

6 Simple Steps

to Building Beginner Workout Programs

WRITTEN BY **JONATHAN GOODMAN**. THIS GUIDE FOR FITNESS PROS IS PROVIDED FREE OF CHARGE BY THE PERSONAL TRAINER DEVELOPMENT CENTER.

The Focus System is a simple, straightforward 6-step system specifically designed to create effective workouts for beginner clients.

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1. Cueing too much

A new client can't process too much information at one time and a picture paints a thousand words. Show the client the exercise with proper form and have them demonstrate. At that point **pick 1-2 of the most important cues and show the exercise with good form.**

The cues should be 1-2 words maximum. In explaining the cue to your client you relate the action you're cueing to the word. The most effective cues are relatable, emotional, and specific. An example script if I want my client's chest up during a squat may go like this:

"For this next rep I want you to have your chest up. Picture as if you're a superhero flying through the air. This will make sure you have a neutral spine to keep your back safe. In doing so you'll be able to squat more weight and get more out of this great fat burning exercise. So when I say "superman" you lift your chest up. Ok?"

In this short paragraph I made the cue easier to understand by relating it back to something they now well (superheroes), made them recognize the importance in safety and why they should care.

Most clients can do 90% of complicated movements naturally so overloading them with cues will only work to confuse them. Pick the 1-2 pertinent form cues and make them meaningful.

2. Cueing too little

Not helping the client make a connection to the exercise through cueing can stop exercise instruction before it starts. Arguably the greatest coach ever, John Wooden, famously cued 1000s of times during a practice. The cues were short, meaningful, and specific. Using the example in mistake #3 I'll often say the word superman 8 times in an 8-rep set. It makes for dedicated practice and leads to accelerate skill development.

3. Not spotting properly

Aside from hurting yourself spotting improperly can also put the client at risk. For dumbbell

exercises always spot on the wrists and for barbell movements spot outside the hands. Know that spotting is for safety and you shouldn't be helping out clients for an extra rep. Unless you're training very high level clientele (2+ years of serious training) it won't add to their training and puts both of you at risk. Spotting from personal trainers should be thought of as pure injury prevention.

Always keep your back straight and use leverage when possible. (I like to jam my knees into the bars at the bottom of a bench press so I can get more leverage if a bar needs to be lifted off of a client.)

4. Thinking you know everything

Don't ever get complacent. There's no stable. **You're either moving forwards or backwards.** Check out the PTDC book list (www.theptdc.com/book-list) if you're looking for something to read.

5. Saying "feel the burn"

Don't use clichés. Ever - unless you're joking. Here are some others to avoid: "Power up!", "love the pain", "loooove it", "engage the core", "pump it up", "welcome to pumpsville, population you". (Ok, nobody's ever said that last one. I made it up.)

6. Not giving homework

You have at most 4hrs/wk with a client. It's not enough if they need to develop new habits or make any significant gains. I give daily homework to my clients

"Every new client is different. They come from different backgrounds, have different challenges, and therefore have different needs."

early on in their training. It works especially well for teaching abdominal and glutes activation techniques.

Homework can also take the form of cardio and nutritional monitoring. **It's your job to give the client guidelines and forms for tracking their progress as all of these components should be worked into their program.**

The final piece of homework that my entire client base does is self-myofascial release. They have foam rollers and balls at home and I provide them with handouts usually from Mike Robertson's awesome self-myofascial release guide (free download by signing up for his mailing list). The key when giving homework is to be prepared. Show your client you're different and willing to **go the extra 10%** by not only providing them with a workout. Give them guidelines for self-myofascial release, cardio, and nutritional monitoring as well.

7. Teaching exercises you don't know yourself

If you learnt an exercise at a workshop over the weekend take time to try it out a couple times and adequately understand it before programming it into a clients workout. The same goes for reading about an exercise on the internet. Have a trainer you work with act as a guinea pig as. Instruct the exercise to them before trying it out on a client.

