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Psychology of Sport and Exercise 6 (2005) 313–334

Psychology
OF SPORT AND EXERCISE

www.elsevier.com/locate/psychsport

“Just do it... before you talk yourself out of it”: the self-talk of adults thinking about physical activity

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Available online 30 April 2004

Abstract

Objectives: Little is known about what adults are thinking about and doing for health-promoting physical activity (PA). We examined the PA levels of middle-aged (40–55 years) and older men and women (56 +) as well as their intentions for future activity.

Methods: Random telephone surveys stratified for age, gender and geographic location assessed the weekly PA and plans for exercise among 40 adults.

Results: Numerical data showed that activity patterns were age-determined and gender-patterned with adults aged 40–55 expending far more energy at both work and leisure-time PA than adults aged 56 + . Self-talk strategies occurred among 88% of the respondents but a key strategy used by active people was to ignore activity self-talk and ‘just do it’ lest they talk themselves out of exercising.

Conclusions: Inactive people already know that keeping active is important to their health and still do not participate. The group to target with positive triggering messages, assistance in getting started and reminders are those who already want to be more active but have not got a regular pattern established. Future research is needed to explore the impact of various kinds of social cueing. Messages such as, “Just do it” or “Don’t think about it” may be all that is needed to trigger adults who are already seriously contemplating how to increase their PA.

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Keywords: Exercise; Health promotion; Beliefs; Motivation; Barriers; Leisure

North American adults born prior to 1960 represent a middle-aged cohort called the ‘baby boomers’—the largest and probably healthiest generation of aging adults in history (Health Canada, 1998). Raised on hula hoops and skipping ropes in their childhood, inventing skateboards in their youth, and then dancing ‘The Twist’ at ‘sock hops’ in their teens, many post-World War II children had early opportunities to develop recreation skills and patterns. Thus boomers have impacted on society in terms of leisure dimensions, and apparently have been an economic force for over five decades by driving sales of running shoes, tennis rackets, ski equipment, and more recently, the golf industry (Foot, 2000).

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Lately, there has been concern that the boomers might finally be slowing down, and spending more time 'resting' such that sitting is projected to be one of the "most popular leisure activities in the years to come" (Foot, 2000, p. 152). In support of boomer's changing lifestyles, a Statistics Canada survey of 20,000 households found aging baby boomers were "hypertensive and out of shape" (Active Living Canada, 1996, p. 1). A mere 55% have healthy cholesterol levels compared to 86% of adults two decades ago (Active Living Canada, 1996). In addition, 'arthritis is booming' in Canada's 9.9 million baby boomers who began turning 50 in 1997 (Arthritis Society of Canada, 2003). In the United States, demographers predict persons over 65 with activity limitations will nearly triple by 2040 (American Association of Retired Persons [AARP], 1998) supporting Foot's (2000) forecast that health care is at a crossroads of greater consumer demand with rapidly diminishing resources.

Even though a 1997 national study by the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (CFLRI, 1999) found that all age groups were more physically active in 1995 than in 1981, little is actually known about the work and leisure patterns for specific age and gender cohorts. With older parents, younger children and careers in full swing, middle-aged adults may be unable to sustain desirable levels of physical activity. How physically active are the baby boomers now? What are their future intentions, if any?

Demographers predict that the boomer generation will sink the health care system by their sheer numbers, even though there are some indications that adults aged 40–55 are aging better than previous generations (National Advisory Council on Aging, 2002). To sustain healthy aging, the middle-aged population will have to adhere to the *US Surgeon General's Report* (US Department of Health & Human Services, 1997) or Health Canada's (1998) *Physical Activity Guide* advocating 30–60 min of physical activity on most days of the week. Paffenbarger, Hyde, Wing, and Hsieh (1984) have estimated that an optimal energy expenditure on leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) for middle-aged men is about 2000 kcal/week, or the equivalent of walking 3 miles everyday. For middle-aged women and for more elderly cohorts, research is lacking and the optimal exercise prescription for them is not quite as clear.

What is clear is that "physical activity improves health" (Health Canada, 1999, p. 1). Physiologists are in agreement that accelerated aging is a result of physical *inactivity* such that North Americans appear to be aging faster than nature intended (O'Brien Cousins & Horne, 1999). Regular forms of exercise reduce risk of mortal diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes (Bokovoy & Blair, 1994) and prevent or minimize high blood pressure, arthritis, osteoporosis, stroke and depression (Health Canada, 1999). In terms of maintaining functional fitness, offering a better quality of life, and promoting lifelong autonomy, scientists have shown that regular physical activity plays an essential role (Spiriduso, 1995). Among current elders, research suggests that 50% of all frailty is preventable, and possibly even reversible (O'Brien Cousins, 1998), with adequate levels of daily physical activity (American College of Sports Medicine, 1998; Fiatarone et al., 1994).

Social context and life stage may hold the key to understanding why sedentary behavior is so prevalent, but North Americans generally hold very positive values for the role of exercise in promoting health and well-being (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Virtually everyone wants to live a long and healthy life, but only 40% of individuals are currently adequately active—a number that diminishes even more among women and among older age groups (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1997). As baby boomers enter their mid-1950s, and as their parents reach advanced age, scientists know little about what these two age groups are actually doing and thinking about their levels of physical activity and what they intend to change if anything.

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