



## CELEBRATE SUCCESS!

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AQ1 by **Dixie Stanforth, Ph.D., FACSM** and **Kelsey Graham, M.Ed.**

**FUNCTION FIRST:** <http://www.functionfirst.com/>

Think for a moment about someone you love. Notice and label the sensations that arise. Although many have felt love, no two experiences are exactly the same. Regardless of the words used or sensations felt, the experience of love is entirely unique. Anthony Carey explains pain the same way. As of 2016, more than 20% of U.S. adults have chronic pain (1), and Carey suggests that each person's pain experience is distinctive. Part of his success in his 25 years of helping clients with chronic pain is his ability to validate the unique physical, social, and psychological components of his clients' pain. "Even if the doctors can't find anything wrong," he says, "your pain is real and it's your experience." For many who've struggled with idiopathic pain for months or years, simply knowing that someone believes in and validates their pain is an essential step on the path to healing.

### Their Story

Function First started in San Diego in 1994 as a partnership between four fitness professionals who wanted to improve the lives of those suffering from chronic pain. After working for another corrective exercise facility, they decided to venture out on their own. The group saw rapid success in client outcomes, and word about their achievements quickly spread. In 1997, two partners left to focus on general fitness, and in 2007, Anthony Carey became the sole proprietor.

Through Function First, Carey has worked with individuals from 17 countries and 32 states. His clientele includes professional athletes and performers, medical doctors, physical therapists, fitness professionals, and many from the general population. His work has been covered in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Shape Magazine*. Beyond working with individuals in a one-on-one capacity, Carey has expanded his professional services to include education for fitness professionals through his Pain-Free Movement Specialist Program (<https://www.acefitness.org/fitness-certifications/specialty-certifications/pain-free-movement.aspx>) and educational sessions at fitness conferences around the world. In addition, he has published *The Pain-Free Program: A Proven Method to Relieve Back, Neck, Shoulder, and Joint Pain*, while owning and operating a fitness business and developing and distributing Core-Tex, a reactive training tool.

Function First is unique in its focus on client empowerment for those suffering from chronic pain. Through education on the multifactorial causes of pain and thoughtfully constructed corrective



exercise programs, Function First helps its clients become catalysts of their own healing.

### AN APPROACH, NOT A METHOD

Carey is clear about one thing — this is the Function First approach, not the Anthony Carey method. This viewpoint gives Function First the flexibility to adapt their services as needed. "If this is our 'method,' then this is the way we do it," he explains. "By keeping it an approach, we have the ability to modify and adapt based on science and as our experience dictates."

This versatility has allowed Function First to stay true to its original vision of providing an exercise alternative to treating chronic pain, while advancing in conjunction with the associated science. "What has evolved is adapting to the research and applying it to our approach, as well as clarifying the narrative around why what we do is so powerful for so many," he says. One scientific evolution that has informed their methods is the biopsychosocial (BPS) model of chronic pain. Although traditional views explain pain as the result of tissue damage, the BPS model considers pain as an experience resulting from the brain's interpretation of nociceptive signals. Function First views pain through this BPS lens, considering an individual's psychological, social, biological, and biomechanical factors that both affect and are affected by their pain experience.

To illustrate, Carey gives the example of two individuals reaching down to pick up a pen from the ground, one with a history of low back pain and one without. In bending down to grab the pen, the individual with no history of low back pain feels a minor twinge in the low back. They notice, shrug it off, and move on with the day. When faced with the same situation, someone with a history of low back pain has a heightened reaction to this same

## EDITOR CONTRIBUTION

situation. Their history, the way they view certain positions or activities, and their perceived susceptibility to pain or injury, among other things, will all affect their pain experience. The person with a history of low back pain has developed pain neurotags, areas of the brain that associate various stimuli and inputs with pain. These stimuli can include positions, exercise or activities, places, smells, sounds, sensations, and even people. As these pain associations grow, this individual begins to avoid activities that they believe incite their pain. This, in turn, can reduce movement confidence, impede health, encourage hypervigilance, increase stress, and ultimately worsen pain.

In describing the chronic pain science to clients, Carey helps them reframe the way they view their pain. This can alter their neurological response to sensory inputs and reduce perceptions of fear and danger, thus changing their pain experience.

### DIGGING A DEEP NICHE

Carey has expanded his work at Function First to establish a robust career in the fitness industry as an author, presenter, educator, and product developer. Despite the exciting variety in his job descriptions, Carey has always run his niche “deep and not wide.” Rather than delving into other areas of the health and fitness industry, he has maintained a targeted focus on the pain-free movement approach, which has allowed him to successfully move into multiple sectors. For example, Carey has expanded into the field of continuing education with his Pain Free Movement Specialist Program, and he has authored numerous publications on the topic of chronic pain. By honing in on his area of expertise, Carey has been able to grow his business beyond personal training and is now a well-known expert in the field of fitness and allied health.

