



Success of the relationship might be based on the need for personal growth and development – the client could be seeking confidence, knowledge and support

# THE PT/CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

Paul Russell looks at an area of great importance to the personal trainer – the relationship with their clients.

## Building relationships

While some experienced members of the fitness profession will intuitively develop methods of developing this crucial relationship, it is generally overlooked in the training and development of the fitness professional. Usually the most successful PTs are highly effective at building this relationship – they are the ones who always have plenty of clients, and retain their clients for longer. These PTs spend less time and money trying to attract new clients because they already have a full client list. Here we examine a framework that attempts to explain the nature and components of this relationship.

## Defining the situation

The recent work of Jowett and her colleagues (2005), where the coach/athlete relationship was examined, can be used as a suitable reference point for the PT/client relationship. Defined as “a situation in which a coach’s and an athlete’s cognitions, feelings, and behaviours are mutually and causally interrelated”,<sup>1</sup> the relationship is thought to be dynamic in nature – therefore constantly changing in response to the dynamic aspect of their thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

## Task achievement vs social perspective

A successful relationship between the PT and client can focus on two main areas:

### 1. The client being successful in their exercise/fitness objectives, and the PT achieving professional excellence.

For example, if the client has approached the PT with a primary focus on the achievement of their fitness objectives, for a harmonious relationship to develop then the PT must attempt to ensure that the client achieves their fitness objectives within the proposed timescale. This relationship can be said to be primarily based on task achievement (with two possibilities – successful/unsuccessful<sup>2</sup>).

### 2. The personal growth and development of both the PT and the client.

Alternatively, success of the PT/client relationship might well be based on the need for personal growth and development. In this type of relationship the client might well be seeking out qualities like confidence, knowledge, support and leadership from the PT, and the achievement of their fitness objectives might be secondary. This relationship has a more social perspective to it (with two possibilities – successful/unsuccessful<sup>2</sup>).

## Success and effectiveness

The PT/client relationship that incorporates elements of success and effectiveness (E-S), is an ideal scenario, because it will mean that the client will reach their goals, and the client feels like they are in a respectful and supportive relationship with their PT.

Even an effective-unsuccessful (E-U) PT/client relationship can be seen as positive in relation to the psychological satisfaction that the client gains from the relationship, though they might not fully achieve their fitness goals. These types of relationships might be an important feature of the relationship desired by new exercisers who need to initially feel supported and want to develop a trusting relationship with the PT, and this relationship is definitely the goal of working with young clients (e.g., children's exercise classes).<sup>3</sup>

In an ineffective-unsuccessful (I-U), or an ineffective-successful (I-S) relationship the psychological distress, anxiety, and frustration that this leads to will outweigh even the elation of being successful and eventually the

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relationship. The most effective trainers are very good at reflecting on this and assessing it accurately, and if there are differences then they will be able to identify this and work towards getting the relationship "back on track" before the relationship breaks down.

### Client satisfaction

The objective for the PT when working with any client is to understand how they are able to develop greater levels of closeness, commitment, and complementarity. If the PT is able to achieve this then both the PT and the client will develop a more effective task and social relationship with their client that will lead to increased adherence levels, which will lead to greater client satisfaction, which will lead to greater achievement, which will lead to more clients through word-of-mouth recommendations.



relationship will deteriorate and develop negative elements, such as disagreement and conflict. In these examples it is highly likely that your client will "walk away" and look for personal training elsewhere.

### The 3+1Cs model

In an attempt to formalise the nature of this relationship, the 3+1Cs model has been proposed.<sup>4</sup> This model uses the constructs of closeness (includes feelings of trust and respect), commitment (includes the intention to maintain the training relationship over a long period of time), and complementarity (includes the PT offering nutritional guidance for the client to follow away from their sessions) to assess the nature and strength of the relationship.

With the identification of the 3Cs, researchers used three other indicators as predictors of the quality of the relationship:

1. **Assumed similarity:** this is where the PT, or client, assumes how they think, feel, and behave is shared by the other person.
2. **Actual similarity:** how similar the behaviour, feelings, and thinking of each member actually is.
3. **Empathic understanding:** this reflects the level at which each member understands how the other thinks, feels and behaves.

In ineffective relationships between the PT and their client, it might be because they believe they have a high level of assumed similarity, whereas their actual similarity might be quite low. It is always good practice for the PT to reflect on any differences they might have between their assumed similarity and the actual similarity because if this is assessed incorrectly it will lead to a deterioration of the

### Top tips for developing effective relationships with clients

1. Clearly understand what your client wants out of the relationship; don't assume how they are thinking, or feeling.
2. Demonstrate empathy, not sympathy, with your client.
3. Give the client confidence in what they are doing.
4. Ensure that you spend adequate time with the client conducting a thorough holistic needs analysis.
5. Develop an effective rapport with your client.
6. Demonstrate you are committed to helping the client achieve their goals, whatever they are.
7. Engage in active listening with your client.
8. Be aware of your body language at all times.
9. Continually reflect on your relationship with your client; ask yourself: "How can I improve the relationship?"
10. Empower your clients to take "responsibility" for their training.

For a list of references visit [www.fitpro.com/fitpro/references](http://www.fitpro.com/fitpro/references) 

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### CONTRIBUTOR

Paul Russell has been an accredited sport and exercise psychologist with the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) since 2001. In his involvement with the Amateur Boxing Association of England (ABAE), and the British Wrestling Association (BWA), he has provided sport psychology support to world-class athletes.