

My career

Group fitness instructor



Tammy Kenney

Falls Church, Virginia

BLS fast facts:

Fitness trainers and aerobics instructors

- May 2011 wage and salary employment: 231,500
- 2010–20 projection: 24 percent growth (faster than average)
- May 2011 median wage: \$31,030 annually, \$14.92 hourly
- Typical education and training: High school diploma or equivalent
- May 2011 top employing industries: Other amusement and recreation industries, civic and social organizations, other schools and instruction, local government, and other personal services.

What do you do?

I teach a yoga-Pilates class in several different gyms. I have my own classes, and I also sub for other instructors.

Before each class, I welcome everyone, describe the class if I have new participants, and might show them postures that they won't be able to see once class starts. During class, as I cue (explain) and demonstrate what we're doing, I also look around to see if anyone needs to make adjustments or corrections. I'll cue modifications or options as needed to make sure everyone is safe. Proper form is very important for safety.

How did you get started in this occupation?

While taking group fitness classes about 10 years ago, I discovered the class I now teach. It struck a chord with me because it blends three things I like in a workout: strength, flexibility, and balance. It's a class based on movement and breath, which makes it incredibly stress reducing.

I had been a member and took classes at the gym where I was initially hired as an instructor, and that gym sponsored my training. Several instructors there helped guide me in getting certified.

To get hired at a gym, you may have to audition by teaching a portion of a class. But many instructors know each other, and there's a lot of networking. If you work in one gym and other instructors there know you, they can sometimes vouch for you at another gym. I've gotten most of my jobs through networking.

What are your qualifications?

I had to get certified to teach this specific class, which meant going to a 3-day training, putting that knowledge to use, and then submitting a video to the certifying organization of myself teaching the material I had learned. To teach group fitness, my gym also required that I be certified in both CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and use of an AED (automated external defibrillator) and by a reputable general group fitness organization.

Do you have other education that ties in with this?

I have more credit hours than I need for a bachelor's degree, but I changed my major from social work to accounting and went to several different colleges. I basically had to start over when I switched to accounting, and I never finished.

But studying social work gave me an appreciation for people and a willingness to listen in a nonjudgmental way. I know that everyone gets something different out of my class. Before they walk in, they're all coming in with different needs, so the class can't be one-size-fits-all. I have to tailor it to meet the needs of the people who are there, so each class might end up with a different feel.

Describe your career path.

Out of college, I worked as an executive secretary to the president of a nonprofit organization, then as an accountant. As my jobs got more stressful, I found that exercise helped reduce my stress.

I've been active most of my life—I was a gymnast growing up and did competitive powerlifting in high school and college. I understand the importance of exercise in living a healthy life. But I got more into group fitness when my work got stressful. I needed the outlet, and I needed the camaraderie to keep me coming back. I developed a deep appreciation of how critical exercise is not only to physical health, but to mental health as well.

I often felt so much relief from taking a group exercise class that I wanted to hug the instructor afterward, and that's when I realized: I want to give this, to *be* this, for someone else. I asked the instructor about it, got all the information, and started looking into it.

Any surprises?

I don't like to be the center of attention. I never took a public speaking class. I am a shy

person. The thought of getting up in front of people, of *exercising* in front of people and telling them what to do, is something I never would've imagined myself doing. But now, I not only feel comfortable doing this, I'd like to get certified in other disciplines along the yoga spectrum.

What's your best advice for someone who wants to teach group fitness?

You have to love it yourself before you can teach it to others. Go to a variety of classes. Find what you love. Be able to see yourself completely immersed in it. I took classes for years in the specialty I chose. You might not need to do it that long, but definitely start with some foundation.

After you figure out what you want to teach, find an organization you respect to get certified. There are all different kinds of general and specific certifications, and new ones are popping up all the time. Do your research so you find the best fit for your needs.

But even after you get certified, you have to keep taking classes, going to advanced trainings, striving to improve and to learn. You can't just settle at a certain point and say, "I'm there." 



Tammy Kenney was interviewed by Kathleen Green, an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. Kathleen can be reached at (202) 691-5717 or at green.kathleen@bls.gov.