It's easy to get excited about a new movement and that's fine. You should get excited. One of the joys in working out for me is the variation in ways to accomplish the same goals. When I'm at a workshop learning new movements I find myself visualizing which of my clients will benefit from it. With that being said **it's your responsibility to take the time to try the new exercise before prescribing it.**

8. Using protocols you're

not comfortable with

If you've never completed a full program using GVT (German Volume Training) please don't prescribe it to a client. This goes for 5-3-1 protocols as well and the Tabata principle or anything else you may come across. It's exciting to read about a new method of gaining strength, burning fat, or putting on muscle. But it's impossible to fully understand the types of exercises that work within the protocols, how progression occurs and how recovery feels unless you've done it yourself.

This is one of the mistakes I see running rampant anytime I'm observing trainers. They enthusiastically talk about the benefits of the workout to a client sparing no details. For example, how GVT is an amazing way to put on muscle because of the incredible volume. The problem is the trainer has never made it through a full program themselves and doesn't realize the amount of soreness and mental fatigue it causes. Maybe if they had gone through a program themselves they'd know it wasn't a good choice of program to prescribe to their client who works 12hrs days and doesn't sleep enough. Yet, the trainers surprised when the client gets sick or hurt.

9. Using a piece of equipment you're not comfortable with

Just because you watched a YouTube video of a TRX exercise doesn't mean that you're an expert on the TRX. A kettlebell workshop at a conference doesn't make you a kettlebell expert. I understand that new fitness equipment is exciting. It's fun to play with. Remember that you're a lot stronger and more comfortable with new movements than most of your clients. **If you're able to pick up a kettlebell swing within minutes, that doesn't mean they will.**

Take the time to thoroughly learn a new piece of equipment before adding it to your training toolbox. For every piece of equipment in the gym

you should know the advantages, limitations, drawbacks, safety considerations and where in workouts it fits. You should also be able to progress and regress each exercise at least 1 part before instructing it. Instructing another trainer in your club on this equipment before you attempt to show it to a client is also a good plan of attack here.

10. Over periodizing

This one hits home for me. An old manager I had made all of us do a 3-month periodization plan for each client. I'd spend 2 hours on each client's workout once a week revising the plan. It was a complete waste of time. Personal training clients aren't athletes and interruptions happen often. Also, almost every client is in the beginner or early intermediate stage meaning that linear progression works best. Periodization is for high performing individuals with at least 2+ years of serious training under their belt.

Don't worry about block periodizing or pyramiding workouts. Instead always find ways to increase difficulty. Be creative. Some ways to increase difficulty over the course of a workout or program can be weight, sets, reps, angle, tempo, grip, rest period, and exercise order.

I'll only change the exercise when the client stops progressing which, for a new client takes a long time. The problem is that clients can get bored and you worry that they'll feel they don't need you if you don't change the workouts of exercises often. Here's an example where I have the client doing a close grip bench press for 10 weeks:

Weeks 1-2 : Close grip bench press

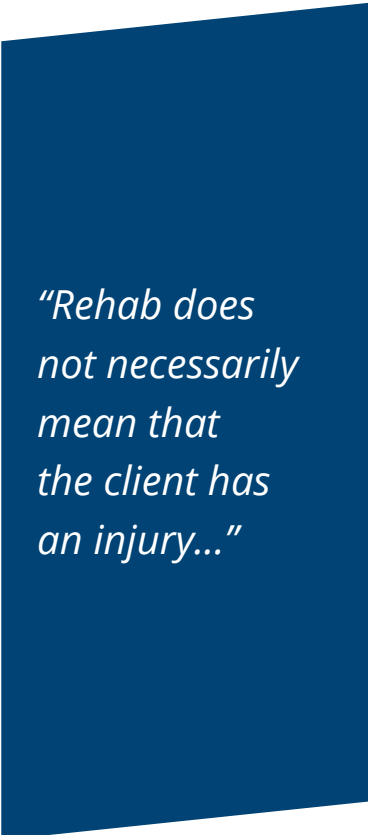
Weeks 3-4: Incline close grip bench press

Weeks: 5-6: Conventional (shoulder width) grip bench press

Weeks 7-8: Close grip bench press with fat gripz

Weeks 9-10: Close grip bench press

Here I changed the exercise enough so the client doesn't get bored but not too much that they stop progressing. For pressing movements some easy ways to



"Rehab does not necessarily mean that the client has an injury..."

change grips is to move from a close grip to wider one. For pulling grips you have your choice of supinated, pronated, neutral, and opposite holds. For all of the holds you have the choice of open, closed or hook grips. All can be done close or wide. If you want to have some fun and offer a different challenge **fat gripz are an incredible tool for changing the activation patterns.**

11. Not studying

I struggled with consistent clientele and questioned personal training as a career choice before deciding to read 1hr/day Monday-Friday and making up for any missed hours over the weekend. Within 2 months I had a consistent client and within 6 I was promoted to senior trainer at my club. My clientele became consistent, my retention went way up, my per hour pay increased, and I started earning a small salary.

