K Team: Creating A Body Positive Exercise Environment for Kalamazoo College Students

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For my role model and sister, Sydney.
Preface

And I said to my body. Softly. ‘I want to be your friend.’ It took a long breath, And replied ‘I have been waiting my whole life for this.’ - Nayyirah Waheed

This project is very much about my own healing and the healing of others. After one year of therapy and recovery from binge eating disorder (B.E.D.), anxiety, and body image struggles, I’ve learned that taking part in mindful movement that I genuinely enjoy helps me mend the relationship between my body and my mind. Exercise has become something that I’ve identified as a major pillar of my self-care routine. Self-care is the caring of one’s own body, mind, and/or soul in the effort to promote one’s own health and prevent illness, whether it be mental or physical (Levin, 1983). It’s important to note that self-care comes in many different forms. For some, self-care could mean going on a walk, taking a bath, spending time with loved ones, taking part in religious or cultural traditions, or cooking their favorite foods. While exercise makes me feel more connected with my body, and is something that is intimately related to the love and care I have for myself, the road here has been rocky.

In the darkest of times, starting when I was a young teenager, I would use exercise as a means to punish myself for the food I consumed. I would run on the treadmill for hours, hating myself and what I perceived as my “fat” body (while I never once experienced fat-shaming or oppression related to my size). The negative self-talk in my mind was constantly telling me that I was not good enough. I was obsessed with losing weight, trying to take up less and less space. My peers in high school would praise me for my “perfect” body, unaware of how mentally ill and emotionally exhausted I was. I viewed my body as the only thing that defined my worth. Looking back, I can see how my distorted body image had a grip on my life; controlling what I
wore, what I ate, where I went, and who I interacted with. Not an hour would go by without me thinking about a part of my body that I loathed. My mental struggles carried on into college, where I began to recognize disordered eating habits I was developing, including binge eating to help me cope with the anxiety, stress, and depression that had surfaced after moving away to college. I hated exercising, but I did it in an attempt to “make up” for my binge eating, and to change my body to fit unrealistic standards that I had set for myself. “The Freshman Fifteen” (the notorious fifteen pounds that freshmen gain during their first year of college, which studies show often correlates with student’s perceived stress [Ferrara, 2009; Serlachius, 2007]) haunted me; it seemed as if everyone was talking about it, even fitness instructors. The use of this widely accepted, fat-shaming language perpetuated my issues as I attempted to assimilate into the K College lifestyle.

It was during my junior year study abroad experience in Chiang Mai, Thailand that I decided enough was enough - I was exhausted. Exhausted of hating my body and being my own worst enemy. I was in desperate need of a change in mindset and mental health. It just so happened that around that time, I was introduced to a Thai CrossFit group that opened my eyes to a new way of viewing my body and exercise. CrossFit Chiang Mai was comprised of people from all over the world, with all different bodies. Workouts were led by some of the strongest (mentally, physically, emotionally) women and gender nonconforming folks I had ever come across, and while the exercises were challenging for me, the space was radically empowering.

Teammates at CrossFit Chiang Mai would cheer me on and laugh with me as they taught me new things, like weight lifting and rock climbing. I was introduced to something that I had never come across before: everyone in CrossFit Chiang Mai unconditionally accepted their
bodies and the bodies of others. It was a space where everyone felt welcomed and loved, no matter what your identity, age, ability, or body size. Instead of focusing on weight loss, this community focused on having fun and challenging themselves. For these reasons, CrossFit Chiang Mai became a reliable safe space for me, and I kept coming back each week. While CrossFit Chiang Mai did not solve all of my body image problems, it became a support system for me and introduced me to the idea of body positivity.

Body positivity, at its core, is the idea that all bodies are good bodies. It is a feminist movement that destabilizes harmful, normative notions of what is a “healthy”, “beautiful”, or “valuable” body. All too often, people of color, disabled people, people who are “overweight”, and people who identify as queer are excluded from these definitions of “valuable” or “worthy” bodies. “Good bodies” in U.S. culture are depicted as thin, cis, straight, and white (Ospina, 2015). There is nothing wrong with having a body that fits these traits, however, the body positive movement centers its energies on empowering and creating representation for marginalized bodies (Ospina, 2015). The CrossFit Chiang Mai community actively did body positivity by intentionally accepting and celebrating bodies of all kinds.

Upon returning to the U.S. from Thailand, I decided it was time to face my struggles with B.E.D. and body dysmorphia and go to therapy. It was there that I learned psychological tools to let go of self-judgement, cope with emotional distress, and manifest healthier relationships with food and exercise. While I still struggle with these aspects of my eating disorder, anxiety, and body dysmorphia, this therapy was the beginning of learning to love myself, and therefore integral to my healing process. It also inspired me to seek out mind/body experiences, including yoga and meditation. In this time of healing and working on myself, I couldn’t stop thinking
about the sense of community I had found at Crossfit Chiang Mai. I missed being part of a fun-loving, high energy environment.

In recent years, I’ve seen one of my most influential role models, my mother, flourish into someone who loves and truly cares for her body. Her own body image improvement and healing has had a huge impact on my own. After weeks of my mother begging me to join her at her weekly bootcamp, I decided one morning to go with her. I was pleasantly surprised to again find a community of people who did nothing but unconditionally love and accept me. The women in this bootcamp, all over the age of forty, had created a community that was dedicated to challenging themselves and supporting each other. It is these body positive groups (Crossfit Chiang Mai and my mother’s bootcamp crew) that act as inspiration for starting K Team at Kalamazoo College.

