

THE ABS OBSESSION: THE NEED FOR A BALANCED WORKOUT

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Introduction: *It is astounding and a tad worrying! A workshop title that includes references to training the body core or the abdominals will attract a large audience of instructors. A fitness class description that sends a message about toning this region generally lures more participants. Simply put, the business of fitness and the participants and leaders associated are obsessed with ABDOMINAL TRAINING.*

Following are just a few of the Myths Surrounding Abdominal Exercise, adapted from an "Aqua Abs" manual written by Anne Pitman, 1998.

- 1) Ideally, abdominals should be flat.
- 2) Crunches (modified bent knee sit-ups) are the most effective way to work the abs.
- 3) Crunches disengage the hip flexors and work only the abdominals.
- 4) Crunches will best prepare you for the abdominal strength you need in day-to-day life.
- 5) You should never do abdominal work with straight legs.
- 6) There is no such thing as upper and lower abdominal fibres.
- 7) Strong abdominals are the best way to prevent back injury.
- 8) You need to lie down in a supine position to effectively work the abs.
- 9) It is impossible to exercise the abdominals effectively in the water.

Working to debunk these myths will assist in assuaging the abdominal fixation that continues to permeate fitness. Following are three aquafitness workshop titles with descriptions, that draw a large number of instructors:

1. CALA - MAXIMUM AQUA ABS:
Learn the most effective abdominal exercises according to the latest research. Get Charlene's list of top exercises to work all four abdominals to the max. Experience set abdominal routines in deep water with tips to modify for chest deep water. Take the choreography back to your participants for maximal abdominal results.

2. CALA - AQUA ABS-OLUTELY:
Discover the ultimate workout formula for training the abdominals that will guarantee you 'absolute' results. This formula is a new revolutionary approach to abdominal training that will benefit you and your participants in exercise experience and daily life!

3. CALA - BEYOND ABS: TRAINING THE INNER UNIT:
Awareness of the four abdominals and the superficial back muscles opens the door to understanding the interrelationship between core stability, balance and functional training. Come prepared with anatomical knowledge of the body core. This comprehensive session goes beyond the basics. Learn subtle techniques, aquatic exercises and tips for core strength development.

Our society tends to "obsess" about "flat abs". This preoccupation on the abdominal region is both counter productive and narrow minded. Promises of "washboard abs" or the idealized "six pack", set people up for failure. Genetics, body composition (governed by an incredibly strict diet) and an extensive training regime may enable an individual to attain "incredible looking" abdominals. But, is this goal really achievable by the average fitness enthusiast? Why does it seem so important to have so-called "tight tummies"?

While is it essential for instructors to understand the biomechanics of abdominal, core and back training, it is also somewhat 'dangerous' to focus on this region when leading or promoting fitness classes. As a part of the 'whole fitness endeavour', targetted conditioning of the trunk and core are essential. The educational opportunities provided to enhance understanding of effective design and delivery of exercises for this region are also of utmost importance. However, when the fitness industry obsesses about the abs and the core, we may be setting people up for failure. From an instructor perspective, consider how often you have been approached by clients with the following concerns:

"How can I get rid of this?"



"I have been attending classes on a regular basis for more than ten years, following a healthy diet and including aerobic walking three times per week, but cannot get rid of this roll around my middle. What am I doing wrong?"



"I am going on holidays in two weeks and want to look good in my bikini, how do I get rid of this tummy?"



We (the fitness industry) may in fact be encouraging participants to obsess about the abs, to the point where participants 'feel like a failure' or 'feel like they are not trying hard enough', or 'feel like they are cheating if they eat or drink something that is not considered healthy'. If participants and instructors are unable to achieve the ultimate: flat abs or six-pack abs, then what message is the collective business of fitness sending?

Admittedly, the industry is maturing with workshops that are more technical in nature and an increase in mind-body training techniques. The bottom line is, we, as instructors have an obligation to welcome the 'whole person' into our classes and celebrate the differences in body size, shape and fitness level.

