



Working with nutritional levels

A nutritional level is like a stage of development.

We divide clients into three nutritional levels, based on:

- **Goals:** What clients want to do
- **Knowledge:** What clients know
- **Competence and skill:** What clients can do
- **Consistency:** What clients can do, *repeatedly and well*.

This last category is very important.

Many clients will have the first three categories nailed down, but don't follow through consistently enough to get the results they want.

Most often, **consistency** is the factor that tells you which level your clients are at.

What you need to know about nutritional levels

You must know what level your clients are at, and structure their programs accordingly.

Different nutritional goals, and different starting points, require different tasks, effort, skill, diligence, and consistency.

NUTRITIONAL LEVEL IS PROGRESSIVE.

Each level builds on the previous one, step by step.

As clients master basic skills and learn to do them consistently, they build a base.

NUTRITIONAL LEVEL IS ABOUT THE QUALITY OF THE PROCESS.

Trying to get great results without having fundamental skills and a consistent, repeatable process is like trying to win a marathon by having someone drive you to the finish line. It looks good for a few minutes, until you're busted.

QUALITY PROCESS LEADS TO QUALITY OUTCOMES.

Every link in the behavior and mindset chain should be solid.

A client who tries to "white-knuckle" or cheat their way into a lean body or a top athletic performance will eventually crash.

At best, they gain some weight back, get a minor injury or illness, or spend a few weeks bonding with the cookie jar.

At worst, they wreck their physical and mental health and spend months or years recovering.

YOU MUST ALWAYS START AT THE BEGINNING.

This is a step-by-step progression that always begins with the easiest and simplest steps, and at the lowest level.

Do not give a Level 1 client a Level 2 program. They will fail.

Level 1 clients will not be ready, willing, nor able to do more complex tasks. (Even if they think — perhaps even insist — that they are.)

Your clients should be winning at every stage, and doing every task you give them. Their process should eventually be bulletproof and their results should show it.



SUCCESS SHOULD BREED SUCCESS.

“Failure” is not only demotivating for clients, it sets up a dangerous cycle of compensation and control.

Clients may “fall off the wagon” immediately if the program is too complicated, rigid and restrictive. Or hang on for a few weeks, then have a spectacular blowout.

MOST CLIENTS NEVER NEED TO PROGRESS ANY FURTHER THAN LEVEL 1.

We strongly encourage you to **focus on the fundamentals**.

Mastering the basics and doing them consistently is *almost always enough* for optimal fitness, health, body composition, performance, and life balance.

MOST PEOPLE DON'T NEED COMPLEXITY.

They need help with the absolute basics of a healthy, sustainable lifestyle.

Even clients who can progress to Level 2 or 3 may only be there briefly.

For most people, living permanently at Level 2 or 3 is impossible... and even if it's possible, it's usually a bad idea.

Trying to live at Level 2 or 3 — which, again, most people can't even do — creates serious disordered eating, mental health issues (such as anxiety and obsession), and often physical harm. It disrupts work, relationships, and other life pursuits.

Past a certain point, “healthy eating” is not healthy.

CLIENTS MUST DEMONSTRATE SKILL, COMPETENCE, AND CONSISTENCY AT EACH LEVEL BEFORE BEING ALLOWED TO PROGRESS.

You don't get to enroll in calculus if you haven't mastered basic arithmetic.

You don't get to pass your driver's test if you can't park the car or change lanes.

Likewise, don't let a client move to Level 2 if they can't eat vegetables consistently, or are sleeping six hours a night.

The word “demonstrate” is important here. It's not enough for a client to say they're doing something. “I eat pretty well” is worthless.

We like two magic words: “Show me.”

“You're eating your protein at every meal, consistently? Great! Show me your photo food journal.”

“You're following your workout plan? Great! Show me your workout notebook.”

“You ate slowly to 80% full at every meal for the last month? Great! Let's grab the measuring tape and skinfold calipers and check it out.”

Talk is cheap. Perceptions are often wrong.

The only thing that counts is data.

Show me.