Whether these groups recognize it or not, they are doing feminist work by accepting, celebrating, and empowering bodies of all identities. I realized, after some time in recovery, that many young adults could benefit greatly from body-positive groups like these. While it was therapy that helped me pull myself out of body image and eating disorders, these two groups acted as catalysts for healing and change. I am forever grateful for the people and energies that make up these communities and the safe spaces they provided me.

At Kalamazoo College, I study Psychology and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with an interest in health science. It is with this feminist, psychological lens that I launched K Team in an effort to provide students of all identities a safe, body positive space to explore their relationships with their bodies. Instead of focusing on weight loss and “getting the spring break
body” (as many of the existing on-campus exercise resources preached), I focus on self-love, inclusivity, the mind-body connection, and integrity in movement.

Recovery, as many survivors will tell you, is not an easy journey. I by no means claim to be an expert on body love. There are still days where I can’t think of anything other than how much I dislike my body, and when food seems to be my worst enemy. Knowing that I am not the only one who struggles with finding an accessible, body positive exercise space on campus is what motivated me to start K Team. While exercise may not be a part of everyone’s self-care routine, creating a body positive space for Kalamazoo College students to explore exercise as a source of empowerment is my effort to help others heal, too. I am thankful that K Team has become a community that supports my recovery, and has turned the pain of my mental illness into something beautiful.
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Abstract

According to Kalamazoo College students, fitness facilities and resources can be intimidating and limiting spaces. Navigating a healthy relationship with exercise at Kalamazoo College may be difficult for students who: experience oppression linked to their body/self expression; live with mental illness, including disordered eating and/or disordered body image; cannot afford fitness class fees; and do not know how to exercise safely. Exercise is also frequently used as a tool to change marginalized bodies (bodies of color, aged bodies, poor bodies, fat bodies, women’s bodies, etc.) to fit physique ideals that are misogynist, ableist, racist, and ageist. My aim is to reframe exercise as a venue for empowerment and self-care instead of reaching for a body aesthetic. With the “stress culture” that makes Kalamazoo College so unique, creating an inclusive and accessible exercise community for students to explore mindful movement is important in order to improve students’ mental health. K Team, a student organization jettisoned in 2016 at Kalamazoo College, gives students free exercise sessions in an inclusive, body positive environment. K Team aims to provide students with the skills and mindset that can help them carry on exercise habits that are sustainable, safe, and fueled by self-care. This project is an integral piece to my personal healing journey, and inherently part of my feminist agenda to create more spaces that celebrate and empower marginalized bodies.
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**K Team Mission Statement**

K Team is an exercise community based on Kalamazoo College campus that aims to provide free exercise sessions for students in an inclusive, body positive environment. These workouts, led by student facilitators, will emphasize a mind-body connection. Self-care exercises and mental health resources will also be provided for students via the K Team Facebook page.

**Short Term Goals:** To provide free, student-run exercise sessions to Kalamazoo College students that help reduce stress and build interpersonal connections in a welcoming, body positive environment.

**Long Term Goals:** To foster an exercise culture at Kalamazoo College that is more accessible, holistic, inclusive and body-positive. To provide students with the skills and mindset that can help them carry on body-positive exercise habits that are sustainable, safe, and fueled by self-care. To decenter normative notions of “lovable” or “valuable” bodies, and to offer exercise as a venue for empowerment.
K Team Offers Inclusive Exercise Classes on Campus

Meredith Ashton
Features Editor

The Fitness Center isn’t the only innovative aspect of K’s exercise scene this year. This fall, K Team, a StuOrg dedicated to offering free, body positive exercise classes to K students, is striving to change workout culture on campus. The group meets at the Anderson Weight Room on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m., and offers a variety of classes such as yoga, meditation, and boot camp.

“We’re not here to change your body or lose a ton of weight,” Kaitlyn Perkins, K’17, a K Team leader, said. “We’re here to have fun and feel good. You should work out because it makes you feel great.”

The club emphasizes its inclusive and encouraging environment, as well as the aspect of convenience. Unlike gym classes at K or at local businesses, there is no mandatory time commitment and no charge for students to attend.

“It’s what’s best for your schedule and for your body,” Maddie Tracey, K’17, another K Team leader, said.

A group of four seniors leads the K Team in different exercises each meeting, and the club plans on inviting other fitness instructors as guest teachers in the future. K Team currently has around twelve students attending morning workouts, and they hope that more students join them as the term continues.

“It’s taken four years for me to feel this comfortable going into the gym on my own and knowing what exercises to do...K Team can act as a supportive group to learn about these different workouts,” Tracey said.

Tracey and Perkins were involved in an informal exercise group their first year at K, and this positive experience inspired them to create a formal StuOrg for free and inclusive physical fitness classes. The club plans on expanding their weekly workouts to include registering for local 5ks together and starting K Team dinners in order to take a more whole-body approach to health and self-care.

“I think trying to change exercise culture into one that is inclusive, body positive, and holistic at K is very important,” Tracey said.
K Team’s Story: The Process of Becoming a Student Organization

In preparation for building our student organization, co-leader Kaitlyn Perkins and I reached out to current students and alumni starting in the spring of 2016 to gauge what the Kalamazoo College community needed. We hosted meetings on campus and invited the student body to share with us what they’d like to see in a body positive exercise group. Students emphasized creating a judgement-free, safe space where participants could explore new forms of exercise in. Several students said they’d like more access to mind/body movement, such as yoga and meditation. Perkins and I also communicated with Charlotte Steele and Kari Paine, alumni who ran an unofficial bootcamp-style group on campus when Perkins and I were first year students. The name of this bootcamp group was “K Team”, and while this casual group didn’t explicitly claim to be body positive, Perkins and I felt that we wanted to recreate the team-like atmosphere that Steele and Paine had sparked.

