Motivating Participants to Be More Physically Active

“The biggest contributor to premature disability is physical inactivity. The biggest contributor to inactivity is low expectations.”

—Waneen Spirduso
Introduction

The Center for Healthy Aging is proud to offer another timely physical activity issue brief, providing practical information and strategies for improving physical activity programs serving older adults. This brief is the fifth in a series promoting best practice physical activity programming for older adults. All of the briefs can be found on the Center for Healthy Aging Web site at www.healthyagingprograms.org.

Motivating Participants to Be More Physically Active is the first in a three-part series focusing on recruiting and retaining older adults in physical activity programs. In this brief, we describe:

- The combined impact of historical perspectives and personal belief systems on older adults’ perception of physical activity,
- The negative impact of biases and stereotypes created by the media, and
- Social norms and personal perceptions about aging that influence motivation to be active.

We also offer program directors practical strategies for addressing barriers and for promoting physical activity.

Generational Bias

Why are so many older adults inactive? Perhaps it is a function of how they were raised to think about physical activity. Life-course Theory helps us to find some of the answers.

Life-course Theory emphasizes that lives are influenced by the historical times and places experienced over a lifetime (Bradley & Longino, 2001). The resulting opinions and attitudes formed throughout the lifespan are referred to as an individual’s personal belief system. When the personal belief system is further influenced by age cohort experiences, we refer to it as generational bias.

Some of the more commonly held personal beliefs reflecting generational bias about physical activity are summarized below.

Physical Activity as Work

For older adults who grew from childhood into adulthood before today’s labor-saving technology, daily life was much more physically demanding, forging a strong association between physical activity and hard physical labor—both on the job and at home. Time spent in sedentary relaxation may have been considered the reward for a hard day’s work. Therefore, some older adults may view physical activity as a negative intrusion on retirement. Additionally, some older adults may have chronic conditions and disabilities, which can foster negative perceptions about physical activity.

To motivate older adults to be more active, we may need to address their perceptions that physical activity is hard work and/or damaging. Even older adults who believe in the general benefits of physical activity may still believe that it can be difficult for people who are physically frail or living with multiple chronic conditions.

A survey conducted by AARP showed that simply titling the effort “physical activity” rather than the more negatively perceived title “physical exercise” had a major impact on the appeal of becoming active. It is clear that programming for older adults must address safety, and should highlight how being physically active contributes to the management of chronic disease and increases the ability to perform activities of daily living. Tailoring messages to individuals, while at the same time promoting group activities are important strategies to employ.

Deeply Ingrained Gender Bias

Until the latter part of the 20th century, females were often discouraged from engaging in physical activity. School policies recognized very few “appropriate” sports for girls, failed to fund female sports teams, and required girls to wear dresses, which made active play difficult or unsuitable. These policies effectively relegated girls to watching boys play. Exercise was often considered unladylike at best, and harmful at worst. Anecdotally, we have heard that many women were counseled by physicians to avoid hard physical exertion for fear of damaging “female organs.”

Upward Mobility and Lack of Physical Activity

Gender-based beliefs about exercise were compounded by the industrial revolution. Initially, automation was new and expensive, establishing a strong and long-lasting link between financial success and reduced physical exertion. There was a clear distinction between “laborers” and “gentlemen” who did little physical work, and between housewives and
“ladies of the house” who had domestic help. Many older adults of today started with the push lawnmower, traded up to the power lawnmower, up further to the riding lawnmower, and when they had really “made it,” they could hire someone else to mow the grass. Indeed, many adults over 60 have spent a good portion of their lives seeking ways to “remove the burden” of physical exertion.

A strategy that can be motivating is to help older adults discover that some of those former physical activities that were replaced by technology can, in fact, be enjoyable, safe, and produce a sense of accomplishment.

Media Images of Physical Fitness and Aging

The mass media often portrays physical fitness as an extreme ideal, placing it out of reach of the average individual, regardless of age. The consumer culture’s preoccupation with perfect bodies and youthful images can be demeaning to older adults, creating negative associations with age-related changes in our bodies (Bradley & Longino, 2001).

