

Coaching Women and Girls – What a Coach Needs to Know

Understand Your Audience

So, what is stopping women getting active or staying active?

Sport and physical activity can fill some women with dread. Furthermore, research advises that fear of judgement is the key issue.

For many women, sport has baggage:

- Reminiscent of school
- Getting sweaty
- Forgotten the rules
- Too competitive
- Changing in front of each other
- Family comes first
- Unfeminine
- No equipment or clothing
- Male leaders/coaches
- Aggressive
- Don't know anyone
- Not aspirational
- Not fit enough

Reference: Go Where Women Are, Sport England, 2015.

Think about what is holding women back and how you can address these barriers to support women to overcome their fears. The more aware you are of what the problems are, the more you are able to empathise and provide a suitable solution within your own sessions.

By delivering experiences that are social, fun, don't focus entirely on the technical skills and are flexible (in terms of payment, not having to turn up every week, and location) you will be providing what many women want. This will often be their catalyst for change, as they will want to come back for more.

Key message: For many women, sport has baggage, and many of them have had poor experiences of sport in the past.

What can you do?

Don't expect women to change to suit your coaching session and coaching style. Talk to them and ask them what they want.

The Fear of Being Judged

We are all our own greatest critics. It is much easier to stay in your comfort zone and avoid perceived judgement from others than it is to get out there and try something new for the first time in ages. It is a real worry for a lot of women who would otherwise love to get more active. The very real fear of being judged can be a big barrier to overcome.

Fear of being judged is, for many, an important all-encompassing concern, which can resurface in the form of another more 'acceptable' barrier.

- While many women may cite lack of time as the reason they do not manage to do any exercise, their real concern may be that spending time on exercise will be perceived as self-indulgent and imply neglect of domestic, maternal or familial duties. Although times are changing, women are still the primary carers for children and other family members.
- Judgement can come from all angles: from immediate friends and family (afraid of not living up to their expectations); from other women (not matching up to their standards); and from men (dismissive of their ability).
- It is a barrier that remains relevant even with sportier women, who fear they cannot perform as well as they used to. Fear of judgement from their own peers is just as real for many women.
- This shows the importance of going beyond initial responses and getting to grips with the core issues that lie at the heart of women's decision making.

Key message: Women can have a fear of being judged by many different people, including family and friends. This will affect their self-confidence.

What can you do?

Being aware of this fear of being judged and understanding the real motivation behind explanations for lack of activity can help you to inspire and support women. Talk to women.

Providing great sessions for inactive women and girls

If you can bring along the passion you have for being active, you are starting from a great place. Also, remember both the practical considerations and the emotional factors that may make it easier for women to engage in sport and exercise.

Practical

- Right time – be open, or run sessions to suit the women you are targeting
- Right place – close to where women feel safe and with adequate facilities (changing rooms, hairdryers, no mirrors in class, etc)
- Right welcome – make sure the welcome is warm and reassuring; tell women what your session will involve
- Right company – introduce women to other participants and show them they will be with people like them
- Right gear – simple clothing that allows free and safe movement; where relevant, provide equipment and/or be knowledgeable about what equipment to buy and from where.

Personal/emotional

- Right time – reinforce the notion that time exercising **is** time that should be spent on themselves
- Right place – provide experiences that don't make women look silly, unattractive or on show in unfamiliar and open environments
- Right welcome – provide activity that suits their level; women shouldn't feel exposed as lacking ability or familiarity with the steps, equipment, etc
- Right company – reduce the fear of not fitting in or being able to keep up with the group
- Right gear – reduce the fear of looking like the odd one out by wearing the wrong thing.

Key message: Some women lack self-confidence to become active due to being unfamiliar of the environment they are going into.

What can you do?

You can help build their confidence and develop a sporting habit in your female participants by providing them with a positive first experience. Don't forget to continue to support their progression, achievement and sense of belonging.

Help Women to Develop a Sporting Habit

You understand the motivations and barriers that exist for some women, but how do you inspire confidence in your participants and reassure them that the activity itself will be a positive experience? It is important to recognise the atmosphere of your session. Who or what is it created by?

- Is it by the women themselves?
- What is your style of instruction?
- Make note of the physical environment (use of music/being in an open public space)
- What intrinsic (feeling/looking better) and extrinsic (social interaction) incentives are you using to encourage women to carry on?

Overall motivation and communication is vital.

Here are some practical tips to retain your female participants:

Communication

Communication is key, both in generating enthusiasm and providing reassurance. Potential participants and experienced sportspeople will benefit from coaches who can recognise personal barriers and motivations, and use appropriate language and delivery methods of communication as detailed here.

- Develop a more personal, frequent style of communicating with the women and girls you attract.
- Address fears head-on before the session itself. Reassure participants that activities will be safe and women will be supported.
- Use myth-busting communications to make it clear that you don't have to be super fit and that others will be beginners as well.
- Provide the personal touch in communications, such as text message reminders about forthcoming sessions, or messages to offer encouragement after missed sessions.
- Use words that resonate with the target audience: freedom, fun, exploration.
- Ask for feedback and input in to decision making.

Motivation

Ongoing motivation will ensure women remain engaged, which will support their retention in your sessions.

Things to consider:

- Offer the right kind of carrot – consider the things women value the most.
- Support women by providing them with the advice and tools they require to start, continue or come back to you, having lapsed once or a number of times already.
- Celebrate what is being achieved. Don't let women beat themselves up about what they do or don't have. It's about self-improvement, not about being the best or better than others.
- Reinforce achievements regularly and with sincerity.
- For those who relish a challenge, setting goals and encouraging progress towards them will be important.

Talking their language

Most importantly, remind your participants of the benefits that resonate with them.

Why is it good to be active?

- To feel good in mind and body
- To become energised
- For de-stressing purposes
- For time with friends (new and known)
- To make progress
- To be a part of something/have ownership
- To feel empowered
- To feel celebrated and rewarded.

Key message: Effective communication and motivation will lead to fewer women dropping out of your session.

What can you do?

Take time to get to know your group and understand what makes them tick. Help them to recognise their own 'personal bests' and how they can achieve them.