

The Age of SELF-CARE: PART 1

Tips for forming a "spa for the soul"

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

In today's unique economy, group fitness instructors often need to be as versatile as possible in an effort to make ends meet. Sparse are the true "full-time positions" with benefits, and more common are instructors that teach in multiple facilities and self-pay or no medical benefits. Consequently, the propensity for today's instructors to face overtraining symptoms looms higher than ever. To that end, a few homework tips to avoid burnout and promote career longevity will serve as welcome gifts for instructors, forming a "spa for the soul."

A unique, buzzword of this century is "self-care." This refers to parameters to ensure that our career machine, the body, which takes so much abuse from class to class, receives routine maintenance and service. Examples of overwork abound: teaching in facilities with no microphones and less than ideal acoustics; teaching in facilities with improper temperature control; having to over-teach to meet financial requirements. Proper instructor self-care encompasses treats for the five

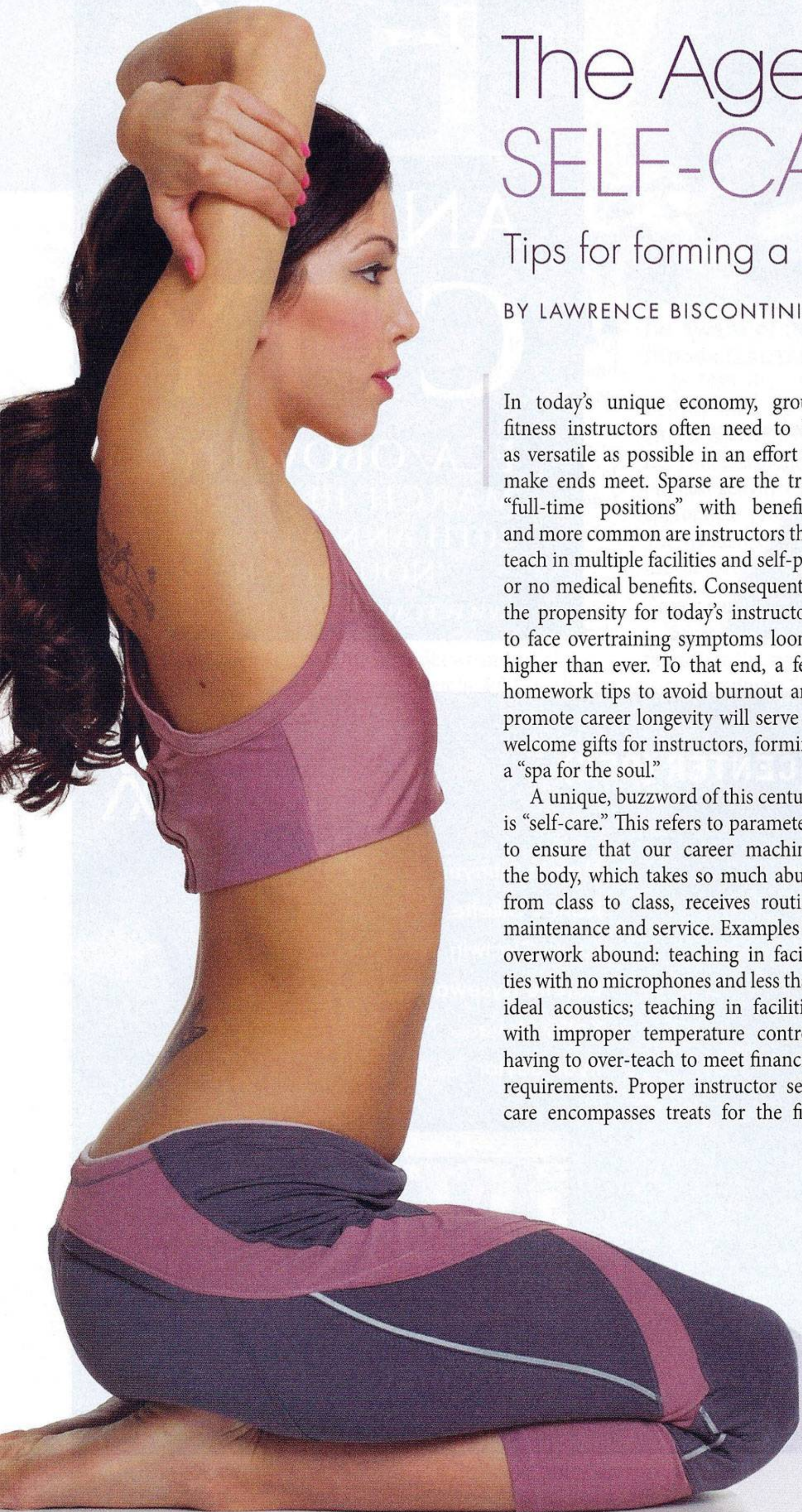
senses. The acronym "V.E.E.T.S." outlines practical steps instructors can take.

"Self-care" means promoting both relaxation and recovery. When we live in stress, the *sympathetic* nervous system keeps us going, providing the "fight-or-flight" response—an automatic reaction to perceived threats. This system keeps us on our toes when we teach and train. Unfortunately, it is also the system that keeps us in stress and dis-ease. Conversely, the body's ability to heal itself consists of the *parasympathetic* nervous system, turns on when we indulge in any of the little exercises outlined in this article.

