

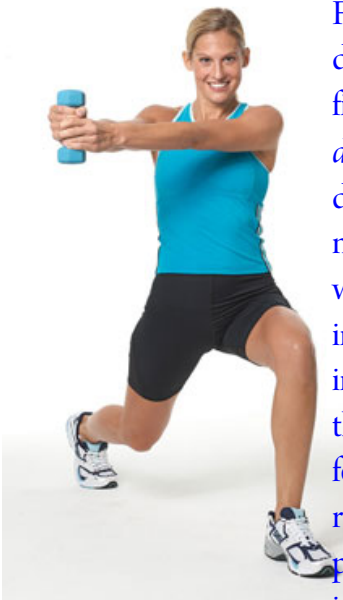


What is Functional Training



The following interview took place on October 12, 2007 when Michael Sylvester, was asked questions regarding 'Functional Training'. It was never aired or published, but is loaded with insights regarding the real definition of a term that is very misunderstood today.

Question #1: Many fitness professionals today as well as numerous magazines refer to functional training. What exactly is functional training and how can it benefit us?



First off, if you ask 5 different trainers, you will more than likely get 5 different answers. With that being said, Functional Training is a type of fitness training that attempts to mirror or mimic the demands of *activities of daily living* and sport and usually involves movements in multiple planes or directions (not just movements that are up and down like a biceps curl, and not just movements that are forward and back, or a bench press, which is what we've all been so accustomed to in the gym, which is predominately in the sagittal plane but functional training enthusiasts believe we should include movements in all directions which are side to side, and movements that promote rotation especially with our feet planted on the ground. I say feet planted because many machines that are out there do promote rotation but in a seated position, but when do we rotate in real life on a predetermined track in a seated position, the only example I can think of is in a barber chair.

Question #2.

Do the functional training camps exclude machines and free weights?



No, traditional exercises using machines (usually cable machines) and free weights are included, but in the context of challenging not only strength but also balance and stability. Proponents of Functional Training believe that this type of training has a greater carry over, if you will, to the real life demands of everyday living and sporting activities.

In contrast, traditional training, usually has two main objective –to alter body composition (ie, increase muscle or muscle tone and decrease fat) and increase muscle strength and is usually accomplished through the sole use of machines and free weights and is usually done in one plane or in one direction with very little balance and stability demands. I believe, an individual can do both, traditional and functional. But I think if you only train in a traditional way or only in a functional way you ultimately limit yourself. I promote both types of training at the fitness facilities I have been involved in.

An interesting story should lend insight on the import distinction between demonstrating strength on a machine and being able to use the muscles in a practical manner. I used to train an 85 year old woman who could leg press 285 pounds, but she couldn't get up from the floor. After months of training, she was able to get up from the floor.

Question #3:

Can you elaborate a little more on functional training?

Sure, I mentioned earlier the traditional definition of Functional Training because I believe there is a deeper meaning of function or functional training.



On one hand, it makes sense to challenge balance, stability and move in multiple planes of motion but on the other hand, it is absolutely absurd to JUMP someone right into this type of training without an in depth appreciation of human movement and the skill involved in progressing someone gradually to greater stability and balance demands.

But getting back to this deeper meaning of functional training, there needs to be a hierarchy of training when it comes to this type of fitness. The reason why I say this, is because there are so many enthusiastic fitness professionals (and I include myself in this category) that go on a seminar on Functional training and learn a bunch of exercises that challenge balance, and core stability but not in any particular order of hierarchy and then attempt to do these same exercises with their clients, young or old, fit or unfit. It's ludicrous. The pictures below depict an example of a supine ball bridge progression, which an individual could start on an easier ball (peanut shaped).



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Question #4:

What is your solution to this, do we just exercise the beginners on machines and simple free weight movements until we think they are ready to do more balance and core stability exercises?



No, because that would be ignoring the hierarchy concept I mentioned earlier. Beginners should not shy away from the “functional” exercises but need to approach them in some sort of progressive and systematic manner. The Postural Conditioning concept is just that, a hierarchy of exercises from easiest to hardest.

It is also based on the developmental sequence which is a fancy way of saying that we all start off as infants on our back (supine) then sidelying, then prone (on our bellies) then hands and knees, then kneeling, 1/2 kneeling, 2 leg standing, 1 leg.

My goal is to challenge your core stability in the most appropriate posture and gradually move toward the most challenging posture for your abilities.

It's also important to note that everyone's level of FUNCTION is going to be different, which brings out another point about “Functional Training” in that it is individual and should not be approached in a “cookie cutter” manner.



The assessment I designed together, with the help of Gray Cook, a well renowned, physical therapist, and the NASM (the National Academy of Sports Medicine) and the numerous courses I had in my physical therapy curriculum, is designed to bring out what many refer to as “Energy Leaks” or compensations that we as the fitness professionals need to find.

In many cases, these weaknesses are consistent across the board. In other words, when I started doing my assessments, I found a “trend” in that many individuals had the same muscles weaknesses as well as the same muscles that were tight.

So we need to strengthen the weak muscles, which in many cases they are what most people refer to as the “core” muscles, the glutes (your butt and hips) and the deep muscles in the spine (the multifidus) and the muscles in the upper back (the scapula muscles).

Most of these muscles are postural in nature and need to be strengthened NOT in the traditional way of being on a machine or using weights but rather using your own bodyweight, or at the minimum a resistance tube. The goal is not necessarily strength when it comes to postural muscles but rather endurance.

Stuart McGill, a well respected scientist in the fitness and Physical therapy genre says that it is not strength but rather muscle endurance in regards to rehabilitation for lower back pain.

So in answer to you question, the beginner should definitely include core stability/functional training exercises but should be based on what exactly is weak.

After the weak and tight muscles are detected, which is not always easy, it is our job to strengthen it in a progressive and responsible manner.



Michael A. Sylvester is a Licensed Physical Therapist Assistant and holds a bachelors degree in Exercise Physiology. He is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine. He has also published 2 books on health and fitness.