

Equipment Addiction

Do You Or Your Clients Suffer From It?

How can you spot an equipment addict? Easy. That would be the person who uses the largest foam dumbbells in every class, whether it is deep, shallow, kickboxing or Aqua Zumba. Is this okay? Is it safe? Is there any benefit? No, no and no. It's time to expose the addict and reveal the dark side of this aquatic affliction.

Here's the fact. People really do get hurt in aquatic fitness classes by twisting, turning, rolling, thrusting and plunging equipment in a haphazard manner. When used properly, equipment increases fitness results and enhances the workout. When used improperly it can lead to injury.

Foam is lightweight on land and therefore some people think they can insert it into any aquatic workout. They don't realize that once the foam is pushed under the water and interacts with buoyancy it becomes a potent force. If a student using buoyant hand-held equipment tries to perform the SAME arm patterns that the instructor is teaching without equipment - injury is just a movement away.

Large buoyant hand bars were not designed to mimic the natural movement of the arms. Trying to replicate certain diagonal, spiral and circular arm patterns with the large foam dumbbells is awkward at best – dangerous at worst. Out of exasperation I often use the following analogy with my clients. “Would you go to a Zumba class in the studio and grab a pair of 15 pound dumbbells and do the Beto Shuffle with your arms?” (Now picture me doing a really bad imitation of shuffling my arms) And the answer - “No, you wouldn't.”

Another form of equipment abuse is *over-use*. The foam dumbbells were not intended for continuous use in any aquatic class. Instead, they were designed for resistance-training activities in the same manner that weighted dumbbells are used in the studio. You use them; you put them down. AEA Standards and Guidelines recommend that periods of training with

submerged equipment should be limited and that frequent breaks should be incorporated.

The point here is not to make an instructor feel bad if they have been over-using equipment. If you are reading this and thinking, “uh oh...I have been doing it wrong.” Rejoice! Now you can do it right. Just use the equipment in more of an interval manner – blending in segments or drills WITHOUT equipment.

As for the naysayers who are still thinking, “It’s just foam - what could happen?” Well, I am pretty sure that if you move those dumbbells in unnatural ways it could result in acute inflammation leading to post-exercise pain, or worse - chronic inflammation that can cause pain for months. How do I know this? I have heard many tales of woe in my 15 years of teaching aquatic fitness.

As for over-use, picture a class participant with their shoulders elevated, wrestling with a large pair of dumbbells and trying to keep them submerged. (Not hard to picture is it?) Now imagine them doing this for a whole class - week after week. That just can't have a happy ending. My Crystal Ball tells me that they will likely experience problems associated with nerve impingement in their future.

What to do? On the subject of over-use, we have already decided to limit periods of training with submerged equipment. But what about those equipment abusers who insist on using dumbbells in every class? The ones who stare at you defiantly - as if to say, “I’ll give you my dumbbells when you pry them from my cold, dead hands.”

Do we point at them and say, “Get out!” That is probably not a good idea and I am pretty sure I would be fired if I did that. I am not the owner or director and I can’t force anyone to put the dumbbells down. However, I am the instructor and it is my job to keep the clients safe. Consequently, I have learned how to politely and persistently educate the dumbbells out of their hands. Well, sort of politely.

When I moved to Florida, I started teaching at a facility where equipment was used in all classes – all the time. *Rule of thumb: Whatever the clients have always done is what they think is right and what they think they should always do.* Woe unto the heretic who tells them otherwise. And thus the weekly battles of “Mark the Heretic” versus the Dumbbell Rebels. Week after week, I started my classes with the same message.

Attention everyone. We will not be using equipment in this class. I see many of you have dumbbells in your hands. If you choose to use equipment promise me on a stack of Bibles that you will NOT do the same arm patterns I am instructing. Those arm patterns are not safe for equipment use. You could injure your shoulders or neck. Once again, if you are using equipment please design your OWN arm workout for this class. Thank you.

This message was repeated at the beginning of every class; it was also repeated during the class when I saw a student doing something heinous with the dumbbells. Good news! Each week more and more clients started coming clean. It took months, but I eventually achieved a 100% recovery rate with no relapses.

In conclusion, let me once again reiterate that proper equipment use can transform an aquatic class into a results-driven workout. The studios are jam-packed with these kinds of classes. We too can pack the pools with results-oriented workouts using equipment. After all, aquatic exercise is the future of fitness. But before we can look to the future, we need to close certain dark chapters from our past. Let's expose equipment abuse so that we can all collectively move our industry forward.

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