

By Shirley Archer, JD, MA

A GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS LOOMS. HOW CAN FIT PROS ADAPT THEIR OFFERINGS TO PROVIDE A NEEDED BOOST?

# Don't Sell Exercise Sell Health and Well-Being

**P**eople are hurting right now, in more ways than one. The pandemic engendered intense bereavement, economic insecurity, fear of illness and death, social isolation, forced work-from-home, home schooling, heightened domestic conflict, and disruption of daily routines. Simple joys and recreational activities—like going to movies or sporting events, gathering with friends, and traveling—were all restricted. As the world puts one tentative foot in front of another, it is critical that we address mental and emotional wellness.

The pandemic significantly disrupted the fitness industry, requiring professionals in every segment and role to reevaluate their

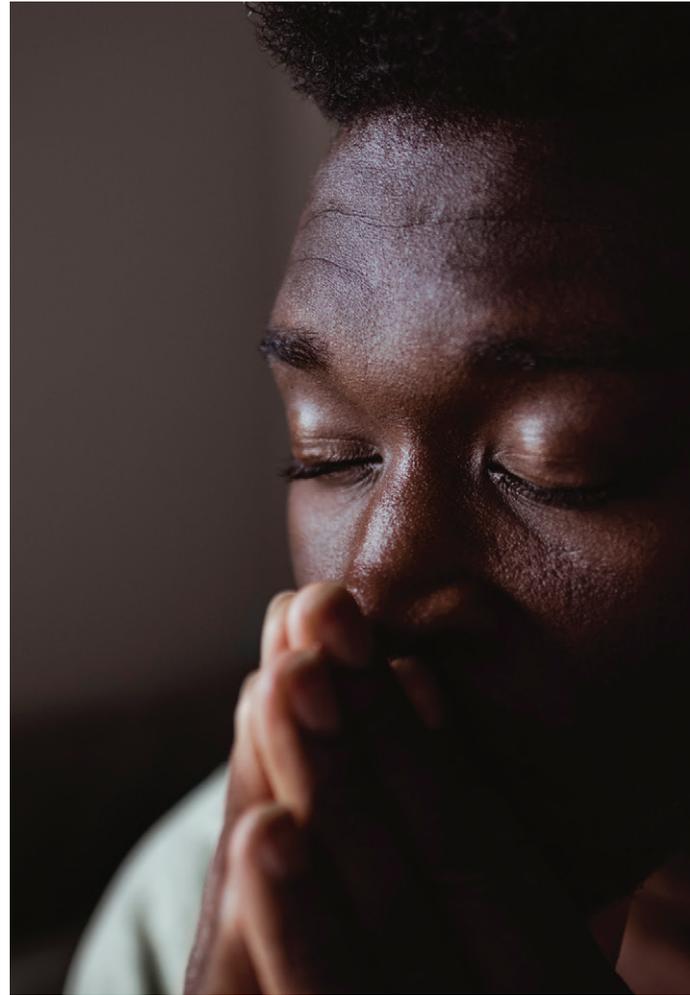
services and products. This challenge is an opportunity. “Historically [in the fitness business], we made what we *look like* the definition of success,” says Petra Kolber, author, speaker, DJ and digital nomad. “When we can realize that our body is not the endgame, but rather a very precious vehicle that is going to carry us into a life of our dreams and help us fulfill our purpose, then we can move into a more uplifting and sustainable conversation around movement and well-being.”

Experts in training, branding, marketing and mental health share how fitness professionals can succeed in today’s market and play a meaningful role in addressing the mental health pandemic. >>





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### A Line of Defense

More and more people are seeking relief from chronic stress, anxiety and depression, even if it does not rise to clinical levels. While older adults have borne the greatest *physical* health risks from the pandemic, younger adults and women, in particular, have suffered higher *mental* health risks, according to research in *The Lancet* (Pierce et al. 2020). The American Psychological Association's Stress in America™ poll revealed that parents, essential workers and people from communities of color were all more likely to report mental and physical health consequences and that Gen Z adults (ages 18-24) were the most likely to report a worsening of their mental health compared with pre-pandemic times (APA 2021).

Fitness professionals possess important skills and knowledge to address this crisis, but promoting physical training while also uplifting minds and spirits requires clear understanding and intention. Across the spectrum, from business owners to trainers, fit pros can promote exercise not only for its penchant to improve physical health but also for its

powerful ability to serve the entire person—to provide mental health benefits without any of the side effects of pharmaceutical treatments.

