

# WORLDWIDE SURVEY OF FITNESS TRENDS FOR 2020

by Walter R. Thompson, Ph.D., FACSM

## Apply It!

From this article, the reader should understand the following concepts:

- Articulate the differences between a fad and a trend
- Use the worldwide trends in commercial, corporate, clinical (including medical fitness), and community health fitness industry to further promote physical activity
- Study expert opinions about identified fitness trends for 2020

**Key words:** Commercial, Clinical, Corporate, Community, Expert Opinions, Future Programs

ACSM's annual survey of worldwide fitness trends is now in its 14th year. New to this year's survey was the inclusion of potential new trends such as mind-body movement (*e.g.*, tai chi) and lifestyle medicine. Other trends were more specifically defined in the 2020 survey. For example, virtual/online training was redefined as online training, water workouts were redefined as aquatic exercise, circuit weight training was redefined as circuit training, mobile phone exercise apps was redefined as mobile exercise apps, and barbell training was redefined as training with free weights. As in the past, the results of this annual survey will help the health and fitness industry make some very important business decisions for future growth and development. These investments can now be based on emerging trends that have been identified by health fitness professionals and not on the latest exercise innovation marketed during late night infomercials on television or the next hottest celebrity endorsing a product.

For the last 14 years, the editors of *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal*<sup>®</sup> (FITJ) have circulated an electronic survey to thousands of professionals around the world to determine health and fitness trends for the following year. This survey guides health and fitness programming efforts for 2020 and beyond. The first survey (1), conducted in 2006 (for predictions in 2007), introduced a systematic way to forecast health and fitness trends, and these surveys have been conducted annually since that time (2–13) using the same methodology. As this is a survey of trends, respondents were asked to first make the very important distinction between a “fad” and a “trend.”

These annual ACSM surveys of trends in the commercial (usually for-profit companies), clinical (including medical fitness programs), community (not-for-profit), and corporate divisions of the industry continue to confirm previously identified trends but also recognize some new emerging trends. The fitness trends survey does not attempt to evaluate products, services, equipment, gym apparatus, hardware, software, tools, or other exercise machines that may appear in clubs or recreation centers or show up during late night television infomercials. The survey was designed to confirm or to introduce new trends (not fads) that have a perceived positive effect on the industry according to the international respondents. Some of the trends identified in earlier surveys could predictably appear for several years when the industry compares the historical results. Likewise, fads may appear but will not unexpectedly drop off the list in subsequent years (some as short as 1 year). The potential market effect of new equipment, an exercise device, or program is not evaluated by this annual survey. The information provided in this survey is left entirely up to the readers to determine if it fits their own business model, and how to best use the information for potential market expansion.



**Trend:** “a general development or change in a situation or in the way that people are behaving” (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/>).

**Fad:** “a fashion that is taken up with great enthusiasm for a brief period” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/>)

Community-based programs (typically not-for-profit organizations) can use these results to justify investments in their markets by providing expanded programs typically serving families and children. Corporate wellness programs and medical fitness centers will find these results useful through potential increases in service to their members and to their patients. Commercial health clubs (those that are for-profit and the largest sector of the industry) can use these results for the establishment (or maybe the justification) of potential new markets, which may result in increased and more sustainable revenue drivers. The health and fitness industry should carefully consider and thoughtfully apply this information to its own unique setting.

