



BY CHRIS FREYTAG

Own the Zone: Heart-rate Training in the Group Fitness Setting

Group fitness instructors are in the business of delivering results. Teach your classes how to use a heart-rate monitor (HRM) to train within the different heart-rate zones and you can help participants make good on their weight-loss and fitness goals. Heart-rate training (HRT) is a fun, yet scientific way to track progress, increase confidence, boost endurance and burn calories. And it's a more strategic way to manage your cardiovascular training. I'm a HRT believer because I've seen it work firsthand with members who attend my classes regularly.

It is human nature to be motivated by feedback and that's exactly what a heart-rate monitor provides—constant, encouraging feedback throughout the workout. The most advanced monitors also include daily, weekly and monthly tracking features.

The basic HRM is a simple device: a wireless strap around your chest that transmits your heart rate to a wristwatch, which tells you how hard your body is working when you do any physical activity. I always wear a monitor during exercise because knowing what zone I'm working in and relating it to how I train each week gives me the incentive I need to stay in the game day after day.

Consider a typical member who approaches you before class and says she has been attending classes five days a week for the last month, but the scale hasn't budged. HRT can help her make sure she is exercising at an appropriate intensity and maximizing her workout.

Where to Start

Introduce your class to HRT by explaining the different heart-rate

zones and how each zone makes a different impact on cardiovascular fitness. Outline the benefits of training in each zone and coach your participants to take advantage of all of them. Remember, each class is made up of a variety of individuals. Some want to lose weight, while others want to relieve stress or build their endurance. HRT makes sense for all of them and can provide proof that group fitness classes deliver genuine results.

Know the Zones

To get the most from HRT, tell your participants to start with their maximal heart rate, or HRmax, which is the highest possible number of beats per minute. It will vary by individual. Physicians and trained fitness professionals can administer a test to determine the most accurate HRmax. But most healthy, moderately active exercisers—those individuals with no adverse cardiovascular conditions—can estimate HRmax with a generalized math equation by subtracting their age from 220. For example, if you're 37, your HRmax is $220 - 37 = 183$.

Once participants know their HRmax, they can calculate how the five HRT zones apply to them. Although some fitness facilities use their own zone terminology, the five zones described below are widely used in our industry:

Zone 1: Warm-up zone (50–60% of HRmax). Even though this is an easy, comfortable zone, members don't like to spend too much time here because they aren't burning lots of calories. However, working out in this zone will help prepare your body for the workout to come. This zone gets the blood pumping, warms up the muscles and joints, and starts the oxygen flowing. This can also be used as the cool-down, or recovery, zone.

Zone 2: Moderate aerobic zone (60–70% of HRmax). In this zone, approximately two-thirds of the calories burned are from fat. It represents an intensity level that promotes good calorie burning and is well-tolerated by overweight and/or unfit participants. Exercising in zones 2 and 3 benefits the cardiovascular system, enhancing the body's ability to provide oxygen to working muscles.

Zone 3: Intense aerobic zone (70–80% of HRmax). This is the zone for endurance training. Your respiratory system, heart and blood vessels are growing stronger. You're taking in more oxygen. In this zone, you're burning about 50% carbohydrates and 50% fat, but you're burning more calories overall because you're working harder.

Zone 4: Anaerobic zone (80–90% of HRmax). This high-intensity zone burns more carbohydrates and less fat. Benefits of anaerobic training include improved oxygen consumption and higher lactic acid tolerance for enhanced endurance. In this zone, you reach your Anaerobic Threshold (AT), the point at which your muscles are producing lactic acid faster than your system can flush it out.

Zone 5: Red line zone (90–100% of HRmax). Training in this zone burns the most calories, but the lowest percentage of fat. Only the most physically fit exercisers should spend any time training in this zone. Exercisers who utilize this zone usually do so for brief periods, as part of an interval training regimen.

Using Zones to Enhance Your Classes

When you incorporate zone terminology into your class descriptions, members can select the fitness classes that will help them achieve their goals. A typical workout schedule might include a step class that focuses on zones 2 and 3, once or twice a week; a power flow yoga class in zones 1 and 2, once a week; and a once-a-week spinning class for anaerobic interval training visiting zones 3, 4 and 5.

Zones give your members another way to think about how they train. I often hear



members chatting about their zones as they leave my classes: "Wow, I was in zone 3 and 4 the whole time—I must have burned a lot of calories!" Or, "I feel really good about what I accomplished today!" When members are familiar with the principles of HRT and fluent in zone-speak, they can understand what they've achieved in concrete terms, which encourages them to stick with their plans.

Zones also give you another way to connect with the faces in the room. You can give them motivation to cross-train and work harder. Even if you don't know what an individual's goals are, you can help them to select the workouts they need to achieve the results they want.

I always explain the zones by describing "body cues" that tell members how they should feel in each zone:

- **Zone 1:** The daily activities of ordinary living
- **Zone 2:** Mall walking, brisk enough to be breathing through your mouth
- **Zone 3:** Jogging, sweating, working hard, but still breathing comfortably enough to chat
- **Zone 4:** Uncomfortable, starting to gasp for air, only able to utter a word or two
- **Zone 5:** Gasping, a burning feeling in chest and throat, unsustainable

One of the biggest myths in fitness is that only gasping, sweating uncomfortable exercise makes a difference. I make sure that members understand that all zones have their advantages, and that balance is the key. For most exercisers, spending too much time in zones 4 and 5 can lead to burnout, overtraining or injury. Spending too much time in the low-intensity zones, on the other hand, can lead to a discouraging lack of results.

High-performance athletes have been using HRT for years. But HRT is relevant to every exerciser, from the ultra-fit marathon runner who's training at the edge of her anaerobic threshold to the middle-aged walker who's trying to drop a few extra pounds. And HRT is especially important to exercisers who are at risk of becoming discouraged because they aren't seeing results on the scale. A zone-focused exercise regimen can help them see they're




making progress even when the scale isn't budging—or troubleshoot a fitness plan that isn't meeting their needs.

Living in the Zone

The best way to promote zone training is to set a good example. I never teach a class without wearing a HRM and I make sure I talk about the benefits of HRT throughout the class. After a full year of teaching this way, I can report that at least half my participants are wearing monitors.

Zone-based training is more than a sound strategy for fitness—it's also a highly effective marketing tool. So use zone terminology to market the benefits of your classes to your members. For example, you can advertise a step class as a fat-blasting workout. Or you can describe your cycle class as a way to enhance cardio fitness and improve fat-burning capacity.

In any health club, the group fitness studio is important, expensive real estate. We are always challenged to prove our worth because clubs are businesses and businesses need to make a profit. HRT can help our clubs achieve their business goals while helping our members achieve their fitness goals. 

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