Why isn't everyone turning to exercise first? Does the public know just how much value fitness pros deliver? Let's take a deep dive into fitness marketing and ask ourselves two questions:

1. Are we meeting this moment with messaging and services that address the foremost concerns of prospective clients in a post-pandemic world?
2. Are we having conversations with people that support their most urgent needs?

## FOSTER INCLUSION for All People

Antonio Williams, PhD, FACSM, associate professor at Indiana University in Bloomington and a fitness branding expert, reminds us of the challenges that people of color have faced in trying to participate in recreational fitness activities. "Look at the case of Ahmaud Arbery, who was shot while jogging. Jogging is a destressor, but Black people can't simply run outdoors. They may get assaulted."

Here are tips on how to increase inclusivity and decrease barriers:

**Boost representation.** People need to feel they belong. Hire Black, Brown and Asian instructors and trainers. People gravitate toward role models who look like them.

**Improve your visual messaging.** Use inclusive imagery. Show people of all races and different body types.

**Avoid patronizing.** Inclusivity comes in different forms. It doesn't require a hip-hop dance class. Even within groups, people have a variety of interests. See people as individuals.

**Expand your product line.** If your facility offers shampoo, include products for Afro-textured hair. If you have skin-colored products, offer different tints.

**Go to clients.** Offer services where people gather. For example, lead programs at local churches, schools or community centers. Reach out to respected community leaders to make connections and introductions.



## CASE STUDY

# YMCA of South Collier Offers Mental and Physical Health Programs

The YMCA of South Collier (Marco YMCA) in Marco Island, Florida, provides a model of how a fitness facility can respond to the wellness needs of its community and be a center for supporting “whole-person” health for a triple win: for its members, its staff and the local community. Residents are interested in and are returning to the Marco YMCA, which recently launched its new model of community wellness to address current health issues with support from medical partner organizations. Since the launch, hundreds of people have been guided through a personalized action plan to overcome the mental and physical effects of living through the pandemic.

At the YMCA, participants can receive various types of medical consultations:

- COVID-19 testing, to confirm if they have had the virus or may be at risk without knowing it
- customized health screening, to identify potential health concerns
- customized mental health screening, to detect signs of anxiety, depression or substance abuse
- individualized health and wellness planning, with customized recommendations to help people recover and reconnect with their community

Program leaders hope the program can be replicated in health facilities throughout the country. For more information, visit [MarcoYMCA.org](http://MarcoYMCA.org).

## Defining the Mental Health Pandemic

Before addressing today’s mental health crisis, it’s important to understand its parameters. “Among adults in the U.S. reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression during the period January to June 2021, 11% of the population admitted to experiencing these symptoms,” says Michael Mantell, PhD, a transformational behavior and leadership coach in San Diego. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that, in December 2020, a whopping 42% of U.S. adults reported anxiety or depression. Between January 20, 2021, and February 1, 2021, more than 2 in 5 adults experienced symptoms of anxiety or depression, and 1 in 4 reported needing, but not receiving, therapy for mental health (Vahratian et al. 2021).

Americans are not alone in this crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasized that

nations must consider mental health along with public health. “The COVID-19 pandemic has been a stark reminder of the importance of integrating mental health into preparedness and response plans for public health emergencies,” said Dévora Kastel, director of the Department of Mental Health and Substance Use at WHO.

A letter published in *Psychological Medicine* describes “PTSD as the second tsunami of the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic” (Dutheil, Mondillon & Navel 2020). The authors raise awareness of the global need to consider policies for preventive treatment of individuals with PTSD—particularly frontline workers, patients, caregivers and family members—who may need

to cope with trauma and higher suicide risks in upcoming months.

While the need for mental health services is surging, the pandemic is also disrupting the ability of mental healthcare professionals to offer services in 93% of countries worldwide, according to a 2020 WHO survey. Just as the pandemic spotlighted healthcare inequality and disparities in access to care, it also revealed chronic underfunding and lack of national and international support for existing mental health programs. According to pre-COVID-19 estimates, nearly \$1 trillion in economic productivity is lost annually from depression and anxiety. And studies show that for every \$1 spent on evidence-based care for



depression and anxiety, the return is \$5 (WHO 2020). Exercise is an evidence-based adjunctive therapy for both depression and anxiety.

### Physical Activity and Mental Health Benefits

Scientific evidence supports the ability of exercise to alleviate anxiety and depression symptoms, even for those with major depressive disorder. For an in-depth research review showing that exercise can relieve anxiety and depression, read “Train Yourself

Happy: Exercise Can Play a Key Role in Alleviating Anxiety and Depression” (Archer 2014).

