILOGY  
 OF MIND, BODY AND BREATH.