## THE SURVEY

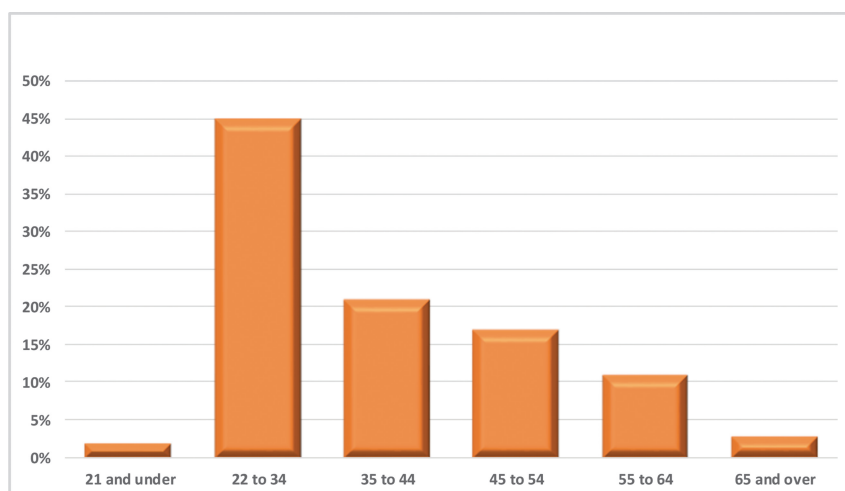
Every attempt was made to replicate the survey delivery as in the past 14 years. For the 2020 survey, there were 38 possible trends. The top 25 trends from previous years were included in the survey, as were some potentially emerging trends identified by the editors of *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal*<sup>®</sup>. The editors represent all four sectors of the health fitness industry (corporate, clinical, community, and commercial) as well as from academia. In the survey, potential trends were identified followed by a short explanation to offer the respondent a few details without inconveniencing them with too much reading, analysis, or interpretation. The survey was designed to be completed in 15 minutes or less. As an incentive to complete the survey, the

editors made available eight fitness-related books published by *Wolters Kluwer/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins* and *Human Kinetics* and a \$100 MasterCard gift card. Turn to page 51 to see more on our winners. These incentives were designed to help increase participation in the survey.

The survey was constructed using a Likert-type scale ranging from a low score of 1 (least likely to be a trend) to a high score of 10 (most likely to be a trend). After each scoring opportunity, space was allowed for additional comments. At the survey conclusion, more space was left for the respondent to include comments or potential fitness trends left off the list to be considered for future surveys as well as some demographic information. The next step was to send the survey electronically to a defined list of health and fitness professionals. Using SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)), the online survey was initially sent to 56,746 people, including current ACSM-certified professionals, attendees of the 2019 ACSM's International Health & Fitness Summit, certification e-mail opt-in list, ACSM Alliance members, ACSM professional members who add a FIT subscription, nonmember FIT subscribers, FIT associate editors, and FIT Editorial Board members. A link also was shared on the FIT web site and on various social media sites, including the FIT Twitter page, the ACSM Journals' Facebook page, and ACSM's Instagram page. This year, the online/social link solicited 300 responses, 100 more than in 2018 (for the 2019 survey). Also new this year was a Trends survey flier displayed at the registration counter at ACSM's Annual Meeting in Orlando along with a slide in the presentation rooms with a link to the survey. Out of the 56,746 invitations, 550 bounced as undeliverable and 351 opted out. The survey response total was 3,037, or a very good return rate of 6%.

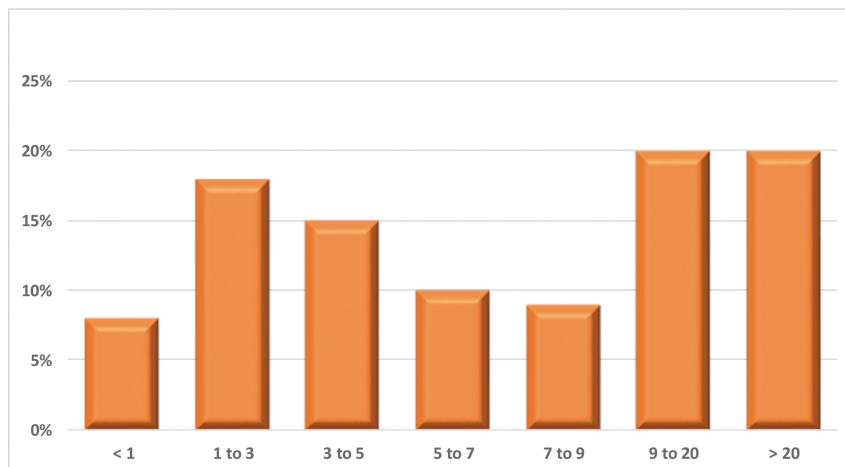
Responses were received from just about every continent, including the countries of Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Japan, India, Italy, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, United Kingdom, and the United States. Demographics

**Figure 1.** Age (in years) of survey respondents.



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**Figure 2.** Years of experience reported by the survey respondents.