I recommend this method to any trainer. **Always have two books on the go – one on training and one on business/marketing/or sales.** For a list of the most influential books on my life and career go to:
<http://www.theptdc.com/book-list/>.

12. Not willing to have your World turned upside down

I used to instruct back squats to most of my clients. Only the truly advanced progressed to front squatting. Now my clients start with goblet squats, progress to front squats, and eventually some become advanced enough to try back squats.

I fought this transition every step of the way. Back squatting was natural but over time as I studied more I realized how difficult they were to teach and

perform properly. I still love the exercise but the learning curve is too steep for most of my clients. Goblet squats have a similar effect and can be taught over one session. In addition the position of the weight forces clients into good form.

This is just one example where my world got turned upside down. **The best trainers keep an open mind to new research and information and are willing to change everything they do if something better comes along.**

It's the way we evolve. Here's a quote to live by:

"Every 6 months I realize how bad of a trainer I was 6 months ago"

stick to it.

14. Not keeping track

Walk into any gym and an easy way to tell whether a trainer is serious about their job or not is whether they're carrying a clipboard. It doesn't matter what method you use to monitor the workouts but every set, rep, and weight should be tracked. **Do this both to improve your clients' results and also to protect yourself legally.**

13. Program hopping

Pick your plan and stick to it. It's easy to get excited about the most recent workout featured in Men's Health or Shape magazine. I'll often research new workout programming and think it's perfect for a client but I don't switch their plan. Your client will be better off finishing their current plan and then you can decide whether the new and exciting program is right for them. **Always remember that no program is effective if you don't**

15. Not being armed with progressions

If you're not armed with at least 2 progressions for every exercise you prescribe then go back to school. A progression can be the same exercise with more weight, more reps, less rest, slower tempo etc.

A progression can also be a more difficult form of the exercise. Some examples are to make the movement unbalanced or single leg instead of two legs. Progressions can also be a completely different exercise. For example a Romanian deadlift is a perfect progression from a cable pullthrough.

16. Not being armed with regressions

If you're not armed with at least 2 regressions for an exercise you prescribe then learn them. Most trainers have their favourite exercises which is fine. Figure out what works for you and your clientele. Make sure that you're able to alter those exercises for every client that comes in and, **when a client takes some time off, be ready to regress the exercise to build them back up to the same movement.**

A regression can be an easier form of the exercise or a decrease in weight or increase in stability. An example of a regression is a band assisted chin up from an unassisted chin up.

Take a notepad and write down your 5 favourite exercises to do with your clients. (Mine are the deadlift, bench press, goblet squat, chin up, and straight leg raise.) Write down 2 progressions and regressions for each. Post this piece of paper somewhere that you can always refer back to it.

17. Teaching equipment before you learn it

Just because you watched a couple YouTube videos made by people you don't doesn't mean you should start using the bosu ball with every client. Your clients pay good money for your services. **Your responsibility to them is to take your years of experience and mistakes to help your client avoid them.** Trying out all of your new toys on your clients before you've taken the time to delve deeply into them should be considered malpractice.

18. Learning a new exercise and giving it to every client for two weeks

Avoid this trap like the plague. I can't count the number of times we do workshops in our club showing new progressions of exercises. Without fail I see some trainers using the new exercise every single session for two weeks with every client. Then I never see the exercise again.