This philosophy of “going deep” has also served him well with social media. Carey maintains a central focus that is true to his brand in all of his social media and marketing engagements. Carey explains that providing educational content has been most influential in growing his subscriber base. The educational content is not self-serving and is always developed with the user in mind. Rather than asking readers to sign up for a course or buy a product, Function First creates posts that offer valuable information, which allows viewers to understand Function First’s skills and offerings, without feeling pressured to buy a product or program.

In addition, Function First’s narrow niche has allowed them to establish a solid client base, largely through referrals. “We use our existing database a lot because referrals have been big for us,” says Carey. “We continue to provide valuable content and give clients the opportunity to refresh what they’ve learned. The more that we’re in front of them in a healthy, positive way, the more that we’re going to come across their mind when they think someone needs our service.” Function First proves the power of word of mouth still rules supreme in a cluttered advertising and social media landscape filled with titillating tweets and empty promises.

In addition to showcasing their knowledge and skills through social media, Function First creates value through their price

point. Carey suggests that creating a cost that is reflective of their excellent service positions Function First as a valuable commodity, which inspires confidence in his clients. “As long as I’m delivering, charging at the upper end of the market gives me leverage,” he says. When clients are paying a premium for a service, they’re more likely to do their homework in both selecting a professional and following through on recommendations. “If the client is paying a \$10 copay, it’s easy for them to think, ‘Oh, I don’t have to do my exercises. I’ll just do them at my next appointment,’” he says. By setting a higher price point, clients assign a high value to the service and are also more likely to put in the effort required to get the most for their money.

### EXPANDING YOUR SERVICES

Making the leap from trainer to educator is a challenging transition for many fitness professionals. Although living in San Diego has afforded Carey access to many large fitness conferences and organizations, he began his educational career by offering workshops to his local community. He offered his first educational sessions in his studio in the days of projectors and slide carousels and expanded to give his first professional presentation for personal trainers in 2002 at the IHRSA Convention and Tradeshow. Carey continued to grow his educational reach with numerous writing and speaking engagements with the American Council on Exercise, IDEA, PTontheNet, and FitPro UK. Carey shares that speaking in different countries and experiencing what the fitness industry is like in different parts of the world is one of the most exciting aspects of his work.

Although he has had great success as an educator and entrepreneur, Carey notes that in the early days, he and his cofounders experienced a classic case of being good practitioners who thought that automatically equated to being good business people. When he found that business acumen was not a natural side effect of owning a business, he joined various professional organizations to improve his skills. Two such organizations are Vistage and Entrepreneur’s Organization, which hold quarterly educational events and monthly meetings for entrepreneurs in various fields to get together and gain input from their peers. Carey explains that these organizations are a great way to remove yourself from day-to-day busyness and gain extrinsic pressure and accountability from others, which is beneficial from a business standpoint.

He found further guidance from the book *E-Myth* by Michael Gerber, which describes how new business owners get stuck working both *in* and *on* their business. “You learn that you can’t do everything,” Carey says. “If your passion is working with people, then you need to hire other people who can run the business, even if you have the final say.” He describes one exercise in the book, where you create a chart of every function that needs to be fulfilled in the business. “What you’ll find out is that your name is in every box, from cleaning the bathrooms, to bookkeeping, to marketing to the web design. The more you can remove your name from a box and assign it to the most qualified person, the better your overall growth as a business will be,” he says.

## SPREAD YOUR GIFT

Carey is clear that there are multiple paths to success. “You don’t have to work just one-on-one seeing clients,” he says. He is fortunate enough to have a perspective that has evolved from doing many different things in the industry — seeing clients, working in education, writing a book, developing and distributing a product, owning a business. “If you’re not content with doing the same thing day in and day out, you can do more,” he says. Look beyond the walls of your gym and consider how you can make an impact in your local community and beyond. “If you’re really good at what you do, you need to spread your gift.”

Share Your Success Stories!

We hope that you, too, will be inspired and work to bring about meaningful change in the realm of health and fitness wherever you are. We would love to hear how you are changing your world. Please send us your stories for publication consideration. If your story is selected for publication in *ACSM’s Health and Fitness Journal*<sup>®</sup>, we will contact you for additional information. To submit, simply e-mail the following to [HFJournal@acsm.org](mailto:HFJournal@acsm.org):

A Word file with the following:

- your story
- lessons learned
- advice
- your contact information (name, affiliation, mailing address, phone number, and e-mail address)

## Reference

1. Dahlhamer J, Lucas J, Zelaya C, et al. Prevalence of chronic pain and high-impact chronic pain among adults — United States, 2016. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2018;67(36):1001–6. Available from: [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6736a2.htm?s\\_cid=mm6736a2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6736a2.htm?s_cid=mm6736a2_w).



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