

PERSONAL TRAINERS ARE JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY



BRYAN EATON/Staff photo

Alice Greene gives a client fitness advice over the phone at her business, Fit Beyond 40, in Newburyport.

TELE-FITNESS

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NEWBURYPORT — When it comes to exercising, motivation is one of the hardest obstacles to overcome.

That's where a little telephone coaching can go a long way, especially for those with tight schedules or who cringe at the thought of going to the gym.

Nationwide, about 125 certified personal trainers who belong to the Association of Fitness By Phone Coaches are helping others get fit and healthy over the telephone.

One of them is riding the growing trend here in Newburyport.

Last year, Alice Greene of Broad Street founded Fit Beyond 40, a company that specializes in exercise and fitness training over the telephone.

She is now helping 12 people achieve their exercise goals in Massachusetts and as far away as San Diego.

"The whole premise behind it is helping people find an exercise routine that they can do all by themselves," said Greene. "And have someone who cares about them, supports them and guides them and answers questions they have."

Greene provides consultation, answers fitness- and health-related questions, suggests new exercises and helps people track their progress on a weekly basis.

Her clients say the program works.

"It's been a good experience for me, because it's all about accountability," said Julie Hiltabiddle, 39, of Newburyport. "That motivates me to do whatever I committed to do."

Hiltabiddle, who runs her own business and wants to maintain a

healthy weight during her pregnancy, said she doesn't have time for the gym and she doesn't need a personal trainer because she already knows how to exercise properly. She has worked as an aerobics instructor.

"It allows very busy people someone to speak with one half hour every week," said Hiltabiddle. "It's easier to have a quick check-in weekly by phone to maintain whatever goal it is you're trying to set for yourself."

Telephone coaching may sound unusual, but the technique has been used for years.

A series of studies conducted by Stanford University and published in 2002 compared exercise counseling by telephone with traditional group exercise and found that people re-

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sponded better in the long-term to the telephone counseling. Though the study made no conclusion on why telephone coaching worked, it suggested that convenience may be a factor.

The study, published as "Telephone-Assisted Counseling for Physical Activity" and written by Cynthia M. Castro and Abby C. King, also suggested that phone coaching would likely gain in popularity.

Now technology is playing a part in spreading the word.

Greene learned about the telephone coaching technique through the Internet about two years ago. She was going through a job transition and a career counselor told her she would be a great fitness coach. Greene did an Internet search that led her to the Web site for the Association of Fitness By Phone Coaches.

She took the necessary training for a phone coach license and joined the association.

Each week, most of the telephone coaches in the association network together via a telephone conference. The teleconference sessions are directed by the association, which is headed by Susan Block in California.

While Greene tailors her coaching to her clients' needs, she and other phone coaches are grounded by similar training.

They're also certified as personal trainers.

Greene said she doesn't want to compete with personal trainers who work in the gym setting, but she said she wants to give people the option of guided exercise at home.

Another New England phone coach, Nancy Martin of Wayne, Maine, acknowledged that phone coaching is not for everyone. Martin has been coaching people by phone since 2002.

"It's for somebody who, I think, is really motivated by numbers and feedback and can be pretty precise," said Martin. "And they're prepared to put some effort into this. They're committed to adding something into their lifestyle."

A large part of the phone coaching program for Greene and Martin is keeping track of calories expended, heart rate statistics and duration of exercise.

Once people decide to work with Greene, she usually meets them in person to go over their goals, their health issues, past injuries and their exercise history. For long-distance clients, the initial consultation takes place over the telephone.

Then, she mails everyone a package of goodies, which includes a calorie tracking device, a food journal, an activity journal, sticky-notes for jotting down information, a Fit Beyond 40 key-chain and a refrigerator magnet.

For those focusing on cardiovascular exercise, she'll include a heart-rate monitor and for those concentrating on strength training, she includes tubing and bands.

Each week, clients fax Greene records of their activity and their food journals. A few hours later, they're on the telephone with her, talking about their successes, their goals and how they felt about their exercises. Trained in intuitive eating, Greene will also consult with people about their food habits.

Depending on the person, she'll mail out instructions on how to perform certain exercises and, if necessary, she'll go over the instructions on the telephone or in person.

Greene said some people tend to over-exert themselves when they begin a new exercise routine, so in the beginning, she spends a lot of time encouraging people to take it easy. One of the biggest deterrents to regular exercise is an early injury that could break a person's momentum.

She said she wants people to learn to enjoy exercise, so that it becomes a permanent part of their lives.

"The hardest thing for many of us is just getting motivated," said Greene, "so my role is to motivate and to guide and to be the person who really, really cares how they're doing each week."