We registered K Team as a student organization in May of 2016, and I conducted research on mind/body wellness and coaching techniques during the summer of 2016. The first K Team workout was held on September 16th, 2016. Since then, free, one-hour workouts have been led by myself and Kaitlyn Perkins on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in the Kalamazoo College Fitness & Wellness Center. As of February 2017, Danielle Purkey, a Kalamazoo College senior student and certified yoga instructor, has teamed up with us to offer students a weekly yoga practice on Tuesday mornings. The workouts held on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are usually put together by Perkins and I. The majority of these sessions consist of a blend of cardio, strength training, stretching, and guided meditation. While Perkins and I have years of experience and dedication in organized sports, gymnastics, yoga, coaching,
weightlifting, and research in mind/body medicine, we remind participants that we are not certified aerobics instructors. The workouts we create are inspired by our own experiences, coaches, mentors, and online fitness resources. Perkins and I take advantage of the wide variety of wellness knowledge available at K College by asking fitness professors, trainers, student athletes, and coaches for their input.

Recruitment for K Team has included several methods, one of them being tabling at “K Fest”, Kalamazoo College’s annual student organization fair. After receiving over one hundred students’ signatures expressing interest in our organization, we spread the word about K Team through flyers, posters, email, social media, and word of mouth. Our K Team Facebook page has grown to over two hundred members, and is an unique online space for Kalamazoo College students to share body positive inspiration and communicate exercise opportunities on campus. It is through this Facebook page that Perkins and I also encourage students to take advantage of the free resources at the Kalamazoo College Health Center and the Kalamazoo College Counseling Center.

After months of research in mind/body wellness and performance psychology, the five pillars of K Team were created as the core beliefs that fuel this body positive student organization. Later, in my literature review, I highlight empirical research that supports these five pillars of K Team. The following pillars are displayed on a poster that is hung during K Team sessions, and act as helpful reminders for participants looking to make their exercise experience more mindful and body positive:

1.) All bodies are good bodies, and deserve autonomy and care.

All bodies are welcomed and embraced here, regardless of your gender identity, race, sexuality,
K Team is about accepting and caring for yourself, and empowering your teammates.

2.) Nix the negative self-talk.

Notice, without judgement, where your mind goes when something becomes challenging. What does that internal dialogue sound like? Keeping things neutral or positive can help you push through moments you never thought you were capable of!

3.) Listen to your body.

Instead of focusing on reps, focus on how you feel during an exercise. Connecting your mind and your body is key. While we have a workout plan, only you know what’s good for you. If you need modifications, let us know!

4.) Forget Perfection.

Focus on progress and integrity in your workout, not perfection. Give everything your all, and appreciate what your body can do in this moment. This is a no judgement zone!

5.) Your breath is your home.

When in doubt, breathe. Whether it’s a deep, calming “belly breath” or a powerful breath that pushes you through a workout, never forget to breathe.
Literature Review

The majority of research conducted on the relationship between body positivity and exercise has emerged in the past decade, with most of it surrounding body image and eating disorders in white, abled, cis-gendered women. Further research is needed on body image and exercise, especially for people of color, gender nonconforming individuals, and those who live with mental and/or physical challenges. The following literature review examines exercise motivation and accessibility as it relates to college students’ well-being.

College Students, Stress and Exercise

Increasingly, studies have shown that chronic stress is a major health issue for college students as they grapple with a variety of academic, personal, and societal pressures (Deckro, 2002). For students who identify with marginalized groups such as students of color, students of low socioeconomic status, gender nonconforming students, and disabled students, college can be an increasingly stressful space (Syracuse University, 2017). According to authors Dixon and Sadava (as cited in Deckro, 2002), there is a positive correlation between college-related stress and negative health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, disordered eating, suicidal ideation, insomnia, and basic health issues such as headaches and the common cold. The stress of acclimating to undergraduate culture (and sometimes U.S. culture), during a time when most young adults are exploring and solidifying their identities, can lead to serious mental and physical health implications for students.

Stress is a unique part of the Kalamazoo College experience, with most students taking on more classes and activities than the average undergraduate. The trimester system employed at Kalamazoo College allows students to take nine classes per year. Kalamazoo College students
are also stereotyped to be especially well-rounded, often taking on many roles including club members/leaders, employees, teaching assistants, international learners, and community volunteers. While these are all opportunities of privilege that the College offers, K students must learn quickly how to cope with a plethora of life stressors. Exercise, if adopted as a sustainable form of self-care, has been shown to successfully alleviate stress (Cox, 2012).

There is a large body of research supporting the notion that physical activity not only reduces perceived stress and negative affect, but also actively improves mental health. For example, studies show that individuals who exercise regularly are less susceptible to the negative effects of life stress, have increased brain activity and cognitive function, report higher levels of positive emotions, and show lower numbers of visits to health centers (Cox, 2012). In some cases, exercise has been shown to be more effective than psychotherapy and antidepressant drugs in the treatment of illnesses such as depression, panic disorder, schizophrenia, and anxiety (Cox, 2012).

While exercise has been shown to increase positive affect and decrease negative affect, the perceived intensity of exercise plays a major role (Cox, 2012). As it turns out, exercising at an intensity above a person’s preferred level correlates with negative affect. The opposite is also true; individuals who feel as if they aren’t challenged enough do not reap the mental benefits of exercise (Cox, 2012). This could have to do with an individual’s sense of autonomy, or control over their own body. It is for these reasons that K Team workouts are based on time intervals instead of repetitions, allowing students to challenge themselves as they see fit. A study conducted by Turner, Rejeski, and Brawley (as cited in Cox, 2012) observed that exercising in a
fun, socially enriched environment (one like K Team) increased individual’s levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and subsequently improved their performance.