of the survey respondents included 59% females across a wide variability in ages (Figure 1), 40% having more than 10 years of experience in the industry (Figure 2), and 20% with more than 20 years of experience. Almost 25% of the survey respondents earned an annual salary of more than \$50,000, which included 5% who earned more than \$100,000 a year (Figure 3). Respondents were asked to identify their occupations (Table 1), with 18% indicating that they were full-time or part-time personal trainers. When asked if they worked full-time or part-time, 61% indicated full-time and 30% part-time (less than 20 hours per week). Figure 4 indicates where respondents work. Survey respondents were asked about their career choices, with 34% indicating they were in their first job and 35% indicating they were in their second career. Figure 5 indicates the broad range of certifications held by the survey respondents.

### SURVEY RESULTS

The top 20 fitness trends for 2020 are described in this report. For a comparison of the top 10 trends from the past 14 years' surveys (1–13), please see the comprehensive comparison table available online (see Supplemental Digital Content, <http://links.lww.com/FIT/A133>). The 2020 survey results (Table 2), as in all previous years, reveal potential trends and not fads as defined in the survey instrument. It is not unusual for potential trends to drop out of the top 20 and later to be labeled as fads. New to the top 20 trends identified for 2020 are no. 4 training with free weights (new to the survey), no. 16 lifestyle medicine (new to the survey), no. 17 circuit training (no. 21 in 2019), and children and exercise (no. 28 in 2019). Out of the top 20 trends for 2020 are mobile exercise apps (no. 13 in 2019), mobility/myofascial devices (no. 14 in 2019), small group personal training (no. 19 in 2019), and postrehabilitation classes (no. 20 in 2019).

1. **Wearable technology.** Wearable technology was again the no. 1 trend as it has been since 2016 (the only

exception was a drop to no. 3 in 2018) and includes fitness trackers, smart watches, HR monitors, and GPS tracking devices. Examples include fitness and activity trackers like those manufactured by Fitbit®, Samsung Gear Fit2®, Misfit®, Garmin®, and Apple®. These devices can track HR, calories, sitting time, and much more. While there was some question of accuracy, these issues have seemed to be resolved well

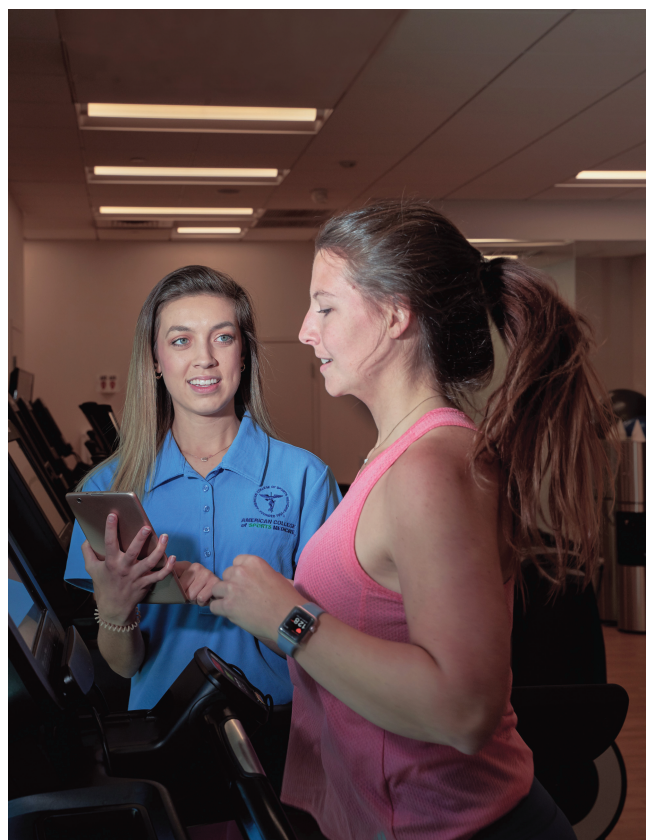
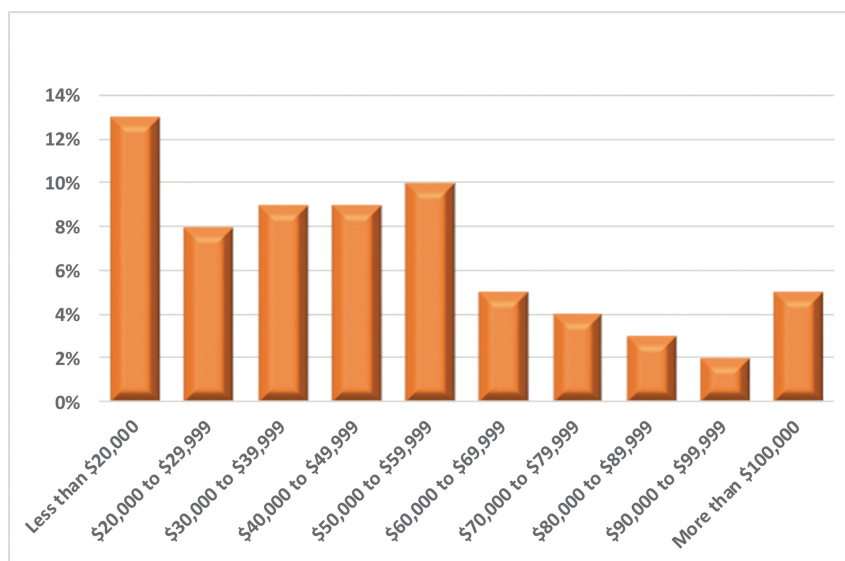