### EVIDENCE-BASED BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

Fitness professionals can't guarantee how a client's body will change from consistent training, but they can confidently share proven, significant mental health benefits. “Physical activity has a very, very large body of research to support that it is consistently associated with physical and

mental benefits,” says Patrick J. O'Connor, PhD, FACSM, professor of kinesiology at the University of Georgia in Athens. And people can experience the benefits of physical activity regardless of age, abilities, ethnicities, shape or size (CDC 2021).

Regular physical activity offers the following evidence-based mental health benefits:

- reduced feelings of anxiety—both short-term (state anxiety) and long-term (trait anxiety)—in adults >>

## 10 ACTION ITEMS for Fitness Professionals

Fitness professionals and branding, marketing and mental health experts agree that it is an industrywide challenge to shift how the fitness industry positions itself through the what (athletic performance, wellness, allied health care); how (virtual, live, indoor, outdoor, hybrid); and why (achieve a particular physique, meet an athletic goal, be healthier and happier, manage chronic conditions). New positioning for the industry is critical, however, if gyms and studios are to successfully become integral or “essential” businesses and receive wider recognition.

Experts offer the following 10 tips for how to start:

**1 Educate the public.** “Most consumers separate the physical from the mental,” says Farel Hruska, director of education and culture at Chuze Fitness, San Diego. “We have work to do in educating our clients about the vast benefits we can be part of in supporting their holistic selves. Show research, talk about connections, and lean in on the power of physical movement as a means for mental and emotional release.”

“Share stories, too—your own and clients’—not just facts,” says Michael Matthews, CEO and founder of Legion Athletics in Clearwater, Florida. “Compelling stories are far more persuasive than encyclopedic information.”

**2 Talk about mental health.** “In the past, mental health was a stigma that a lot of fitness teachers shied away from,” says San Diego-based Sadie Nardini, e-RYT500, founder of CSV Yoga® and The Yoga Shred®. “Tell people how just a few minutes of concentrated movement a day is shown to shift their mental state toward the positive and possible.” Fit pros who partner with mental health professionals can also discuss how physical activity programs fit into a client's overall mental health treatment plan.

**3 Be compassionate.** “Have compassion for those struggling against mental illness that they can't just exercise away,” adds Nardini. “Let them know that they, too, can find support, more vitality and a more harmonized, balanced body—which only better serves the mind.”

**4 Connect to your client's “why.”** “Losing weight and body image often are directly connected to relationships,” says Reid Carr, CEO of Red Door Interactive in San Diego. “People see their outward appearance, how they're seen in the world, as influencing who they attract and how; it becomes part of their identity. While this feels external to those who want to change these people's perspective, this shift does have a real impact on their lives and comes from a very human place.

“If you can connect to their why, then you have a chance to make that shift happen. . . . Making that shift from body composition and weight is difficult because, while superficial, they are visual and more easily tracked. Ultimately, it's about getting people to be willing to connect more deeply within themselves—their feelings and emotions—to help make that change.”

**5 Dig deep and engage.** To connect more deeply with your clients' whys, Billy Polson, CSCS, co-founder of The Business Movement in San Francisco suggests asking people about a goal they list on their intake forms, such as “Lose the COVID 20,” and talking about it. “Dig deeper,” he says. “What does [that weight loss] mean for their life? Get specific. Are they looking for more connection? Relate to that reason. Ask, ‘How can I make your life better?’ Be understanding of the journey they're on.”



These are powerful questions every fitness professional should ask: “Does what I offer cause anxiety for some I want to include?” “How can I create a space of true belonging and safety?” Evaluate your messaging—visual, written, spoken and nonverbal. Is it inviting and welcoming?

“For many years, I thought to be a fitness ‘expert,’ I should know everything, but it’s not our job to know everything,” says Petra Kolber, author, speaker, DJ and digital nomad. “Our job is to share what we know. When we ask open-ended questions that allow us to get to know the values, hopes and dreams of our clients and combine our skill set with their inner wisdom, we can create a different conversation around the fitness journey.”

**6 Track mood.** “Encourage clients to track their moods,” says Hruska. “What gets recorded tends to get repeated.” Help clients connect better moods with workout days. Use a notes app, calendar, or app like MoodTracker.com, MyTherapy, RealifeChange® or Daylio to observe consistent moods and connect changes in mood with behaviors and events.