The Dilemma:

How do we remove the obsession from abdominals and balance the workout focus to involve the whole body, the mind and the spirit?

The Solution:

- Ongoing education of the instructor and the participant.
- Putting theory into practice in the fitness class.
- Embracing the whole person, rather than component parts at every possible opportunity.
- Celebrating healthy active living and our body through the messages we send while leading classes or interacting with participants outside of the fitness class.

Where do we (those in the fitness industry) start?

Let's start by ceasing to perpetuate the obsession with abdominals. Instead, let's focus our energy on educating our clients about the need for balanced fitness and the absolute necessity to engage the mind in the movement experience... Putting the mind into the muscle, so to speak.

Instructors are obligated to understand movement mechanics and then to share the information with participants. Knowledge is power. When people understand 'what' the exercise is for, 'why' the exercise is important and 'how' to do the exercise effectively then there are many positive outcomes. From a leadership perspective: the act of leading the classes becomes more rewarding, more meaningful. From a participant perspective, exercise execution becomes more effective, more meaningful.

In a nutshell, workshop facilitators, conference presenters and educators alike have a responsibility to the fitness industry to 'raise the bar' by educating instructors beyond what has tended to happen in the past. "Do this move to tone the abs." Admittedly, the industry has come a long way. If the global fitness certification standards would follow suit, the industry would grow in leaps and bounds and perhaps instructors would actually earn more money to teach classes.

Food for thought: Why are less than 20% of the population engaged in fitness? What are the other 80% doing with their time? We need to make fitness more accessible, less intimidating, more holistic in nature and more meaningful to healthy active living – rather than merely a race to achieve the perfect body.

Now, for a focus on abdominal, back and core conditioning within the context of training the whole body.

continued →



Excerpts from ABS-OLUTELY handout written by Maureen Hagan and Charlene Kopansky. 1999.

TO ACHIEVE ABS-OLUTE RESULTS;

- KNOW
 - i the structure of the specific body region - *determines function/action
 - ii the location (origin and insertion) of the muscles - *determines function
 - iii the line of pull of the muscles - *determines function
 - iv the real life function of the abdominals including the: rectus abdominus, external oblique, internal oblique and the transverse abdominus
- KNOW - the muscle actions and roles of the abdominals
 - i the stabilizer role
 - ii the prime mover role
 - iii the assistant role (secondary mover)
- KNOW - the importance of "upright" posture (sitting and/or standing) for effective training of the abdominals
- KNOW - the order of recruitment of the abdominal muscles for optimal condition in the "upright" posture ("bottom to top")
- KNOW - how to build active strength and endurance required for activities of daily living; quality time versus quantity of repetitions.

With this knowledge the instructor understands why and how to do specific exercises and can educate the participants, over time, during the class.

Take time to share the Functional Significance of a Strong Body Core with your class participants:

- to protect vital inner organs
- to move with ease, grace and agility
- to keep pelvis "level", "square", "in line"
- to prevent excessive curvature in the lumbar spine
- to diminish the prevalence of, or prevent, low back pain
- to improve postural alignment
- to provide stability and flexibility for the body

Take time to explain how to condition the global and core trunk muscles from a biomechanical perspective that makes sense to participants:

- Discuss the "pelvic bowl" or "cup" in relation to creating a balance between the stretch and strength capabilities of the muscles surrounding and influencing the final position of the pelvis. Reinforce the need to condition the muscles to be able to maintain a level pelvis.