Photo courtesy of Trevor Bennion, DHS, [www.portraitscientist.com](http://www.portraitscientist.com).

**Figure 3.** Annual salary of survey respondents.



enough. Wearable technology has been estimated to be about a \$95 billion industry.

- High-intensity interval training (HIIT).** These exercise programs typically involve short bursts of high-intensity bouts of exercise followed by a short period of rest. While a part of the survey as a possible trend in previous years but not making the top 20, HIIT was no. 1 in the survey for 2014 and 2018 (dropped to no. 3 in 2016 and 2017) and has been in the top 5 between 2014 and 2020. Although there are several commercial club examples of HIIT, all emphasize higher intensities (above 90%) of maximum during the increased intensity segments followed by periods of rest and recovery. Despite warnings by some fitness professionals of potentially increased injury rates using HIIT, this form of exercise has been popular in gyms all over the world.
- Group training.** Defined as more than five participants, group exercise instructors teach, lead, and motivate individuals through intentionally designed larger in-person group movement classes. Group classes are designed to be effective, motivational sessions for different fitness levels with instructors teaching many types of classes and equipment, from cardio-based classes and indoor cycling to dance-based classes to step classes. Group exercise training programs have been around for a long time and have appeared as a potential worldwide trend since this survey was originally constructed. However, it was only in 2017 that group exercise training made the top 20, appearing at no. 6 followed by no. 2 in the 2018 and 2019 surveys, respectively. For 2020, group training fell slightly to no. 3.



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**TABLE 1: Survey Respondents' Occupation**

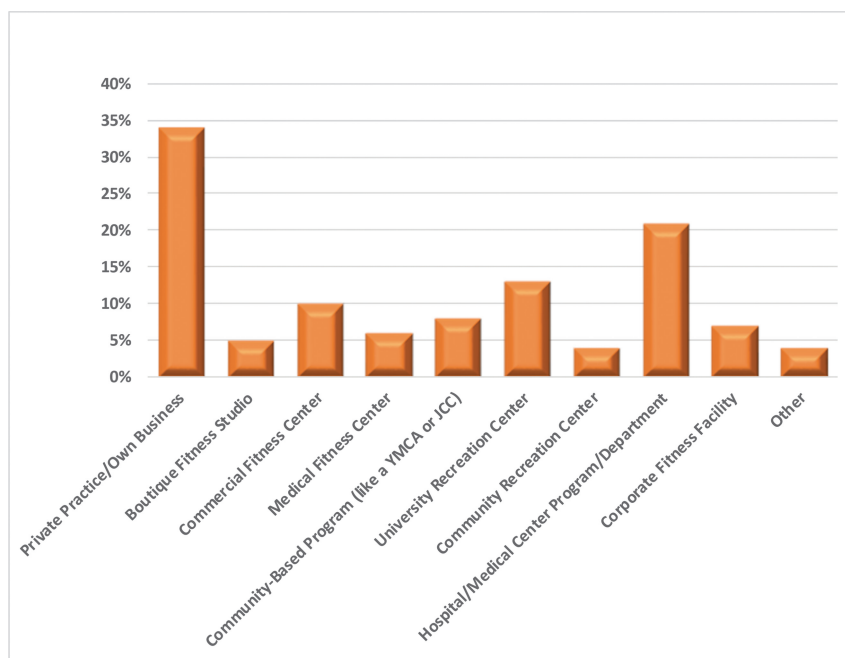
Respondent Occupation	Total Respondents
Personal trainer (part-time)	10%
Personal trainer (full-time)	8%
Group exercise leader	4%
Health fitness specialist (or equivalent)	4%
Clinical exercise specialist (or equivalent)	2%
Clinical exercise physiologist	5%
Program manager	4%
Health/fitness director	4%
Owner/operator	4%
Health/wellness coach	5%
Undergraduate student	4%
Graduate student	7%
Teacher	3%
Professor	7%
Medical professional (MD/DO, RN, physical or occupational therapist)	9%
Registered dietician (RD, RDN, LD)	1%
Other	20%