If exercise has so many health benefits, a crucial question then becomes: Who has access to exercise? According to Cox (2012) and Cohen (2005), one of the leading barriers to exercise in the U.S. is perceptions of obesity. This may sound convoluted, however, let’s take a deeper look into the research conducted by Cohen (2005). According to his study, the U.S. “war on obesity” is resulting in prejudice towards bodies that do not fit the “healthy” (synonymous with “slender”) body type. Blame is placed on the shoulders of the “overweight” individual by labelling them as lazy, unintelligent, and noncompliant, therefore oversimplifying a complex issue without considering the social and economic influences at play (Cohen, 2005).

Preadolescents and adolescents internalize societal anti-fat and pro-thin biases perpetuated in media, leading to a myriad of mental health problems and chronic stress (which, not surprisingly, leads to even higher risk of disease) (Cohen, 2005; Normandi, 2001).

*We are not advancing the health of people who are overweight when going to the gym means being judged and getting weighed at the doctor’s office feels like receiving a bad report card . . . Negative attitudes within the health and exercise science communities toward the obese have been documented in numerous studies. These negative attitudes are often cited by patients as a reason for avoiding medical care.* (Cohen, 2005)

Nutrition and physical activity are important matters to address in improving the well-being of U.S. citizens, however, we need to focus our energies on creating environments that are as supportive and accepting of all bodies, and “address the external factors that act as barriers to healthy eating and active living.” (Cohen, 2005). In order to improve well-being,
Cohen (2005) suggests utilizing a “...social ecological approach that does not isolate, discriminate, or marginalize the obese and overweight.” Interestingly enough, programs that focus on self-acceptance and a healthy lifestyle rather than weight loss are more successful in lowering cholesterol levels and blood pressure in women deemed as “obese”, compared to women who follow regimented weight loss programs (Cohen, 2005). Research reported by Huberty (2008) (via Cox, 2012), informs us that perceived self-worth is a strong indicator of whether an individual will adhere to a type of exercise.

Exercise motivation is another important factor to consider when building an exercise community. In “Commitment to Sport and Exercise”, Levon William’s (2013) research shows that, regardless of age, both youth and adults participate in physical activity for the same three reasons: fun, competence, and affiliation. “That is, people young and old, participate in sport and exercise, because it is fun, they like to strive to achieve and experience feelings of competence, and they want to be with their friends and meet new people” (Williams, 2013). Cox (2012) also mentions the importance of creating an environment that is process-oriented. Existing literature states that young adults who focus on their own progress instead of perfection are more likely to persevere and thrive in physical activity (Cox, 2012). Young adults who have process-oriented mindsets also tend to take part in “positive self-talk”, a tactic used by elite athletes to help them perceive stressors as opportunities for growth (Cox, 2012). Based on these principles, exercise science specialists recommend creating environments where people can find enjoyment in movement while letting go of perfectionist judgements/expectations (Williams, 2013).

It is for these reasons that K Team does not identify as a weight loss program, and refrains from weight loss talk in an effort to create an empowering, body positive environment.
K Team is devoted to making exercise a fun mode of self-care by building a welcoming, reliable community that is explicitly inclusive of all bodies and exercise abilities.

**Exercise Accessibility at Kalamazoo College**

Fellow Kalamazoo College students have shared with me their concerns of finding a time, space, or group that they feel comfortable exercising in. An opportunity presented itself to foster a more inclusive and body positive fitness culture at Kalamazoo College with the addition of the new Fitness and Wellness Center on campus (as of fall of 2016). Hopefully, hosting K Team as a safe space in the new Fitness and Wellness Center will help students feel a sense of security and autonomy while exercising (a feeling that has taken me years to find on my own).

Student organizations such as Frelon (K College’s dance company) and Kalamazoo College Ultimate Frisbee (KCUF) are wonderful resources for students to be physically active, free of cost. Understandably, these clubs’ functionalities depend on the attendance (and quality of performance) of their members. Participants are expected to make a long-term commitment, or else the club ceases to be successful. Numerous fitness classes are also offered for Kalamazoo College students, such as boot camp, swimming, and yoga. These classes can cost up to $150 per quarter, and a participant receives a grade in the class dependant on the number of classes one attends. Of course, K College also has an impressive range of intercollegiate sports teams. These team dynamics can be beneficial for those partaking in the sport, however, not all students have the talent or resources to be on a sports team.

Many universities often have group fitness programs (also known as “GroupFit”) that offer undergraduate students unlimited access to free, group exercise classes. For example, at Oakland University, students enrolled in at least one academic course are given access to free
GroupFit classes such as bootcamp, yoga, kickboxing, cycling, and zumba (www.oakland.edu/recwell). There are no academic grades involved, no participation requirements, and the classes are led by trained fitness instructors. Unfortunately, Kalamazoo College has yet to offer a guided, long-term, free resource like GroupFit for students who seek exercise as a form of self-care and stress relief. That is where K Team comes into play. K Team provides students free, campus-based exercise sessions led by volunteer student instructors. There is no mandatory time commitment for participating in K Team; its “drop-in” style allows students to attend based on what’s best for their schedules and their bodies, and they are not assessed based on participation and/or their exercise skills. This makes attending K Team and participating in movement a choice independent of academic, monetary, or performance pressures.
K Team Handbook

A Facilitator’s Guide to Leading K Team

2016/2017
Dear Future K Team Facilitators,

This handbook is a flexible guide, offering recommendations for K Team workouts and outreach. K Team will evolve over time, and my hope is that the body positive, empowering framework used to create it will remain constant. Keeping K Team an inclusive, accessible, and safe space for students is a non-negotiable. Moving forward with this integrity is paramount to continuing community healing.