**7 Dispel fitness fears.** “Create a warm, kind atmosphere,” says Mark Fisher, founder of Mark Fisher Fitness and Business for Unicorns, New York City. Fisher welcomes prospective clients with this message: “We help people who hate gyms find a fitness home they actually love.” Fisher highlights an enjoyable, un intimidating fitness experience where people feel welcome, not awkward or foolish, particularly if feeling welcome has not been their experience.

Victor Brick, co-founder and CEO of Planet Fitness Growth Partners, Miami, recommends directly addressing a new member’s five fears: physique anxiety, not knowing anyone, feeling like a klutz, feeling stupid—not knowing what to do and not wanting to ask—and the hard sell.

Polson notes that people are also fearful for their safety. “If you’re using masks, physical distancing and controlling check-in with temperature readings, let people know. Post pic-

tures on your home page of people wearing masks, show people interacting in joyful connectivity, post testimonials sharing mental health benefits, such as, ‘I sleep better,’ ‘My focus is back’ and ‘I feel better.’ Provide social proof and reassure people.”

**8 Link programs with benefits and current road-blocks.** Nardini offers 10-minute “stress rescue yoga” and a 15-minute “anxiety release” HIIT workout. Jessica H. Maurer, FIT4MOM® senior instructor of instructor development in Asheville, North Carolina, suggests using marketing messages like, “Skip the second cup of coffee and energize in our early morning classes” or “Need to unwind after a long day? Try our evening classes for better sleep.”

**9 Address the fatigue barrier.** Stress, anxiety and depression can make people feel tired. Let people know movement can help. “A top reason for not exercising is feeling tired . . . paradoxically, low-to-moderate physical activity makes most people feel energized, not fatigued,” says Patrick J. O’Connor, PhD, FACSM, professor of kinesiology at the University of Georgia in Athens.

**10 Offer shorter workouts.** “People are looking for ‘less is more,’ shorter, compact microworkouts that give big results in less time,” says Nardini. “Make your paid classes under 30 minutes. Also offer 1- to 5-minute, value-based videos on social media to help people—and better familiarize them with your style.”

- improved cognition in children ages 6–13 and adults over 50
- fewer depression risks for children from age 6 to adults of all ages
- improved sleep
- better quality of life
- lower risk of dementia, including Alzheimer’s disease

Many mental health benefits occur immediately after one session of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (CDC 2021).

### What Is Mental Wellness?

Today’s consumer is looking for mental health solutions. The wellness market evolved as consumers wanted to optimize personal health, rather than simply not be sick. Similarly, consumers are now prioritizing mental health as “self-care.” The mental wellness economy was estimated at \$121 billion globally in 2020 by the Global Wellness Institute (GWI 2020). Fitness providers can respond to this market now with targeted messaging to capture strong and growing consumer interest in services and products.

### THE MENTAL WELLNESS GYM

This market trend began before the pandemic with companies like Coa, which dubs itself “your gym for mental health” and offers online emotional fitness workouts. Coa was founded in 2018 in San Francisco and is backed by Kevin Love, professional basketball player with the Cleveland Cavaliers, among others. Love, who openly discusses his challenges with anxiety and depression, created the Kevin Love Fund, with a commitment to normalize the conversation around mental health and to empower people to pursue mental wellness with the same vigor as physical health.

In 2019, booksellers noted

“We are seeing people choose to move for reasons outside of the [weight loss] scale, such as mental clarity, emotional health and stress relief. Again, this is not everyone and all clients, but there is a wave building.”

—Jessica H. Maurer

that, for the first time, American readers showed more interest in books on mental health than in books about diet and exercise. “. . . [B]ooks focused on mental well-being are far outpacing titles addressing exercise and dieting,” Liz Harwell, Barnes & Noble senior director of merchandising for trade books, told Michael Schaub of the *Los Angeles Times*. “When it comes to preparing for New Year’s resolutions and goals, the data shows that across the [Barnes & Noble] chain more people are buying books about mental and emotional well-being as opposed to what were previously the more popular areas of exercise and dieting” (Schaub 2019).

During the pandemic, app-based mental wellness programs surged, with Headspace® and others generating record sales. MindLabs, another app-based mental health program, was founded in 2020. Adnan Ebrahim, co-founder of MindLabs, told TechCrunch that the company’s goal is to “make taking care of your mental health



as normal as going to the gym” (Shu 2020).