Workshops are great. Continuing education is great. **Perhaps the best skill a trainer can have is the ability to recognize movements and figure out where and when to use them for the great effect.**

19. Not explaining why it matters to the client

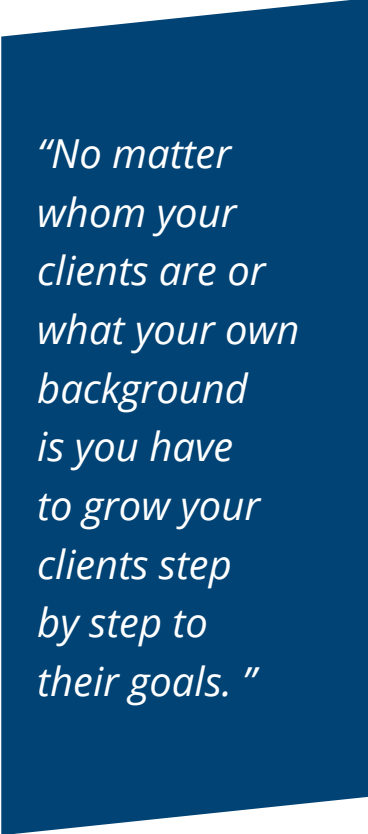
This crucial step comes into play when you're instructing exercises. **Explaining why each exercise is important specific to the client's goals or background will make them want to learn it faster.** For example, if your client's main goal is to lose weight but they're also going on a sky trip here's what I would say while instruction a single-leg squat:

"I chose this exercise for you for two reasons. The first is that it will make you better at squatting. As I said before, squatting is one of the best fat burning exercises due to its large muscle recruitment. Additionally the single leg squat will help you get stronger for skiing. It will improve the stability around the ankle, knee, and hip."

20. Not making realistic programs

Goal setting is incredibly difficult. It takes a keen understanding of physiology and without following your clients 24hrs/day is almost impossible. Yet – it's still a staple of the business and your gym will probably ask that you make goals with all of your clients to be held accountable too.

This is fine and not a big problem but **you must be comfortable telling your clients what it will take on their end.** Also make sure to explain the difference between weight loss and body composition change. If they want weight loss they must seriously change their dietary habits. Body composition change will happen and can be measured in any of a number of ways. (I like waist to hip measurements personally.)



"No matter whom your clients are or what your own background is you have to grow your clients step by step to their goals. "

Understand that bigger gains will happen in the first month due to water loss and decreasing inflammation with the addition of vegetables and fish oil to the diet. Explain to the client that these massive gains won't last. Gains later on may be lower in the absolute sense but are just as important.

21. Getting caught up in trends

This is a biggie. I cringe every time I walk into a fitness expo at the workouts and exercises done with the “toy of the month”. Trends come and go. Take a long and hard look at the trend be it a piece of equipment or new workout routine and figure out what it's best used for (if anything).

Also note that your clients will ask you about the hottest workout trends. Great! This keeps you on your toes. **Research and learn about them so you can give an educated opinion.** Always be positive and never say anything bad about the product or workout even if you're thinking it. Doing so will make you appear unconfident. Instead point out its strong points and weaknesses.

22. Wanting to only train athletes

It seems that everybody wants to train athletes these days. There are very few trainers who successfully train athlete's full time. Fact is athletes often have very little money. It takes years and a lot of hard work to get to a level where you train high performance athletes making big bucks. Even then there aren't a lot of positions available.

Personal trainers should focus on the everyday clientele. If you do a great job with regular people athletes will come along. I've worked in a boutique style

gym my entire career catering towards weekend warrior types yet have had the opportunity to work with kids entering (successfully) the NHL draft, an LPGA golfer, and a national team skier preparing for the Olympics. I never searched for these clients but they were referred to me through everyday clientele that I did a great job with.

23. Using the same program for every client

It's ok to have a template. In fact I'll go so far as to recommend you use the same template for every type of client you deal with. Why not? **If you find a type of programming that works for fat loss clients stick to it.** The same goes for hypertrophy clients and so on.

The best trainers are those who are able to adapt the same protocol for the individual. Changing up seemingly small details such as the grip on an exercise can make a big difference for clients with particular needs. Figure out what works and stick to it but make sure to individualize it whenever it's needed.

24. Not talking client

It always comes back to knowing your client. My clients that are medical doctors appreciate when I use jargon whereas my weekend warrior types don't understand the term pelvic tilt. **The best trainers are able to alter their speech every hour and meet the client at their level while still getting their point across effectively.**

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