Being a K Team facilitator takes time, energy, and dedication. While it sometimes may seem like a thankless role, know that your willingness to share knowledge and positive vibrations with peers in an effort to promote their well-being is invaluable. You will find that helping to lead a team rooted in acceptance and passion in movement will not only do good for the Kalamazoo College community, but it will influence your own personal growth.

In “First Follower: Leadership Lessons From Dancing Guy”, Derek Silvers focuses on the importance of the first leaders in a movement. “Leadership is over-glorified,” he states. “It was the first follower that transformed the lone nut into a leader. There is no movement without the first follower. When you find a lone nut doing something great, have the guts to be the first person to stand up and join in.” Without your faith and dedication in K Team, this movement would cease to exist.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for your openness, courage, and love. It will undoubtedly make a difference.

With love,

Maddie Tracey
Leadership and Language

All too often, we are bombarded with messages that our bodies are not good enough, not valuable, and are not worth care and love. K Team is meant to be a space that undoes social constructions of “valuable” bodies, where students choose to take part in mindful movement because it makes them feel empowered. K Team is not a venue that perpetuates weight loss language and unrealistic body ideals. An autonomous mind-body connection can be extremely powerful in sustainably decreasing stress levels of marginalized groups such as women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those with mental illnesses. It is therefore imperative that K Team caters its body positive messages to all students, no matter what their identity, and avoids dieting/weight loss language.

Everyone deserves the opportunity to find physical movement that makes them feel empowered. Being body positive means empowering marginalized bodies and being intentionally anti-racist, trans and queer-inclusive, and culturally humble. While white, woman-identifying narratives of body image and eating disorder struggles have been embraced in body positive efforts, there is less work being done to create exercise environments that are unconditionally accepting of marginalized bodies. K Team works to offer students access to an inclusive exercise space that is accepting of all bodies. This is integral to community healing.

Instigating communal healing and making a space “safe” takes positive action. Collaborating and communicating with student support groups on campus such as Kaleidoscope, Soul Circle, Women’s Process Group, International Student Organization, Young Men of Color, and the Trans Support Group can help make K Team a welcoming space for everyone. With the help of peers who are also dedicated to creating safe spaces on campus for marginalized students,
K Team can grow to be a more intentionally inclusive environment. Perkins and I recruit students at Kalamazoo College who are passionate about certain kinds of movement (from dance to weightlifting), and encourage them to come and be a guest facilitator for a workout. This practice has proven to be extremely beneficial in recruiting new members to K Team, and offers students exercise opportunities that they wouldn’t have if Perkins and I were the only leaders. Utilizing the knowledge and skills possessed by Kalamazoo College students in K Team makes for an exciting and diverse exercise environment.

Incorporating things like yogic breathing techniques and stretches, mindful meditation, and body positive reflections in sessions helps to create an environment where people can openly connect their minds with their bodies without judgement. Facilitators should create short, simple pre-workout discussions/exercises to get people thinking about their bodies and how their bodies serve them in hopes of creating a space of self-love.

A major step in making K Team inclusive is creating a curriculum that is accessible to all students, no matter what their exercise experience. This means offering modifications for each workout that either make movements easier or harder, depending on how much the participant wants to challenge themselves. While emotional safety is of utmost importance at K Team, so is physical safety. Students who have little experience in exercise, or who are limited in their movement/ability, should be offered options to make workouts low-impact. This takes dedication from K Team leaders to do their research and offer exercise sessions that are safest to their ability.

A typical one-hour session of K Team includes warm-up, cardio, strength training circuit, yoga/stretching, a mental body-positive exercise, and guided meditation. Cardio and guided
strength training act as empowering venues for students to physically challenge themselves at a level that is comfortable for them in a physically and mentally safe environment. By adding yoga and guided meditation at the end of each session, students are offered the opportunity to connect with their breath and discover new ways to manage stress and manifest self-love. Finally, the mental exercises often require participants to do things like compliment themselves, set intentions for their workout, or write down things that they love about themselves. These mental exercises are small ways to encourage students to think about the connection they have with their bodies, and to destabilize normative notions of a “good” body.

I understand how creating a body positive exercise group can sound contradictory. Some may think that it is counterintuitive to create a workout group in an effort to build body acceptance, since exercise is often used as a means to shape people’s bodies to fit normative notions of worth and attraction. However, exercise isn’t just for weight loss; learning new forms of mindful movement can be an empowering and central part to the healing process for those with disordered eating and body image struggles. Facilitators should accept that the kind of exercises that K Team will be offering (and exercise in general) is not always a part of everyone’s self-care plan - and that’s okay! For students who enjoy physical activity, but cannot afford class fees or personal trainers and who lack a safe environment to learn in, K Team can be a space where they feel welcome and loved.

Finally, one of the best ways to create a truly body positive workout climate is to lead by example. Participants will notice the subtle ways you treat and view your own body. Doing things like avoiding negative self-talk and unconditionally accepting your body and it’s abilities will rub off on others who look up to your guidance. Being a K Team leader means being a role
model, and while K Team leaders most definitely do not need to have a perfect relationship with their body, they should consider being mindful about the ways they talk about their own bodies. Working on your relationship with your body will make K Team a more enjoyable and meaningful experience for facilitators and participants alike.
**Leading a K Team Circuit**

Facilitating a K Team workout takes a great deal of planning and energy. K Team leaders should keep in mind that being a facilitator means not only instructing proper movement techniques, but also creating a supportive and fun environment for participants. Leaders should have complete workouts planned ahead of time, and consider what equipment is needed for the workout before participants arrive. Typically, each one hour session of K Team includes warming up, cardio, strength training, yoga, a body positive mental exercise, and guided meditation.