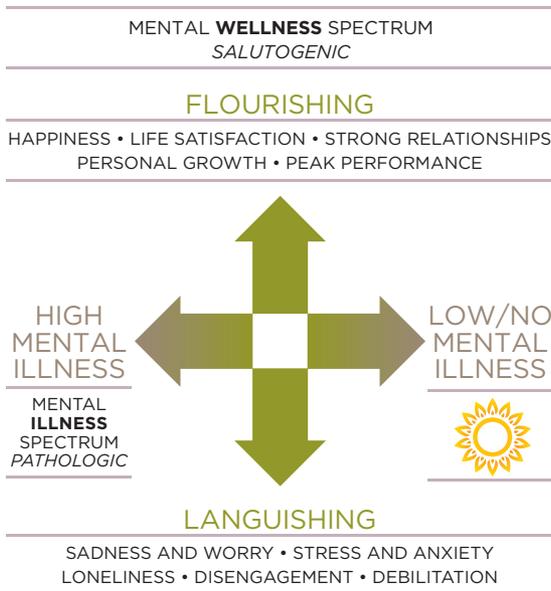
Another athlete, U.K. footballer Gareth Bale, has backed the London-based company Rowbots, which features a “mental health workout” along with physical training. Incorporating “mental health objectives” is a crucial aspect of modern sports science, Bale told Samuel Fishwick of the *Evening Standard* (Fishwick 2019).

“All movements are generated from the ground up—the grassroots,” says Victor Brick, co-founder and CEO of Planet Fitness Growth Partners and founder of the John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation in Miami. “People are going to drive this change [for mental wellness options].”

Jessica H. Maurer, FIT4MOM® senior instructor of instructor development in Asheville, North



## The Dual Continuum of Mental Wellness and Mental Illness



SOURCE: GWI 2020.

Carolina, agrees. “We are seeing people choose to move for reasons outside of the [weight loss] scale, such as mental clarity, emotional health and stress relief. Again, this is not everyone and all clients, but there is a wave building.”

### Training to Thrive: The Dual Continuum of Mental Wellness and Mental Illness

One good way to understand how fitness professionals can assist clients with mental wellness, according to Brick, is with a dual-continuum model of mental wellness and mental illness.

“Historically, mental health has been considered as one continuum,” says Brick. “On one end, you had ‘well-adjusted’ qualities like happiness. Let’s say that’s a 10. As you moved down the scale, minor depression and anxiety cropped up. Further down were clinically diagnosed illnesses like depression, bipolar and schizophrenia, with suicide at the very end. People moved up and down this continuum based on physiology, pathological condition and life events. Fitness and wellness professionals [have tried] to push people up toward the happiness end of the spectrum. This horizontal spectrum is pathologic [of or related to a disease condition] and is related to your brain function.

“In reality, it’s a dual continuum. The vertical axis is salutogenic [of or related to promoting well-being rather than disease]. It deals with holistic approaches and lifestyle programs that can get you from languishing to flourishing.

“For example, you can be depressive or have serious mental illnesses, but you can go from languishing to flourishing if you do all the right things—stop smoking, exercise, have the right friends, get the ‘right’ job. The dual con-

tinuum [which incorporates the medical *and* wellness spectrums] is a clinical way of approaching this topic. You can ‘sell it’ to the medical and wellness communities and the general public. Plus, it shows why we need to get away from talking about just the physical with fitness and start talking about the total body.”

Fitness instructors have the training, the skills and a powerful tool—safe and effective movement—to boost health and well-being; they just need to let the public know. “When trainers understand the power of their tools in helping people deal with emotional distress, sometimes even more directly than medication or psychiatric treatment, and take the time to learn how to approach and properly communicate with those who are emotionally distressed, a training session will bring far more health than another set of crunches will ever do,” says Mantell. “Personal trainers are not doing psychotherapy or counseling. They use fitness to boost healthy mood. They [can] use the tool they have—fitness—to help emotional functioning.”

### SHIFT TO A WHOLE-PERSON APPROACH

Brick and others believe the entire industry needs to shift. “Fitness and wellness industries need to realize that they are one and the same [and] start working together instead of separately,” he says. Maurer agrees. “If we want clients to see our services as part of their total wellness, we need to answer their pain points, which go far beyond losing weight. This means less emphasis on ‘calories burned per hour’ and more on the ‘sweat can make you happy’ message,” she says.

Antonio Williams, PhD, FACSM, associate professor at Indiana

University in Bloomington and a fitness branding expert, also concurs. “For years, the fitness industry has been making promises about what it can’t deliver—how a person’s body will appear after training. Consequently, consumers judge it based on that message. Because the industry is not promoting the ‘feel better’ message, consumers aren’t going to rate it by that.”

