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'Functional Training': What the heck is it?

'Functional Training' is a vague and often misused term. Here we provide some sound logic and reasoning to help you determine its actual meaning.

Back in the late nineties, in sunny Perth (Western Australia) I set up my first Personal Training business and called it '*Functional Training Systems*'.

I called it this because I wanted the name of my business to reflect the type of training I provided my clients – namely that the training would be what 'I' deemed to be 'functional' at that time – so 'functional' training for my clients consisted of lots of multi-joint 'compound resistance exercises using only the clients bodyweight, free weights and stability balls in an attempt to mimic what I considered to be 'the way the body was designed to move'. There were certainly no isolation exercises involved and very rarely were weight machines ever incorporated into my personal training sessions

Back in the 90's this concept of 'functional exercises' and 'functional training' was starting to become popular – and it still is. However like many things in the fitness industry we seem to have either missed the point, misunderstood the point or completely overcomplicated the point...

So what is 'the point'? Well the point is – what actually makes training 'functional'? And what actually makes an exercise 'functional'?

Functional training: Popular explanations

The terms 'functional training' and 'functional exercise' are extremely vague – hence they can easily be interpreted to mean many different things and represent many different approaches to training.

The most 'precise' explanation of functional training that I've found comes from Wikipedia as 'training the body for the activities performed in daily life'. Functional training has its origins in rehabilitation where physical therapists select exercises for their injured patients to perform that closely mimic the movements those patients need to be able to perform at home and/or at work, in order to correct movement disorders or rehabilitate from injury so they can return to work/complete all the activities they need to at home, as quickly as possible.

So functional training for a typist suffering from RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury) may consist simply of one or two isolation 'wrist curl' resistance exercises designed to strengthen the client's forearm and wrist.

This is a little at odds with what functional training and functional exercise have come to represent in the fitness industry, where functional is more oriented on using big, multi joint exercises that use lots of muscles including the important 'core' abdominal and deep back muscles.

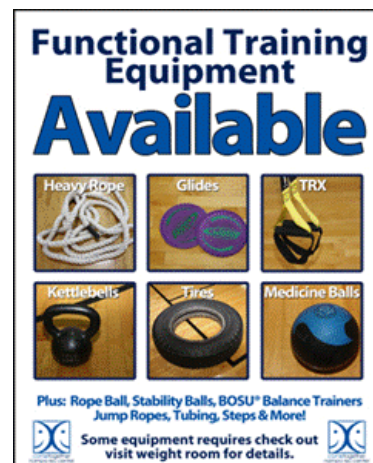
'Experts' in functional training will often advocate the use of exercise bands and balls, free weight exercises, plyometric exercises, and most recently suspension training in an attempt to condition the body in an unstable environment – their argument is that mimicking (largely athletic) activities and skills in an unstable environment is the most effective way to; improve strength, balance, co-ordination, endurance and agility, all in one full swoop...regardless it seems of what the clients actual goals are.

And its got to the point where 'functional' has become so confused that trainers are inventing exercises they deem to be functional that have little or no relevance to any activity of daily life let alone activities of any athletic pursuit, such as the exercise shown here (what the heck is it?). Now being innovative is good – but trainers would be better off using their 'innovative' skills to find ways to help their clients combat the barriers that interfere with building and sustaining an exercise habit, rather than inventing weird, often pointless exercises.



Increasingly the manufacturers and suppliers of exercise equipment are getting in on the 'functional' training buzz to help sell their equipment. So increasingly we see suspension 'TRX' training equipment, stability balls, bosu balls, kettlebells and even tractor tyres branded as 'functional' training equipment to a market of fitness professionals that eagerly purchase the equipment because...you guessed it – it's marketed as 'functional', and many of us believe that's valuable, without really considering what 'functional' actually is.

Now based on what we have come to accept as 'functional' which of the following two workouts is more functional and uses more functional exercises? (Assuming the workout's are designed for the same client, have the same warm up and cool down, and use the same exercise variables – sets/reps/etc)



Workout 1

- Dumbbell lunges
- Push ups (with suspension bands)
- Dumbbell bent over row (on bosu ball)
- Ab crunch (on stability ball)

Workout 2

- Leg extension machine
- Leg curl machine
- Lat pulldown machine
- Chest press machine

You'd have to say that workout 1 is far more functional than workout 2 – free weights, suspension bands and body weights are being used as opposed to machines. Lunges are more an activity of daily living than sitting down extending your legs as in the leg extension, and the stability ball and bosu ball make the environment less stable than with the machines, so there's more stress placed on those 'core' muscles to stabilise the body.

But would your idea of what 'functional' is change if you knew that the client this workout was designed for had very little resistance training experience, was significantly overweight, clumsy, very self conscious and you were going to be training them in your gym during peak hours in front of lots of other people?