Judging nutritional level

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Once again, your criteria should be:

- **Goals:** What clients want to do
- **Knowledge:** What clients know
- **Competence and skill:** What clients can do
- **Consistency:** What clients can do, *repeatedly and well*.

HOW TO ASSESS YOUR CLIENTS

To figure out a client's level, use a mix of objective and subjective assessment.

You can measure some factors objectively. These include things like:

- body weight
- body composition (skinfolds, calipers, etc.)
- athletic performance
- blood lab work

Other factors will be based more on a feeling after you get to know them. These include things like:

- clients' history with food
- clients' lifestyle
- clients' mindset
- clients' ability to solve problems

It's not clearly defined. There are gray areas.

Use your coaching intuition, wisdom, and gut instinct.

Most importantly:

- **Always start with Level 1 tasks, no matter who your client is.** Fundamentals first, always. You can't do Level 2 tasks unless and until you have mastered Level 1 essentials.
- **When in doubt, go backwards.** And always regress a client to a lower nutritional level, rather than assuming they can handle more complexity.
- **Clients must be able to SHOW that they can do assigned tasks consistently.** Saying they can do it, or knowing information about the tasks, is not enough.

Overview of nutritional levels

	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
Goals	Improve general athletic performance and recovery	High-level recreational / amateur athletic performance and / or physique competition	Elite / professional athletic performance and career Elite / professional physique / fitness competition and / or modeling career
Level of athletic performance or body composition required	Daily-life function; regular activity	Dedicated recreational / amateur athlete	Elite / professional; nationally or internationally competitive
Body composition desired or required¹	Normal, sustainable, metabolically healthy to lean-healthy body composition Men: 13-20% body fat Women: 23-30% body fat	Lean-athletic Men: 8-12% body fat Women: 17-22% body fat	Extreme leanness and / or muscularity Men: below 8% body fat Women: below 17% body fat
Training load	<6 hours a week	6-12 hours a week	12-20 hours a week or more
Knowledge	None to moderate	Moderate to high ²	Expert ³
Competence and skill	None to moderate Can do simple tasks when given clear instructions and the coach monitors completion	Moderate Can do complex tasks when given clear instructions and the coach monitors completion Can do simple tasks easily and intuitively, often without supervision	High Follows a complex plan to the letter
Consistency	None to moderate Can do simple tasks up to 75% of the time May struggle to sustain habits or “stay on track”	Moderate Can do simple tasks 90% of the time or more Can do more complex tasks up to 75% of the time Has a base of sustainable habits and a consistent foundation of essential behaviors	High Can do any task, no matter how complex, 90% of the time or more Has a base of sustainable habits and a consistent foundation of essential behaviors

	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
Mindset / psychology	<p>"I have a lot of questions and / or worries."</p> <p>"Many things are distracting me from full focus on this."</p> <p>"This is just one part of who I am. I have a lot of other things going on."</p> <p>"I just want to be healthier, fitter, stronger, leaner, and / or better at the stuff I do regularly."</p>	<p>"I feel relatively confident."</p> <p>"I can stay on track pretty well."</p> <p>"This is a priority for me."</p> <p>"I want to be better than average."</p>	<p>"Don't ask; just do."</p> <p>"Everything is secondary to this."</p> <p>"This is my life / job."</p> <p>"I want to be one of the best in the world."</p>
Limiting factors	Many	Some; most major roadblocks have been cleared	Everything in the client's environment (routines, people, physical environment, etc.) supports execution of tasks; client is 100% dedicated to getting things done and everything around them facilitates that

- 1 Note: Clients will vary widely in their body compositions depending on their age, sex, genetic makeup, etc. What is "unreasonably lean" for one person may be another person's "normal". Look for natural tendencies and try to get a baseline of what is appropriate for each client. "Normal" is the body composition that a client can easily and sanely maintain doing basic Level 1 habits consistently.
- 2 Most clients at Level 2 will have coaches. So the clients themselves need not be experts, but they should be guided by someone who is.
- 3 Most clients at Level 3 will have coaches. So the clients themselves need not be experts, but they should be guided by someone who is.