- 4. Training with free weights.** Previous surveys included a category described as “strength training.” Determined to be too broad a category, strength training was dropped in favor of the more specific free weight training. Free weights, barbells, kettlebells, dumbbells, and medicine ball classes do not just incorporate barbells into another functional class or activity. Instructors start by teaching proper form for each exercise and then progressively increase the resistance once the correct form is accomplished. New exercises are added periodically, and those begin at the form or movement level. Training with free weights debuts at no. 4 in 2020.
- 5. Personal training.** One-on-one training continues to be a trend as the profession of personal training becomes more accessible online, in health clubs, in the home, and in worksites that have fitness facilities. Personal training includes fitness testing and goal setting with the trainer working one on one with a client to prescribe workouts specific to clients’ individual needs and goals. Since this survey was first published in 2006 (1), personal training has been a top 10 trend. Personal training was no. 9 in 2017 and was no. 8 in 2018 and 2019.

- 6. Exercise is Medicine®.** Exercise is Medicine® (EIM) is a global health initiative that focuses on encouraging primary care physicians and other health-care providers to include physical activity assessment and associated treatment recommendations as part of every patient visit, and referring their patients to exercise professionals. In addition, EIM recognizes fitness professionals as part of the health-care team in their local communities. EIM was the no. 7 trend in 2017, no. 12 in 2018, no. 10 in 2019, and jumping to no. 6 in 2020.
- 7. Body weight training.** Using a combination of variable resistance body weight training and neuromotor movements employing multiple planes of movement, this program is all about using body weight as the training modality. Body weight training uses minimal equipment, which makes it an inexpensive way to exercise effectively. Body weight training appeared for the first time in the trends survey in 2013 (at no. 3) and was in the no. 2 position in 2017, no. 4 in 2018, and no. 5 in 2019. Body weight training did not appear as a survey trend option before 2013 because it only became popular (as a defined trend) in gyms around the world over the last few years.
- 8. Fitness programs for older adults.** This trend continues to stress the fitness needs of the Baby Boom and older generations. These individuals in general have more discretionary money than their younger counterparts do, and fitness clubs may be able to capitalize on this growing market. People are living longer, working longer, and remaining healthy and active much longer. This trend is making a strong return after being in the top 10 since 2007 (when it was the no. 2 trend) and dropping to no. 11 in 2017. It was the no. 9 trend in 2018 and no. 4 in 2019.
- 9. Health/wellness coaching.** This is a growing trend to integrate behavioral science into health promotion and lifestyle medicine programs. Health/Wellness coaching uses a one-on-one (and at times small group) approach with the coach providing support, goal



