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Transcending Our Limits: Professionalism

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We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.

-- Buddha

I BELIEVE THAT, “We become what we think, what we talk about, and what we do. If we think our work is for the right reason, if we think that our actions will bring forth positive results, and if we start living as professionals, we will become our vision.” I find myself reading this quote several times a week. It helps me to keep my eyes opened to the possibilities exercise physiology has for each of us. There cannot be any question that our minds determine our actions, behavior and, most certainly, our future. No one is forcing me to think this way, but I believe that we are responsible for our actions. We are the sum of what we think. Our thoughts shape us. Our thoughts determine our destiny. Others agree as well, especially the American motivational speaker, Earl Nightingale, who said: “We become what we think about.”

The problem is that exercise physiologists at all levels are not thinking about professionalism in exercise physiology. They are not likely to become exercise physiology healthcare professionals, but they are likely to become personal trainers and fitness instructors. Another problem is that exercise medicine should be prescribed by board certified exercise physiologists who understand the principles of professionalism and

The price of change requires your total commitment, mind and body. But then something great happens: True professionalism is lived, and now you are what you believed you were.

exercise medicine. Board certified exercise physiologists understand the importance of thinking and living as exercise physiology healthcare professionals. Yet, in spite of this growth within ASEP to think as a professional, the majority of the “would-be” exercise physiologists are not ASEP members. As the billionaire entrepreneur Richard M. DeVos said, “The only thing that stands between a man and what he wants from life is often merely the will to try it and the faith to believe that it is possible.” Take a moment and ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the profile of the ‘typical’ exercise physiologist?
- What do exercise physiologists do?
- What type of educational preparation is required to become an exercise physiologist?
- What are the career opportunities and roles that should be developed in society that uses exercise physiologists’ skills in different ways?
- What keeps exercise physiologists at all levels of education interested in the ASEP organization and becoming certified?

Attitude towards change makes all the difference. But, unfortunately, the attitude of most academic exercise physiologists (that was learned while working on their doctorate degree) isn’t in regards to professionalism but rather research. Their college professors talked constantly about research and publishing. The doctorate prepared exercise physiologist thinks of him- or herself primarily as a researcher. Teaching is simply something college “teachers” do because it is part of the academic position. They understand that presenting their research at regional and national meetings is a big part of the academic process that involves promotion and tenure. The immediate problem is that the professors’ pursuit of research does not help the students much at all. While research is important, it is the responsibility of the college professors to make sure that the undergraduate degree is credible. Students should graduate with a favorable opportunity of accessing financially stable career options.

Why not fix your eyes on ASEP. Take the plunge and run the race that will set you free.

After all, college students borrow large sums of money to attend college. It is not surprising they and their parents expect a credible job opportunity after graduation. When it happens, everything is great. When it doesn’t happen, which is 90% of the time, college graduates with the largest debt burden suffer in many ways, particularly a decrease in feelings of well-being. Strangely enough, college teachers seldom take the time to think about the fact that a degree program without credible career opportunities often results in a long-term legacy of diminished health and self-esteem. That is why

many exercise science college graduates find themselves saying, “Why did I go to college? It was a waste of time and money.” Instead of providing some assurance of things hoped for, many students graduate with the feeling of being used and manipulated.

College teachers owe their best to students. But, instead of working on behalf of the students, they allow themselves and their students to wallow in mediocrity. It is not hard to see that the professors try to escape their obvious faults by saying to their students, “When you graduate, you can complete an application for physical therapy?” This kind of thinking by the professors is not striving for excellence. It is their response to what they have grown accustomed to. It is as if the size of their thinking is linked to the inertia of their doctorate experience and/or the laziness of their exhausted research efforts. Either way, transcending the exercise science limits is extremely hard when adults come across as emotionally crippled.

To add fuel to the students’ frustrations, the professors’ failure to grow beyond their feelings of not wanting to upset status quo is directly a function of doing nothing and, therefore, not acting in regards to proven principles of success. It is as though they are afraid to take a chance.

You can almost hear them saying to themselves, “What if my boss finds out that I think joining ASEP is a good idea? How would it influence my work towards tenure?” Or, “what would my friends from a much more popular organization say if I joined ASEP and supported Board Certification?” Well, no one said that taking charge of your life and taking a chance are not without challenges. Action often leads to reaction. Whether it is favorable or unfavorable isn’t really the point, but persistence is critical. It is up to exercise physiologists to stop stalling and get with the change process.

Believe what you hope for will happen by joining ASEP and growing beyond what you are today.