**Warm Up**

Warm ups should last about five minutes and students should be breathing heavily at the end. The aim is to get everyone’s hearts pumping, and to warm up all areas of the body in preparation for the workout. Listed here is a variety of options that would be acceptable for warming up. Warm ups can be stationary if the facilitators are limited on space (for example, jogging in place). If leaders need to, they can google how to do each of these warmups. Choose at least 5 of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jog</th>
<th>High knees</th>
<th>Butt kicks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lunge &amp; twist</td>
<td>Skips</td>
<td>Frankenstein kicks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inchworms</td>
<td>Burpees to “Roxanne”</td>
<td>Large arm circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down dog with calf stretch</td>
<td>Side stretches</td>
<td>Cat/cow pose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mental Exercises

K Team mental exercises are meant to be brief way to start or end a workout on a body
positive note. These short exercises aim to make students think about their bodies and exercise
in a new light by asking them to respond to questions like, “What is your goal for this next
workout?” “What do you like about yourself?” or “What is something that you’ve done really
well during today’s workout?” Students usually write down their answers anonymously, either
on their hand, paper, or a poster.

It’s interesting to see how long it takes students to answer questions like these. Students
may think that mental exercises like these feel weird, scary, or strange. That is okay, and is
simply a reflection of how self-inflicted negativity has become so many individual’s default
setting (Amour, 2015). By providing mental exercises like these on the regular, students are
actually taking part in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is a psychological tool used
to help individuals re-route ingrained neural pathways so that instead of taking part in automatic
negative thoughts, they can recognize negative thoughts, stop them, and work to actually change
them. By taking part in mental exercises such as these, students can begin to strengthen neural
pathways that are correlated with positive thinking, making positive thinking easier down the
road (Amour, 2015).

I suggest that facilitators also take part in mental exercises, for after all, facilitators are
also participants in K Team. Here are some mental exercises that we’ve practiced before and
that have gone over well.

● Before a workout, write down on a small piece of paper why you came to K Team today.

Fold up the piece of paper, create a pile of responses, and have students draw the
responses randomly at the end of the workout. During stretches, go around in a circle and read the anonymous responses.

- Before a workout, write a goal/intention for your workout on your hand with washable marker. When a workout becomes particularly challenging, look down at your hand and remind yourself of your personal goal.

- Before a workout, choose a partner to do the exercises with. Unconditionally accept your partner, and cheer them on throughout the whole workout. This provides an opportunity for students to meet new people and create a loving, supportive environment.

- Before a workout, think about the following question: What does body positivity mean to you? What does that look like for you? Write down your answer, fold it, and put it in a bowl. During stretches, go around in a circle and read the anonymous responses.

- Before a workout, dedicate each round of exercises (or each station) to someone or something you are thankful for. This way, when an exercise becomes particularly challenging, you can think of the person or thing that you are thankful for to motivate you to keep going.

- Before a workout, write down on a piece of paper an unrealistic body expectation that you feel pressured to fulfill. Fold up the piece of paper, create a pile of responses, and have students draw the responses randomly at the end of the workout. During stretches, go around in a circle and read the anonymous responses. After each student reads a response, have them tear it up and place the bits in the “Imaginary fire” in the center of the circle (could be represented with a bowl).
• Before a workout, take a piece of paper and brainstorm reasons about why you want to love yourself. How will it make you feel? How will it help your life? Have students continue to reflect on this while they are exercising. Students can fold up the pieces of paper, create a pile of responses, and jdraw the responses randomly at the end of the workout. During stretches, go around in a circle and read the anonymous responses.

• After a workout, write down two things that you think you did really well during your workout. Reflect on positive moments and what your body can do.

• After a workout, write down two things you love about yourself - either physical or non physical - on the “What I Love About Me” poster (provided by K Team facilitators - keep one poster for the whole quarter). At the end of the quarter, the poster is filled with things that people love about themselves.

• After a workout, think of three body positive affirmations and write each on down on a post-it. Have students save the post-its, and tell them to stick them to mirrors in their home.

Circuit Stations

In order to help students focus on the integrity of their movement, and feel as if they can tackle workouts in small increments, we usually plan circuits that are composed of stations where students do 30 seconds of an exercise, 15 second break, 30 seconds again, and then switch to the next station. Having the 15 second break in between ensures that students do not hurt themselves in the process. In most workout sessions, there is enough time to do two full rounds of a circuit with a water break in between. If time is limited, students can do one full round, take a water break, and then complete a “speed round”, where students are at each station for only one
30-40 second increment before switching to the next station. By organizing the workout by time instead of repetitions, students are able to push themselves to whatever level they feel is appropriate for their bodies.

Since there is such a wide variety of exercise experience represented by students who come to K Team (some participants are experienced student athletes, while others have never exercised before), it is important to give students the space to challenge themselves at whatever level they feel comfortable with. This relates to the philosophy of process (or progress), not perfection. Facilitators can encourage students by saying things like, “You’re all so strong! Only 30 seconds left - don’t be afraid to challenge yourself!”, but facilitators should avoid saying things like, “Push harder,” or “You’re not trying hard enough”, etc. Comments about losing weight and dieting should be avoided at K Team sessions, as this can be triggering for those with eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Of course, making judgemental or negative comments about people’s bodies - ever - is unacceptable.