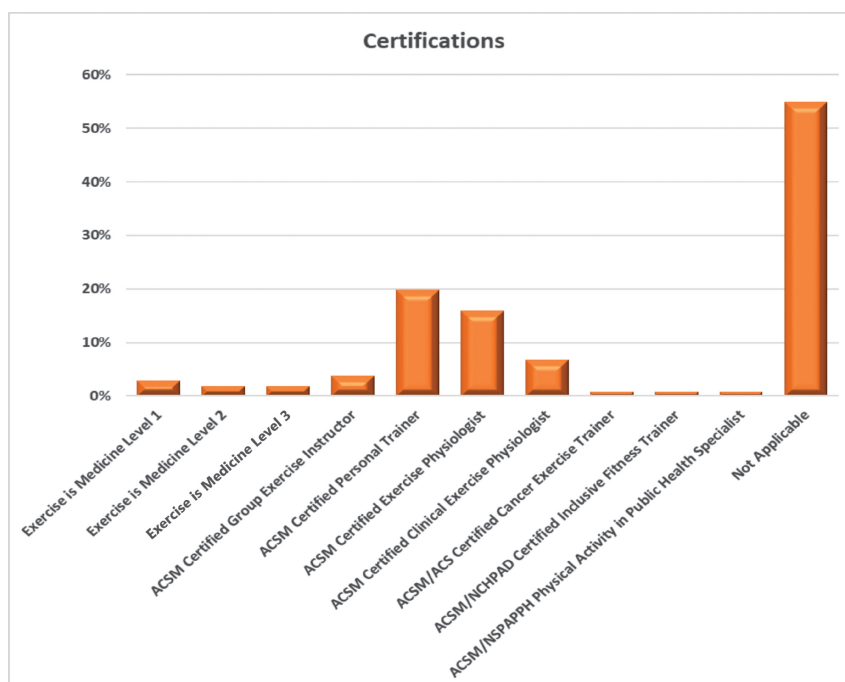
**Figure 4.** Where do you work?



setting, guidance, and encouragement. The health/wellness coach focuses on the client’s values, needs, vision, and short- and long-term goals using behavior change intervention strategies. Previous surveys included wellness coaching, but for the 2019 survey, the

term “health” was added, which better describes the trend. Wellness coaching has been in the top 20 trends since 2010 and was listed as no. 17 in 2014, no. 13 in 2015, no. 13 in 2016, no. 15 in 2017, no. 18 in 2018, and no. 11 in 2019.

**Figure 5.** Which certifications do survey respondents hold?



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**TABLE 2: Top 20 Worldwide Fitness Trends for 2020**

Rank	Trend
1	Wearable technology
2	High intensity interval training (HIIT)
3	Group training
4	Training with free weights
5	Personal training
6	Exercise is Medicine (EIM)
7	Body weight training
8	Fitness programs for older adults
9	Health/wellness coaching
10	Employing certified fitness professionals
11	Exercise for weight loss
12	Functional fitness training
13	Outdoor activities
14	Yoga
15	Licensure for fitness professionals
16	Lifestyle medicine
17	Circuit training
18	Worksite health promotion and workplace well-being programs
19	Outcome measurements
20	Children and exercise

10. **Employing certified fitness professionals.** Debuting last year as the no. 6 trend, the importance of hiring certified health fitness professionals through educational programs and certification programs that are fully accredited for health fitness professionals is fast becoming a trend. More certification programs have become accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, allowing employers easy access to certification validation through the U.S. Registry of Exercise Professionals. Employing certified fitness professionals was a new survey item for 2019, replacing “Educated, certified, and experienced fitness professionals,” which was determined to be too broadly defined as a survey item.
11. **Exercise for weight loss.** Most diet programs incorporate some kind of exercise program into the daily routine of caloric restriction adding the caloric expenditure of physical activity. Exercise for weight loss programs has been a top 20 trend since the survey began. In 2009, exercise for weight loss ranked no. 18, moving

to no. 12 in 2010, no. 7 in 2011, no. 4 in 2012, and no. 5 in 2013. In 2014, this trend was ranked no. 6 and remained at no. 6 in 2015. Exercise for weight loss was no. 9 in the 2016 survey and no. 10 in the 2017 survey. It was the no. 11 trend in 2018 and no. 12 in 2019.