Theodore Roosevelt said it best, “It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.”

If the academic exercise physiologists would change their thinking, they could change their future and that of their students. If that happened, the well-being of their students would be significantly improved. All it takes is one person and the desire to think as a “professional” exercise physiologist. This means thinking about professionalism and the importance of the ASEP profession-specific organization versus a generic organization.

This suggestion is no different from the present-day physical therapists who decided to become credible healthcare professionals on their terms. Exercise physiologists can do the same. All that is necessary is to follow the lead of the ASEP perspective regarding “who we are” and “what we do.” It is all about our beliefs and our thoughts. Both contribute to our decisions and behaviors and to our actions and our personality and character. The simple truth is that we can transcend our limits by what we think about all day long.

Imagine the response of a large number of academic exercise physiologists who believed in the importance of professionalism in exercise physiology. Just imagine the influence of such thinking. Actually, that is exactly the significance of ASEP and the work of the leadership to promote the professionalization of exercise physiology. The truth is that everything they have been doing since 1997 has been consistent with the needed mental shift in “what is exercise physiology” and “who is an exercise physiologist.” The ASEP leadership understood what business exercise physiologists are in from the very beginning. That is why they developed the first-ever exercise physiology code of ethics, academic accreditation, board certification, and professional practice documents. The concept of purpose and credibility was recognized and articulated specifically on behalf of exercise physiologists.

Why not become an exercise physiology healthcare entrepreneur and take the business of exercise medicine healthcare into your own hands?

This incredible focus on purpose and credibility applies specifically to exercise physiologists as healthcare professionals. This thinking is consistent with the array of purposes that underpin other healthcare professions. Thus, in short, it doesn't take a second breath to understand that what the present-day exercise physiology faculty is saying in regards to exercise science is meaningless when it comes to locating a credible career in the public sector upon graduation. The “red flags” are everywhere and have been for five to six decades. The “ah-hah!” revelation is

simply this: “Hello, wake up students and parents all across the United States.

Nothing can take the place of a credible academic degree and dedicated teachers. So, why not avoid spending thousands of dollars on degree programs that are meaningless when it comes to locating credible jobs after college? In fact, think about this for a moment: Do you think students by the thousands would apply to physical therapy if there were just a few good jobs in the public sector? The obvious answer is “No.” The purpose of earning a college degree is to increase the students' chances of success. That is the bottom line.

Just for the purposes of this article, if you are a college student or a parent with a son or daughter who is about to start college, take a minute to think about what Yogi Berra

said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’re probably going to wind up someplace else.” So, ask yourself these questions: “What do you want it to be? What do you really want to do with the short amount of time in college?” Do you want to be a personal trainer or an exercise physiologist? Why not think outside the box and combine what has been done with what can still be done?” Take your time to think about the questions and let your thinking plant a seed in your mind. What do you want in life after college? What do you want to become as a function of your college degree? Answers to these questions should help you work steadily towards becoming what you think about daily, given that we become what we think about.

*The people you’re with
do make a difference.*

-- Robert A. Schuller

Remember it is not changing that is difficult; it is the force of inertia or status quo exercise physiologists must overcome. When first considered not just on an intellectual level but on an emotional level as well, it reminds me of what Andy van de Ven said, “People resist change when it is not understood, is imposed, is perceived as threatening, has risks greater than its potential benefits or interferes with other priorities.” Given that the ASEP leaders find it difficult to believe that academic exercise physiologists don’t understand the reasons for changing from exercise science to exercise physiology (especially since ASEP cannot and would not impose or threaten change), they are confused when their colleagues say, “If it ain’t broke, why fix it.” Yet, clearly, the system is broken and there is a major problem.

In closing, exercise physiologists are not where they should be. Nothing in the academic world can take the place of a sound academic degree. Research will not; nothing will change the degree from meaningless to meaningful if the professors are not involved in all aspects of the program and department. The PhD itself will not correct the program; the college faculty is full of misdirected doctorates. The willingness to engage in straight thinking and the desire and persistence to live the changes are what make the difference! Change in how exercise physiologists think is imperative. Where we are now is not where we should be. So, from one of the 1997 co-founders of the ASEP perspective, I wish you, your colleagues, and your students a grand welcome to the 21st exercise physiology “professionalism race to a much better future.” We within the ASEP organization look forward to your participation in the full-spectrum of ASEP and the crucial difference it is making in the credibility of exercise physiologists as healthcare professionals. We will transcend the old dogma for a new way to think.