### Meet People Where They Are

“Since this is a time when everything is so different, it’s an opportunity to go back and define your clients’ needs—specifically their mental and emotional needs—and how you can [meet those] in a unique and differentiated way,” says Billy Polson, co-founder of The Business Movement in San Francisco. “It’s so important for your marketing, branding and connection with your clients that you feel current. Reconnect. Let folks know there are tools they can use to boost their mental and physical health now.”

### WALK THE TALK

It’s crucial that fitness professionals address their own mental wellness needs. “Our job is to help bring ‘glow’ back into people’s lives,” says Polson. “Take care of number one first; then you’re at your potential to help others get back.”

“Demonstrate through your own actions that working out is linked with mental health. . . . People need to trust the messenger before they trust the message,” says Michael Matthews, CEO and founder of Legion Athletics in Clearwater, Florida. Lawrence Biscontini, MA, mindful movement specialist and fitness virtual host in Puerto Rico and New York, as well as Mykonos, Greece, adds,



“Stay grounded and strong in your own fitness convictions of what’s important by surrounding yourself with those who emphasize your values and goals.”

### ADDRESS DIVERSITY, EMPHASIZE INCLUSIVITY

The pandemic has heightened awareness around diversity issues, while also stimulating perceptual changes about the value of life, health and happiness. “If you’re still using ‘ladies and gentlemen,’ you’re behind,” says Biscontini. “Consider using inclusive greetings, such as ‘guys, gals and our nonbinary pals.’” Statistics show clear disparities in mental health consequences from the pandemic, particularly for essential workers and people of color, among others (APA 2021).

This is not new. A 2017 American Psychological Association report showed that people of color and

of lower socioeconomic status have significantly less access to stress reduction resources than other groups. This problem is compounded by higher levels of stress from exposure to discrimination, threats to safety and financial security, greater exposure to violence, and barriers to occupational advancement (APA 2017).

While tackling issues of systemic inequality and access disparities is a real challenge, every person can commit to positive change. Williams notes that, historically, recreational facilities were segregated spaces, barring people of color. “Today, people ‘pay’ for segregation in certain spaces,” he says. “African-Americans have been asked to leave certain fitness facilities or even been assaulted, for example in condo workout facilities, because someone said they didn’t belong there. And,



Across the spectrum, from business owners to trainers, fit pros can promote exercise not only for its penchant to improve physical health but also for its powerful ability to serve the entire person—to provide mental health benefits without any of the side effects of pharmaceutical treatments. Why isn't everyone turning to exercise first?

100% of our population want that. The other physique-based stuff? Not so much.”

### Make a Difference

Fitness professionals have an opportunity to bridge the gap for services that boost whole-person health and to address, in a way that only fit pros are uniquely qualified to do, the global mental

health crisis. This contribution can literally be the difference between life and death. Physical activity is internationally recognized by research institutions, government and public policy officials as critical to health and well-being.

If the industry can reimagine itself to serve the need for inclusive health promotion, the future is indeed bright—for the leaders who affect people's lives, for an industry engaged in healthful life transformation and for public health. We've got this.

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References available on [ideafit.com](http://ideafit.com).

even if there aren't overt racial slurs, many microaggressions can occur. Why, if I'm looking for respite from anxiety, would I turn to a place that causes anxiety?"

These are powerful questions that every fitness professional should ask: "Does what I offer cause anxiety for people I want to include?" "How can I create a space of true belonging and safety?" Evaluate your messaging—visual, written, spoken and nonverbal. Is it inviting and welcoming? Does it empower or shame individuals? Biscontini recommends showing over telling when posting on social media. "Use a cross-section of age groups, demographics, ethnicities," he says. "In addition to physical training, include meditation, mindfulness and stress reduction. Ultimately, we will attract more clients when we focus on spreading wellness, joy and overall well-being, because

## Additional Resources

To learn more, check out the following resources:

### Organizations

- Anxiety and Depression Association of America, [adaa.org](http://adaa.org)
- Global Wellness Institute, [globalwellnessinstitute.org](http://globalwellnessinstitute.org)
- John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation, [johnwbrickfoundation.org/](http://johnwbrickfoundation.org/)

### Fitness Business Services

- Billy Polson, CSCS, The Business Movement, [thebusinessmovement.com/](http://thebusinessmovement.com/)
- Jessica Maurer, fitness business consultant, [jhmfitness.com/](http://jhmfitness.com/)

### Books

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