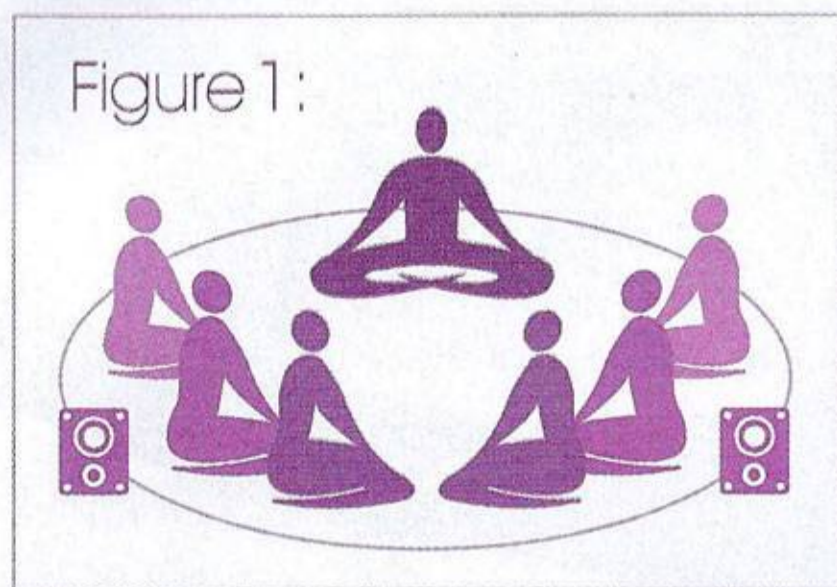
V is for Voice (and Taste)

Avoiding vocal overuse proves impossible in our industry. Nevertheless, taking care of one's voice is paramount so that proper healing will be possible. First, prudent clubs provide microphones for all teaching environments, especially where sound tends to be an issue and acoustics are less than ideal. Be sure to adjust the volume of the microphone so that the spoken (not shouted) word is sufficient. Second, without a microphone, always project from the diaphragm; trying to lower the pitch of one's voice assists with this projection. As instructors teach, the *sympathetic* nervous system often dominates, and voices tend to rise in both volume and pitch. Instead, remembering to project with a lower pitch helps maintain vocal health.⁶

When using a portable device such as a "boombox," placing it far from the teaching position reduces the instructor's tendency to scream over the music. For



example, speakers may be placed behind the students at the opposite end of the area. See Figure 1.



Homework Suggestion:

After a class that is cueing-intensive, consider planning time for the voice to recover—when you can be in silence, if possible. Sipping on cool water or other appropriate beverages and teas to promote throat health will help the throat recover from strong use. For more information on possible herbal remedies, visit vocalist.org.uk. The National Institutes of Health reports that long-term vocal overuse, especially without the assistance of a microphone, can yield vocal nodules and even decrease overall vocal quality with age.

Slow Down

Because instructors often eat on the go, two nutritional concerns arise. First, is taking the time for proper nutrition. Second, the Slow Food movement organization tells us that eating in a hurry not only prevents the body from extracting the total amount of calories from food, but it also can defeat the ability to enjoy the full *sensorial* approach to feeding.²

Homework Suggestion:

Take a moment to savor a snack. Eat in silence and in darkness for a few minutes; removing the other senses enhances taste. Try to chew each mouthful slowly until liquid. Commence with a single-flavor food, such as a piece of fruit. Gradually work up to complex snacks. Savor each bite, asking yourself when was the last time you really tasted each ingredient.

E is for Eyes

The most commonly overlooked sense that instructors need to rest is sight. We

tend to scan our classes with keen eyes, constantly evaluating the postures and movements of each participant.

Homework Suggestion:

Two simple daily exercises can work wonders to bring relaxation to both the eyes and the optic nerve. Closing the eyes for two minutes refreshes the eyes' functions. Slowly blinking the eyes for one minute also rests the eyes. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) reports that doing both exercises with only the light of a candle enhances the effectiveness of the second exercise.⁷

E is for Ears

Some instructors describe music as the soul behind every group movement class. With the exception of mind-body disciplines, instructors often play loud music to create a sense of energy. As effective as this is, a nasty cycle occurs. The louder the music, the louder the instructor needs to cue. Loud music also taxes the ears. The BBC News reports that, when we use our personal listening devices to listen to songs at the same volume we use for work, the chances to adversely affect the eardrums increase because we fail to let the eardrums relax.¹

Homework Suggestion:

A 2004 JAMA study reported that, to avoid this fatigue, many ear, nose and throat doctors recommend not only listening to personal music at a lower volume than used in classes, but listening to different types of music altogether. This study noted that having a softer volume for personal use music that is different from work music not only promotes ear health, but also helps to create a parasympathetic, relaxation response. If you play work music (to which you sweat and work out intensely) for personal time it is quite possible for your body's systems (like heart rate) to speed up because of the physical association and "memory" of the work environment.⁴

For this reason, some instructors do not listen to work music on their personal time. June Kahn, 2009 IDEA Instructor of the Year Award Recipient, is the Life Power Pilates Coordinator for Lifetime Fitness in

Colorado. She recommends "having a separate playlist for times when not working out. I use a relaxing playlist when driving between clubs," she says, "because it keeps my body from staying in work mode. I also try to avoid ear buds and use a background stereo. At home, I relax with music that I would never use in class to create different types of subconscious associations between relaxation and my special music."

Scientists have long been interested in both the relaxing and healing powers of music. Furthermore, the musical phenomenon of *entrainment* teaches that a beating oscillator (such as the heart) will try to beat at the rate of the other beats in its vicinity, meaning that the heart will always try to beat at the rate of the music it hears. Knowing this, instructors can make sound choices to promote their own relaxation response and self-care.⁵

Stay tuned to our January issue for Part II of this article where we will continue our break-down of "V.E.E.T.S." with Touch and Smell. Namaste!

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