When creating a circuit, it’s important to remember not to put stations next to each other that challenge/target the same parts of the body (for example: Station 1 is push ups and then Station 2 is bicep curls). While some trainers and athletes support this setup, I’ve found that it exhausts participants and creates more possibility for injury. Same goes for cardio stations - be sure to space cardio out with motions that strengthen the arms, legs, back, and core so that the exercise feels balanced. Below is a chart of possible circuit stations that leaders can use to craft a well-rounded and challenging workout, even with little or no exercise equipment. Listed with each workout are variations to make the exercise more or less challenging. K Team leaders
should always have modifications or alternatives for stations that may be inaccessible for some students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arms</th>
<th>Legs</th>
<th>Core</th>
<th>Cardio/Full Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push up (on knees or regular - wide or narrow)</td>
<td>Squat (weighted or not)</td>
<td>Plank (on forearms or hands)</td>
<td>Mountain climbers (fast or slow motion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricep dips (knees bent or straight)</td>
<td>Lunge (forward, side, or reverse; weighted or not)</td>
<td>Plank w/ foot taps</td>
<td>Squat jumps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicep curls</td>
<td>Lunge jumps</td>
<td>Ab roller</td>
<td>Burpees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance band curls</td>
<td>Side-lying leg lifts</td>
<td>Side plank</td>
<td>Long jumps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-arm side push ups</td>
<td>Donkey kicks (w/ upward or side pulse)</td>
<td>Superhumans (a.k.a. “Supermans”)</td>
<td>Jump rope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side lateral raises</td>
<td>Plank w/ leg raise</td>
<td>Bird-dogs</td>
<td>Ladder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kickboxing punches</td>
<td>Box jumps</td>
<td>Leg lifts</td>
<td>Speed skaters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull ups/Chin ups</td>
<td>Wall sit</td>
<td>Flutter kicks</td>
<td>High knees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small shoulder circles</td>
<td>Lying hip raises (normal, pulses, or single leg)</td>
<td>Crunches (normal, bicycle, reverse, or side)</td>
<td>Jump tucks (keep in mind: high impact)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumbbell flyes on Bosu ball</td>
<td>Kickboxing side kicks</td>
<td>Back extensions on Bosu ball</td>
<td>Step-ups (with or without dumbbells)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse dumbbell flyes</td>
<td>Elevated calf raises (optional: single leg)</td>
<td>Medicine ball twists</td>
<td>Jumping Jacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse snow angels</td>
<td>Stairs (every other, or glute squeeze)</td>
<td>Penguins</td>
<td>Inchworms (two or one-legged)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yoga Cool Down and Stretching

Following the strengthening circuit, it is important to incorporate at least a five minute stretching session. According to athletic coaches and trainers at Kalamazoo College, stretching is critical in order to increase flexibility and range of motion, improve posture, and prevent future injury. Participants create a circle, sitting on yoga mats, and begin static stretches that target legs, arms, back, and hips. Students should be reminded to focus on their breath. If desired, K Team leaders can lead a short yoga sun salutation A (also called “Sun A” or “Surya Namaskar” in Sanskrit) to help students cool down. One sun salutation A should look something like this:

\[ \text{Mountain pose} \rightarrow \text{Upward salute} \rightarrow \text{Standing forward bend} \rightarrow \text{Half standing forward bend} \rightarrow \text{Four-limbed staff pose} \rightarrow \text{Upward facing dog pose (or cobra pose)} \rightarrow \text{Downward facing dog pose} \rightarrow \text{Feet to hands transition} \rightarrow \text{Half standing forward bend} \rightarrow \text{Standing forward bend} \rightarrow \text{Upward salute} \rightarrow \text{Mountain pose} \] (McGonigal, 2010)

If K Team leaders want to do one or a few Sun A’s at the end of a workout, it would help if one of the facilitators is experienced in yoga and has researched the poses/alignment above. Some poses that help transition from static stretching and into guided meditation are double pigeon pose, child’s pose, happy baby pose, knees to chest, and lying spinal twists.

Guided Meditation

Each K Team workout is finished with a guided meditation (written and led by myself) after stretches are complete. I encourage leaders to offer participants the option of leaving K Team before the meditation begins. For some, meditation and stillness can be more of a stressful experience than a relaxing one. I say the following while students are finishing stretching: “We
usually end K Team with a short, guided meditation, but if that doesn’t sound good to you and you would like to leave before we start the meditation, that is totally okay. You’re more than welcome to excuse yourself if that’s what you need.” Like all aspects of K Team, nothing is mandatory, and students should feel that they have a choice of how and when to push themselves, whether mentally or physically. K Team leaders should respect student’s mental and physical boundaries.

If students decide to stay for guided meditation, they can either lay or sit cross-legged on a yoga mat. If desired, students can drape a blanket over themselves or fold one up to create a pillow in order to increase comfort. Facilitators should turn off the lights and close the doors, avoiding outside sounds and distractions. Guided meditations usually last about five to eight minutes. K Team leaders can choose whether they want to do a basic, head to toe relaxation meditation, or if they’d like to do a themed meditation. Listed here are meditation scripts that K Team facilitators can use. It is suggested that leaders read over the meditations, have the “calming music” prepared beforehand, and say the meditations slowly and calmly when reading them aloud.

Guided Meditation Script

*Take a moment to settle into a comfortable position, letting your hands rest by your side, on your tummy, or on your heart. You can close your eyes or keep them gently open. Let your body completely relax.*

*Notice how your body is feeling right now in this very moment.*
Take a deep inhale in, filling your chest and your belly with air, and exhale out the mouth - letting it all go. Continue focusing on your breath, and with each inhale and exhale, begin to slowly relax your body, bit by bit...

