

NETWORK *The official publication for group exercise & mind body instructors*
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The official publication for group exercise & mind body instructors
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Indoor cycling and obesity

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Disadvantages for the obese client

1. Physical

- Saddle discomfort; the obese client will unfortunately begin to register extreme discomfort from the saddle within a relatively short time.
- Weakness in the lower limbs and an inability to support the body in a standing position. When combined with discomfort in the saddle, the problem is finding any position at all that is comfortable or achievable.
- Inability to achieve optimum bike set-up due to body shape.
- Inability to achieve optimum cycling position due to body shape – angle at hip, shoulder/arm position, difficulty in cycling with knees in correct alignment, etc.
- Shortness of breath, irregular breathing pattern.
- Higher than recommended heart rate.
- Only able to achieve very short periods of work and need protracted recovery times.
- Difficulty in getting on and off the bike.
- Difficulty in altering the foot straps for either safety or comfort.

2. Symptoms of physical discomfort

- Numbness in hands/feet.
- Sore bottom/discomfort in saddle.
- Soreness in genital area.
- Tension in shoulders.
- Thighs rubbing against each other or against saddle.
- Discomfort from sweating/soreness in areas where skin folds meet.

3. Psychological/environmental

- Embarrassment at their inability to keep up with other class members.
- Inappropriate clothing; they tend to wear very loose clothing that is not ideally suited to cycling.
- Difficulty in getting between the bikes so these clients often sit at the back where they are least likely to be within eye contact of instructor.

It is important to recognise and deal with these issues if we are ever to find a place for severely overweight and deconditioned clients in our classes. Although unlike some “specialist” groups such as pre and post-natal, or seniors, you are unlikely to come across groups of obese clients in dedicated classes. Realistically, unless the class was attached to a specific diet and exercise programme, it would be very difficult to programme a class for clinically overweight clients into a regular timetable; so the question is, how do we encourage overweight participants into class, and how do we manage them once we get them there?

The key to working with this group is to take the emphasis away from the workout and put it into achievement; where every revolution is recognised as a step towards success.

With these clients the goalposts must be moveable, contrary to the kind of goal-setting that is normal for fitter participants. Deconditioned clients must be



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encouraged to dip in and out of the exercises as they feel able. Setting them targets like “a minute of standing hill-climb” may be as unattainable as cycling up Mount Everest; while “standing up when you are ready for as long as you are able” means that every small climb can be registered as a success. More importantly, every session will see an improvement that can be measured and the client will feel that they are achieving something for themselves.

So while the advantages of indoor cycling speak for themselves, how do we deal with the physical disadvantages of group indoor cycling for the obese participant? Working to their weaknesses will mean that we do not expect more of them than they are physically capable and when they exceed our, and their own, expectations it will be a triumph. By this I mean treading carefully with the workload and making them see that the exercise itself is achievable and that it is their lack of fitness and familiarity with the exercise format rather than the actual weight that is holding them back.

Development of foundation endurance is the key to success here – starting with short easy intervals that have a higher ratio of rest to work, progressing to balanced intervals, and moving towards low intensity endurance exercises that create a foundation for higher intensity aerobic activity. The example over the page is a 10-minute section of a class in which the intensity progresses to develop the ability of an absolutely deconditioned client to that of a general level participant.

Note that the modified climb could be performed while fitter members simply worked at their normal rate.

The section would be part of a longer class, but the important factor to note is the amount of rest and recovery offered, making the class realistic and achievable, if only in part.

Class format

Severely deconditioned participants need a high proportion of recovery periods, so the natural format for classes for this group is a low intensity interval; basically one period of work/rest, followed by one period of controlled, active recovery. A typical “easy level” class, which will be more than enough of a challenge for your obese clients, would look something like:

1. 8/10-minute warm-up, including water and breathing breaks.
2. 4-minute climb, mainly seated with a standing recovery, including water and rest breaks as appropriate.
3. 3/4 minutes’ active recovery in saddle, including breathing exercise.
4. 3/4 minutes’ combined climb, with a seated recovery, including water and rest breaks as appropriate.
5. 3/4 minutes’ active recovery in saddle.
6. 4-minute climb, mainly seated with a standing recovery, including water and rest breaks as appropriate.
7. 3/4 minutes active recovery in saddle.
8. 8/10-minute cool-down, including water and breathing breaks and stretching.

The progression of this class would be in the increase of the duration of the work periods, rather than through an increase of intensity, with a view to improving cardiovascular endurance in the foundation area.

Managing deconditioned clients within a mixed-level group

It is important to make each and every client feel that they are cared for. Using eye contact, verbal feedback and, where appropriate, physical contact will all make the nervous clients feel as if they have a place in the class. Don’t be afraid to get off the bike and go over to someone, take off your microphone and speak to them directly, encouraging them to either carry on, take a break or get off the bike and move around if they need to. Singling clients out of a group from the instructor bike will have the opposite effect – the personal touch is far more effective in this situation. Some people need to be left alone; learn to recognise and respect this while offering information to the group that will help them along.

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Indoor cycling and obesity

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It is a courageous client that comes to the class knowing that they are likely to be the biggest, slowest and most cumbersome member of the group. Treat them with respect and give them the opportunity to succeed and they will trust you and come back to class. At the end of the day, their weight loss will be both yours and their gain. ♦

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Exercise	Deconditioned client	General level client
Warm-up seated flat Seated incline/climb: 4 minutes	Cycle at own pace, until a comfortable leg speed is achieved and rhythm maintained Slow legs to a climb with a gradual increase of resistance; max duration of resistance = 60 seconds: • 30-60 seconds climb • 60 seconds recovery at lower resistance • 60 seconds climb, increased resistance • 60-90 seconds recovery at lower resistance	Cycle at own pace or to match speed of music 80-100bpm Slow legs to a climb with a gradual increase of resistance: • Maintain cadence • Increase resistance
Recovery climb/standing climb: 4 minutes	Slow legs to a climb with a gradual increase of resistance: • Stand up for a few seconds to ease pressure from being seated • Return to saddle and recover with low resistance and increased cadence • Repeat by increasing resistance and standing up to ease pressure	Slow legs to a climb with a gradual increase of resistance: • Stand-up • Maintain climbing cadence • Increase resistance
Recovery seated own speed or up to speed of music 80-100bpm : 2 minutes	Cycle at own pace, until a comfortable leg speed is achieved and rhythm maintained. Slow to minimum speed, breathing exercises, stretch back, loosen hands, alight from bike if necessary	Cycle at own pace or to match speed of music 80-100bpm, adding enough resistance to maintain some intensity



Janine Joseph

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