

If Not Us, **Who?** If Not Now, **When?**



During the height of the COVID pandemic, IHRSA commissioned the consulting firm ClearView to develop a new messaging campaign for the fitness industry that would be effective in getting members to return and attracting new members once health clubs were allowed to reopen.

After carefully analyzing what the drivers would be to accomplish this objective, ClearView concluded the best way to get people more active and involved with the fitness industry was to focus on what fitness does for people's mental health as much or more than what it does for their physical health. ClearView used the expression "Blue Ocean" opportunity. Why? Because no one is doing it!

Why mental health? First, that is what the public wants. In the "Good Old Days," people joined a gym for two main reasons: to get bigger or to get smaller. Men wanted to get bigger (lift weights), women wanted to get smaller (do aerobics). But all that has changed. In an international poll of 10,000 people conducted by Euromonitor, the world's leading market research company, all four major age groups – the Boomers, Gen X, millennials and Gen Zs – gave mental well-being as the main reason they work out. And that was in 2019, before COVID!

Second, human psychology. Fundamentally, people consciously or subconsciously evaluate things on a reward-effort basis. If they perceive the reward is greater than the effort, they will continue to pursue the activity. However, if they feel the reward is NOT worth the effort, they will not.

So, how does this relate to fitness and mental health? Let us first look at the traditional reason many of our members join our clubs, and that is to lose weight. If this is their goal, they work out, they work out, they work out and, if they are lucky, they lose one or two

pounds in a week. Effort, effort, effort and then maybe a little reward. Over time, they get frustrated and quit.

Now let us look at what happens when people join for their mental well-being. Work out-feel better, work out-feel better, work out-feel better. The reward is instantaneous and perceptible. Here is even better news: Studies have shown that as little as five minutes of physical activity has a mental health benefit by releasing the happy chemicals serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin and endorphins. Like Chris Rondeau says, "Most people do not work out because they like it; they work out because they like how it makes them feel."

If they are working out for their mental health, they feel it as soon as they leave the gym; again, just like Chris Rondeau says, "What we are really talking about here is reframing." We are taking an activity and putting it into another frame of reference. We are going from stressing weight loss, something that is delayed gratification and takes a great amount of effort, to mental well-being, which can be immediate gratification and accomplished with much less effort.



by C. Victor Brick and Lynne Brick

To avoid the negative stigma associated with mental illness and mental health, Carrie Kepple of Styles Studios Fitness suggests reframing the terminology as well. Kepple was president of the IHRSA Board of Directors when they worked with ClearView to develop the strategy to focus on mental health. She uses the term mental fitness instead of mental health or mental wellness.

She also recommends comparing the brain to other organs and parts of the body. You get your heart checked and your muscles checked. You should get your brain checked as well. In addition, you exercise for other parts of the body. You should exercise for your brain as well. And not just mentally. Your brain needs increased circulation and the benefits of physical activity just like the other organs of the body. And, in addition to the happy chemicals we discussed earlier, your brain can experience neuroplasticity from exercise.



Lynne and Victor Brick work out at the 30-Minute Circuit.

As far as what type of movement is best, according to the findings in the Move Your Mental Health Report, developed by the John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation, which reviewed 1,440 studies done over the last 30 years on the effects of movement on mental health:

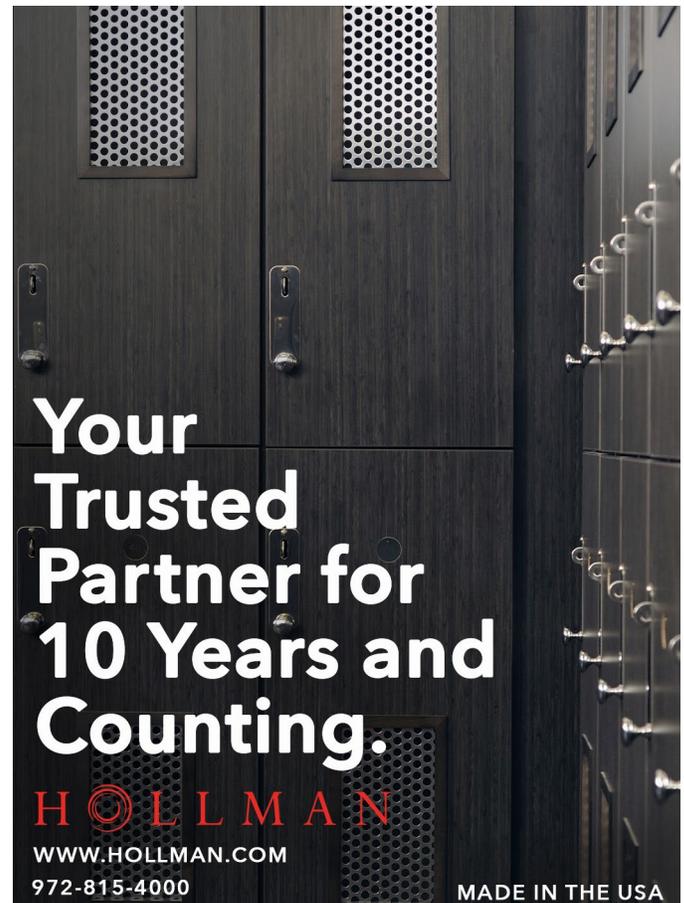
- While benefits can be experienced from as little as five minutes of exercise, three to five 30-45-minute exercise sessions per week of moderate to high intensity group exercise sessions combining cardio and strength are most effective in aiding depression.
- Cardio is the best single form of exercise for mental fitness, but a combination of cardio and strength training is even better.
- For maximum results, the training effort must be moderate to intense. However, as stated earlier, even minimal effort gets some results. And, of course, “moderate to intense” is different for everyone, depending on their level of fitness.
- Group exercise sessions are best for depression. Why? Because depression is often caused by loneliness, something that is more prevalent than ever due to COVID-induced quarantines.
- Movement/exercise is best for depression. Mind-body activities, such as yoga and meditation, are best for anxiety. Why? Because often we need to do exactly the opposite of what we want to do. When we are depressed and don't feel like doing anything is when we need to move the most. When we are anxious and can't sit still is

when we need to calm our mind, be still and stay in the moment.

Through our programs and services, we are perfectly positioned to take advantage of these major findings. The 30-Minute Circuit and our PE@PF sessions address the three to five 30-45-minute exercise sessions per week of moderate to high intensity group exercise sessions combining cardio and strength. Our Black Card Spa area, with our HydroMassage beds, massage chairs, Beauty Angels and even tanning provide an environment for mindfulness and meditation.

In conclusion, focusing on mental health as opposed to weight loss or general fitness is the Blue Ocean for the fitness industry. People who join health clubs for weight loss attend less and quit faster because, for many, the reward does not match the effort. Stressing mental “fitness” plays to human psychology with the reward being immediate and perceived as greater than the effort. You work out. You immediately feel better. We believe Planet Fitness® is perfectly positioned to take advantage of the “mental fitness” movement through its programs and services. If not us, who? If not now, when? 

Victor and Lynne Brick are the founders of the John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation and founders of PF Growth Partners. They are the 2020 recipients of the Global Wellness Summit Debra Simon Award for Leadership in Mental Health. For more evidence of the benefits of exercise in improving mental health, you can check out the free “Move Your Mental Health Report” on the John W. Brick website, JohnWBrickFoundation.org, under Resources.



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