12. **Functional fitness training.** This is a trend toward using strength training to improve balance, coordination, muscular strength, and endurance to improve activities of daily living typically for older adults but also in clinical populations. Replicating actual physical activities someone might do as a function of their daily routine, functional fitness first appeared on the survey in the no. 4 position in 2007 but fell to no. 8 in 2008 and no. 11 in 2009. It reappeared in the top 10 in 2010 at no. 7 and in 2011 at no. 9. Functional fitness was no. 10 in 2012, no. 8 in 2013 and 2014, no. 9 in 2015, no. 7 in 2016, no. 12 in 2017, no. 10 in 2018, and no. 9 in 2019.
13. **Outdoor activities.** More outdoor activities such as group walks, group rides, or organized hiking groups are becoming popular. They can be short events, day-long events, or planned weeklong hiking excursions. Participants often meet in a local park, hiking area, or on a bike trail typically with a leader. This trend for health and fitness professionals to offer outdoor activities for their clients began in 2010. In that year, the trend outdoor activities was no. 25 in the annual survey, and in 2011, it ranked no. 27. This trend was no. 14 in 2012, no. 13 in 2013, no. 14 in 2014, no. 12 in 2015, no. 14 in 2016, no. 13 in 2017, no. 14 in 2018, and no. 17 in 2019.
14. **Yoga.** Yoga has taken on a variety of forms in the past (including Power Yoga, Yogilates, yoga in hot environments, and many others). On-demand videos and books are plentiful, as are certifications in the many yoga formats. Yoga first appeared in the top 10 in this survey in 2008, fell out of the top 20 in 2009, but made a great comeback in the 2010 (no. 14) and 2011 surveys (no. 11). In 2012, yoga was no. 11 on the list, falling to no. 14 in 2013 and up to no. 7 in 2015. In 2017, it ranked no. 8 after occupying the no. 7 spot in 2015 and no. 10 in 2016. Yoga was ranked no. 7 in 2018 and 2019.
15. **Licensure for fitness professionals.** There are some professions in the United States and around the world that are regulated by local, state, or national licensure. For example, people cannot call themselves a medical doctor or nurse or, in most states, a physical therapist or dietitian, without holding a license. This is a trend in the fitness industry to pursue regulation of fitness professionals such as personal trainers and exercise physiologists. Licensure for fitness professionals first appeared as a fitness trend in 2018 when it was ranked no. 16 and then no. 18 in 2019.

16. **Lifestyle medicine.** Lifestyle medicine is the evidence-based practice of helping individuals and families adopt and sustain healthy behaviors that affect health and quality of life. Examples of target patient behaviors include, but are not limited to, eliminating tobacco use, improving diet, increasing physical activity, and moderating alcohol consumption. Lifestyle medicine promotes healthy behaviors as the foundation to medical care, disease prevention, and health promotion. Lifestyle medicine debuts for the first time in the fitness trends survey at no. 16.
17. **Circuit training.** Circuit training appeared for the first time in the top 20 trends at no. 18 in 2013, and it occupied the no. 14 position in 2015, up from no. 15 in 2014. It was trend no. 18 in 2016 and no. 19 in 2017, improving to no. 17 in 2018 but dropping again to no. 21 in 2019. Some respondents pointed out that circuit training is similar to HIIT, but at a much lower or even moderate intensity (some have called this moderate intensity interval training). Circuit training is typically a group of about 10 exercises that are completed in succession and in a predetermined sequence. Each exercise is performed for a specified number of repetitions or for a set time period before having a quick rest and moving on to the next exercise. Circuit weight training has dated back to 1953, but it is impossible to determine exactly when and under what circumstances it was first developed.
18. **Worksite health promotion and workplace well-being programs.** This is a trend toward a range of programs and services provided by employers to improve the health and wellness of workers integrated with systems to support the evaluation of and reporting on the effect on health, costs, and productivity. Programs are generally on site or with a local gym. Previous surveys restricted this trend to worksite health promotion. For the 2019 survey, workplace well-being programs were added to the description. Worksite health promotion was the no. 16 trend in 2017 before dropping out of the top 20 in 2018 but improving to no. 15 in 2019.
19. **Outcome measurements.** There are efforts to define, track, and report outcomes leading to accountability of both the health club member and the trainer. Measurements are necessary to determine the benefits of health and fitness programs in disease management and to document success in changing negative lifestyle habits. The proliferation of technology aids in data collection to support these efforts. The trend outcome measurements was no. 21 in 2018 and no. 16 in 2019.
20. **Children and exercise.** Children and exercise for the treatment/prevention of obesity dropped out of the top 20 in 2016 and 2017 and was no. 32 in 2018 and no. 28 in 2019. Demonstrating the biggest decrease in the survey, dropping from the top 5 in every survey between 2007 and 2013, and appearing at no. 11 in

2014 and no. 17 in 2015, was exercise programs specifically aimed at children and weight loss. Childhood and adolescent obesity continues to be a major health issue in most developed and developing nations and is important because of its association with other medical issues such as diabetes and hypertension. Health clubs around the world may find this to be a new potential source of revenue.