- Utilize the "headlights" analogy to create a visual picture of what neutral pelvis looks like. 'Place fists on anterior hip bones. Imagine the fists are headlights (low beams, tee hee) on a car and ensure the lights are shining straight ahead'.
- Play with the positions of the pelvis, by having participants try various pelvic positions, first with eyes open then with eyes closed so that they can feel neutral pelvis. Do a 'hula hoop' style hip circle: including anterior tilt, excessive lumbar curve (lordosis), lateral tilt to the right, posterior tilt, or pelvic tuck, flat back, no lumbar curve, lateral tilt to the left. Then assume a level pelvis, with a natural lumbar curve. Add hips rocking side to side through neutral pelvis. Add hips rocking forward and backwards, through neutral pelvis. Then find and maintain neutral pelvis. By the way, keep the knees slightly soft throughout and move at a comfortable pace.
- Name and identify the muscles which affect the position of the pelvis including the global and inner unit or core muscles. Use diagrams, or show the muscles by indicating where they are on your body as you teach:
 - abdominals (superficial to deep: rectus abdominus, external obliques, internal obliques, transverse abdominus)
 - hip flexors (iliopsoas, rectus femoris, sartorius)
 - erector spinae (21 different muscles)
 - hamstring (semitendinosus, semimembranosus, biceps femoris)
 - specific back muscles (quadratus lumborum, multifidus, iliocostalis lumborum, longissimus thoracis pars lumborum)
 - pelvic floor muscles

Excerpts from Beyond Abs: Training the Inner Unit, workshop handout written by Charlene Kopansky. 2003, with reference to why training the body core is so important to daily living...

"The development of strong muscular stabilizers in the lumbar spine is essential for functional, recreational and sport performance. A strong base of support at the core of the body allows for a better transfer of forces to the extremities when we are lifting, punching, kicking, swinging, carrying etc." Fahren Dhalla, BHSc., PT

When an instructor is able to meet the following objectives, they are then well equipped to integrate the mind, body and spirit when leading classes.

- 1) Understand the anatomy and biomechanics of the body core.



- 2) Know the importance of integrating real life functional abdominal work into the class.
- 3) Learn specific aqua movements which strengthen the body core.
- 4) Practice visual and verbal technique tips and cues to encourage safe and effective exercise execution.
- 5) Understand the importance of stabilizing the body in relation to core strength.
- 6) Experience core strengthening movements in the water themselves.
- 7) Practice utilizing the specific cues and exercises to ensure clients understand 'the why are we doing' and 'the how to do' each exercise.
- 8) Practice pre-choreographed abdominal routines in the water and on deck, then introduce them slowly and thoughtfully to the class.

Actual Exercises: Getting down to actual exercises, the 'meat and potatoes'...

First and foremost: Create a strong base for all movements. Cue participants to activate the muscles of the pelvic floor, draw the navel towards the spine, maintain a level pelvis, long tall spine and continue to breathe comfortably while exercising.

With that said and done (it takes time and effort to actually educate participants about how to do Kegel exercises, activate the transverse abdominus, activate the global muscles of the trunk... all while performing an exercise... good luck, provide ongoing cues and meaningful feedback and over time, participants will 'get it' and they will celebrate!).

In the black box is a list of exercises that will work the body core and global muscles of the trunk, if the appropriate effort is expended and the exercise is performed properly.

Charlene's Top Ten Aqua Abdominal Exercises:

- 1) *repeater sartorius jogormarch with sartorius arms*
- 2) *flamingo swivels with bow and arrow arms*
- 3) *mogul tuck*
- 4) *kayak arms - variety of legs & different 'phase focus'*
- 5) *abdominal jack with reverse breast stroke arms*
- 6) *recumbent to sitting to vertical to triathlon cycling*
- 7) *anchored narrow jogormarch with unison cross country ski arms*
- 8) *narrow tuck with jumping jack arms*
- 9) *tuck-jack-tuck-ski combo*
- 10) *pumping karate kick with unison arms reaching away from leg*

See pages 10-13 for photos of these moves.

"Core training, while physical in nature, is more effective when the doer understands the mechanics of the movement and feels the work of the body. This is holism in action: body doing, mind thinking, spirit feeling".

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