Starting with your toes... the bottoms of your feet... relax your ankles... let this relaxing feeling move up into your calves... your knees... relax the fronts and backs of your thighs... your hips... let this relaxing feeling move into your belly... relax your back... and your chest... scan your fingers... hands... arms... let them all relax... let go of tension in your shoulders... and your neck... finally relax your head... your face... and relax that space between eyebrows.

Allow your body to be heavy, and melt into the floor.

[Insert themed meditation section here, if desired].

If thoughts or emotions come up, good or bad, that’s okay. Just keep breathing slowly and deeply through the nose. Remain gently focused on your breath, with each inhale and exhale coming and going in waves.

Let any remaining tension melt away, and take rest.

[Play relaxing music for 1-2 minutes].

When you are ready, you can wiggle your fingers and toes, beginning to wake up your body.

You can stretch your arms and legs a bit to feel your muscles reawakening. When you’re ready, roll onto your favorite side and slowly push yourself up with your arms to seated.
Themed Meditations to Insert

Theme #1: Self love

*Take a moment to consider what it might feel like to unconditionally accept yourself, just as you are. How would it feel? How would it help you? What would unconditionally loving yourself feel like?*

Now I will read some affirmations. You can simply relax as I talk. These affirmations are:

- I am grateful for the things that my body allows me to do.
- My appearance does not equal my worth.
- My body deserves care.
- My body is a valuable body.
- I believe in myself.
- I am a work in progress, always becoming and unbecoming.
- I deserve to be confident and happy.
- I am enough.

Theme #2: Gratitude

*Take a moment to scan your body, thanking the parts that you are particularly grateful for.*

Perhaps your feet for taking you where you want to go, or perhaps your hands for their strength. Whichever part you feel drawn to, thank it, and move on to another part of the body that you are grateful for.

Next, tap into the energy you put forth for taking care of yourself and others. Breathe deeply into your heart center and allow your chest muscles to relax in the awareness of your good effort.
Hold onto this feeling of gratitude in your heart for all that you have, all that you give, and all that you are.

Theme #3: Deep Inner Stillness & Coping With Stress

As your body relaxes, your mind relaxes. Allow your entire body to feel soft and soothed.

Now, take a moment to imagine a happy place. It’s okay if this place is made up. Engage all of your senses: What does this place look like? Feel like? What smells are present?

Allow yourself to be fully present in this happy place. [Pause for about 15 seconds].

Know that you have everything in yourself to cope with stresses that arise in life returning to this happy place and your breath.

Theme #4: Acceptance and Putting Yourself First

Think about a time in your life when you put yourself first. Consider, for a moment, what it might feel like to fully accept your needs, and to always put yourself first in life.

Now I will read some affirmations. You can simply relax as I say them. Each affirmation is true, even if it may not seem true to you right now. These affirmations are:

- I don’t need to compare myself to others to feel good about myself.
- My productivity does not equal my worth.
- I am enough.
- I am for progress, not perfection.
- My body deserves care.
- It is okay to put myself first.
Theme #5: Connecting to Your Core & Confidence

Take another deep inhale, filling that soft space between your ribcage and your hips, and exhale out the mouth.

Imagine a small, warm light glowing in your lower belly. In some Hindu and Buddhist chakra beliefs, this area of your body, in between your belly button and your hips, is where you carry your sense of strength, power, and confidence. With every breath you take, imagine this warm light growing bigger and brighter. As you continue in inhale and exhale, allow this warm light to fill every part of you. You can even try repeating to yourself: I am strong, I am confident, I choose light. [Pause for a few seconds].
K Team Student Feedback: Narratives of Empowerment

In order to gauge the needs of students attending K Team, Perkins and I crafted surveys for participants to give constructive, anonymous feedback. Over seventy percent of students who responded to these surveys all reported the following perceived benefits of attending K Team: improved self esteem; increased energy; stress management; increased strength and flexibility; along with mental and emotional support. In these surveys, we were pleasantly surprised to find students writing in testimonies of empowerment and improvement in well-being. Below are some anecdotal responses that we found to be powerful regarding the effects of K Team on students’ lives:

- “I love the people at K Team, who are kind and welcoming. I also love the atmosphere, which is comfortable and encouraging. The language we use is so positive and loving. The group workouts have introduced me to a lot I did not know about exercise. I can now think of myself as someone strong and able.”

- “This positive and encouraging environment truly represents a TEAM.”

- “I really enjoy coming into a positive space and feeling valued, accepted, and accomplished. K Team brings 3-times-a-week reminders that we all are enough.”

- “I hadn’t exercised in four years before coming to K Team, but this community has made me feel so welcome and empowered.”

- “K Team is a wonderful addition to K College. The instructors are knowledgeable, supportive, enthusiastic, and always give options for people of all fitness levels.”
• “I always feel really loved and comfortable and happy here. It’s GREAT that I can cater the workouts to my own difficulty. I always feel really good afterwards. I also like the variety of workouts and that I can incorporate what I learn into my own workouts.”
• “I like the emphasis K Team has on listening to one’s body and knowing what’s best for your own body. It is such an inclusive environment, and I really appreciate that. K Team is always something I can go to when I want to switch up my workout routine. Also, it’s a nice way to break up the day and socialize while working out. It always feels like a safe, happy space.”
• “K Team during fall quarter was what literally got me to start working out regularly again. The space and the good energy that K Team provided was incredibly motivating and attending K Team early on set the tone for my entire quarter in a really, really great way.”
• “I love that K Team makes me feel good about my body, and I like that the environment is not competitive.”
• “What I love about K Team: Listening to and moving my body; Meeting new people; Encouraging myself and others; Balancing my physical and mental health.”
References