Problems with the popular explanations

The problem with what has been accepted as functional in the fitness industry is that it is based on our idea of functional, and not the client's idea of functional. And unfortunately our idea of functional training is often slanted towards training advanced athletic populations. This is probably due to our own personal interests often being more athletically oriented, or the sad fact that many of the exercise science courses we study to gain our qualifications are oriented towards training athletic populations rather than understanding the barriers non-athletic populations face when they try to start and maintain an exercise programme.

If you don't see the problem here then please consider this question – just how many 'athletes' are at your gym as opposed to non-athletic people who simply want to lose a few pounds, improve their health and feel a bit better about themselves?

Would workout 1 still be 'functional' if the client felt awkward and stupid trying to do the exercises and was so sore for the following few days that they decided not to purchase any more personal training sessions and then cancelled their gym membership at the earliest opportunity?

Of course it would still be functional. It would serve the function of turning the client immediately off exercise, losing the personal trainer a client and providing a reason for any other nervous, clumsy or overweight gym members who witnessed the workout being delivered to avoid ever using a personal trainer.

This begs the question – is it up to us as personal trainers to choose exercises that our clients are capable of doing, enjoy doing, and are deemed 'functional' in this regard, or is it up to our clients to 'suck it up' and do the exercises we deem to be most functional for them, irrespective of whether they enjoy, and actually can do those exercises and will achieve their goals by doing them?



For example, do all our clients really need to learn how to activate and condition their core muscles and learn how to balance on stability balls because we consider this to be 'functional' if what they really want is to get stronger or leaner?

Alternatively (and here's a novel thought) should we as personal trainers simply select exercises our clients are capable of doing, and will repeat often enough to achieve results specific to them (even if these exercises have no stability element and rely heavily on machines)?

Your value as a personal trainer has nothing to do with your ability to train your clients according to what you dictate to be functional for them – it has everything to do with your ability to select exercises your clients are capable of performing and delivering personal training sessions your clients look forward to repeating time and time again. You see your clients will only achieve great results if they enjoy exercise enough to keep repeating it – so it's better to concentrate your efforts on designing and delivering addictive exercise experiences that are tailored to each and every one of your clients.

The fundamentals of great personal training session delivery are all explained in the [session delivery folder](#) here at [ptdirect.com](#) – invest your time here rather than with the latest exercise gimmicks and gadgets.

An alternative explanation

For 'functional training' and 'functional exercise' to have a practical and useful meaning for personal trainers they must have a client centric element and be oriented on meeting the needs and wants of every individual client. This means that 'functional' will change from client to client.

After all, the success (or failure) of your personal training business depends largely on how well you meet and exceed the needs and wants of every one of your personal training clients.

So training is only functional when it is oriented on achieving the goals of the client and is delivered in a way that the client will want to repeat. In the same vein exercises are only functional when they relate directly to the clients goals, the client is capable of doing them and will happily repeat them often enough for results to happen.

Based on these refined explanations then workout 1 for the client named previously is definitely not functional, whereas workout 2 is functional. The reality is that you simply cannot determine what is functional or not in regard to exercise or training without knowing what your individual client's goals are and what their likes, dislikes and capabilities are.

Rather than spend your precious time, energy and money purchasing lots of cleverly branded 'functional' training equipment or attending courses where you can be shown amazing ways of using that equipment (in case one day you have an influx of athletically oriented clients who need to learn how to do one legged squats on a bosu ball in preparation for joining the circus or attending the next tight-rope Olympics) you'd

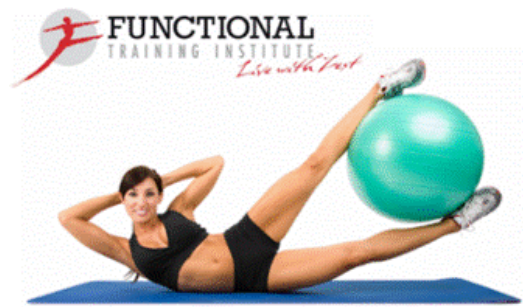
be better off learning how to gather masses of relevant information about your clients likes, dislikes and goals so you can deliver client centric 'truly' functional sessions for them.

This requires you to be great conducting consultations (screening) with your clients. The consultation is where you gather the information that will determine whether your personal training business succeeds or fails. Some of the key outcomes of a client consultation are identifying the results the client wants to achieve, their preferences for exercise, their previous exercise experiences and any fears they may have (such as looking like a plonker in front of others)

Now unless your clients are dramatically different to the vast majority of gym users, the results they want will typically involve; toning parts of the body, losing weight, gaining strength, developing muscles and improving aspects of ones health. So quite simply for an exercise and training to be functional it must achieve these results in the most time efficient, and enjoyable way for each and every individual client...

That is **functional training!**

And in the vein of truly functional training here is a list of [10 truly functional resistance exercises](#) you can use with your personal training clients, as well as [10 commonly used resistance exercises of 'questionable functionality'](#)!



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