## WHAT'S OUT FOR 2020?

Postpublication commentary on these results is always interesting with one group or another arguing that their interest is a popular trend. Readers of this survey must understand that regional popularity does not always translate as an international trend. Dropping out of the top 20 from 2019 were mobile exercise apps, mobility/myofascial devices, small group personal training, and postrehabilitation classes. Mobile exercise apps ranked no. 26 in 2018, rose to no. 13 in 2019, and ranked no. 25 in 2020. These apps are available for mobile devices such as the iPhone®, iPad®, and Android devices and include both audio and visual prompts to begin and end exercise and cues to move on. Some of these apps can track progress over time as well as hundreds of other functionalities. Mobility/myofascial devices include the deep tissue roller, myofascial release, and trigger point relief and are designed to massage, relieve muscle tightness and muscle spasms, increase circulation, ease muscular discomfort, and assist in the return to normal activity. Rollers have been designed for low back, hips, and larger muscle groups, such as the hamstrings and the gluteal muscles. Some rollers are made of foam, whereas others are hard rubber, to achieve the desired effect. Flexibility rollers were the no. 16 trend in 2016, no. 20 in 2017, no. 15 in 2018, no. 14 in 2019, and no. 23 in 2020. The small group personal training trend expands the personal trainer's role from strictly one-on-one training to small group training. The personal trainer works with two or more people (but in a small group of less than 5) and offers discounts for the group. In 2007, group personal training was no. 19 on the list, but in 2008, it rose to no. 15 then dropped again in 2009 to no. 19 and improved to no. 10 in 2010. In 2011, group personal training was no. 14 on the survey, no. 8 in 2012, no. 10 in 2013, no. 9 in 2014, no. 10 in 2015, no. 11 in 2016, no. 14 in 2017, no. 13 in 2018, no. 19 in 2019, and no. 29 in 2020. Postrehabilitation classes are exercise programs specifically designed for patients with chronic health conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, Parkinson's disease, and stroke recovery, which are generally outside of a medical referral; it could also include posttraumatic disorders seen in soldiers coming back from military combat. It was ranked no. 27 in 2018, no. 20 in 2019, and no. 21 in 2020.

## SUMMARY

Wearable technology took over the no. 1 spot in 2019 and 2020 after dropping to no. 3 in 2018. HIIT, the no. 1 trend in 2014 and 2018 fell to no. 3 in 2019 and has now regained the no. 2



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spot. Group training made a significant return in 2017 as the no. 6 trend and has been the no. 2 trend for the past 2 years (2018 and 2019) and is now no. 3 in 2020. Training with free weights (which replaced barbell training for 2020) is the no. 4 trend. Personal training is still in the top 10. Fitness programming aimed at older adults has regained some popularity after falling out of the top 10 trends in 2017, appeared as no. 9 in 2018, no. 4 in 2019, and no. 8 in 2020. Body weight training first appeared as fitness trend at no. 3 in 2013 and has been a top 5 fitness trend since that time, realizing a peak as the no. 1 fitness trend in 2015. In 2019, body weight training was the no. 5 trend, and in 2020, it is the no. 7 trend. Other trends to watch are health/wellness coaching, EIM, lifestyle medicine, and exercise programs specifically designed for children.

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### BRIDGING THE GAP

The 2020 worldwide survey of fitness trends is now in its 14th consecutive year. It was designed to help and support the health fitness industry make critical programming and business decisions now to capture additional business into the future. These results are relevant to all four sectors of the health and fitness industry (commercial for-profit clubs, clinical or medical fitness programs, corporate wellness programs, and community-based not-for-profit fitness programs). Although no one can accurately predict the future of any industry, this survey helps to track trends that can assist owners, operators, program directors, and health fitness professionals with making their important business and program decisions.