Not surprisingly, older adults are often characterized in the media as frail and dependent. Conversely, other media advertisements promote the “woofies” (well-off-older-folks) who are marketed as slender, healthy, financially secure, and actively pursuing leisure activities. The resulting cultural images of aging reduces older adults to caricatures, leaving them both seriously underrepresented and marginalized by the media (Krueger, 2001). Such extreme images can negatively impact self-esteem and limit the lifestyle options to which older adults relate or aspire (Vesperi, 2001).

Program planners may find it useful to encourage discussion about such stereotyping asking older adults to share distorted examples of media stereotypes with each other, to help them acquire realistic perceptions about their capacities and the many benefits of participating in physical activity programs.

Perceptions about Aging

Social Norms

Another barrier to older adults’ participation in physical activity may be widespread social norms that foster misconceptions about aging. Even today, some health care practitioners and older adults themselves assume that declining function, physical and mental frailty, and falling are normal and unavoidable consequences of aging.

One approach to debunking this myth is through organization or community-wide educational campaigns. Such campaigns can demonstrate that physical decline is not inevitable, and that older adults who adopt more active lifestyles can enhance and maintain their independence and physical functioning well into later life. Fortunately, there is much research that reinforces this positive message. (For information on keeping current with the research in physical activity, refer to Physical Activity Issue Brief #4 posted at www.healthyagingprograms.org.)

Individual Perceptions about Aging

Ultimately, negative perceptions and limited views of “successful aging” can have a dampening effect on older adults’ self-esteem, body image, and self-efficacy (Bradley & Longino, 2001). Researchers have found that motivation to change behaviors is significantly influenced by our perceptions of self, and our perceptions about how others view us (Shepard, 1999). More specifically, Shepard noted, an individual’s motivation may be influenced by:

- Attitudes toward the behavior (physical activity);
- Perceived “norms” for the behavior;
- Beliefs that certain influencers (e.g., doctor, spouse, friend) think s/he should or should not perform the behavior;
- Desire to comply (or not) with perceived wishes of the doctor, spouse, or other;
- Belief that the change (increasing physical activity) is positive; and/or
- Belief that action taken will result in the desired change.
Widespread negative messages about aging contribute to older adults doubting their ability to be more active. This is especially true among those who have experienced functional losses, often resulting in diminished self-esteem and self-efficacy (Dishman, 1994). In addition, research shows that late-life physical activity choices are often dependent on a person’s perception of what is, or is not age-appropriate behavior (Cousins, 1997). Thus, helping older adults reframe the messages they hear from the media, the community, and from within themselves will help to motivate participation in physical activity.

**Action Steps for Changing Perceptions**

Ideally, we want to motivate older adults to participate in various types of physical activity, including strength training, flexibility, endurance, and balance activities. (Refer to Physical Activity Issue Brief #2: Designing Safe and Effective Physical Activity Programs at www.healthyagingprograms.org.) Findings from strength training studies provide excellent information to change perceptions of aging and to make physical activity personally relevant. Specifically, research has shown that the average adult loses approximately 1.5% of strength capability per year from peak strength in early adulthood, resulting in a loss of about 30% by age 60, 45% by age 70, and 60% by age 80. Yet, the good news is that older adults can make significant strength gains at any age and can stave off these aging-related losses (Fiatarone, 1994).

Many practical solutions to the barriers mentioned in this brief, as well as strategies applying the cited research findings were found in the Center for Healthy Aging’s ten Best Practice in Physical Activity Programming sites. Several of the programs motivated older adults by relating physical weakness and de-conditioning to loss of specific functions that are related to activities of daily living. Successful programs have helped adults see that physical activity participation may be warranted if a person is:

- Using his/her arms to help rise from a chair;
- Struggling to lift sacks of groceries or reach something on a high shelf; and/or
- Avoiding social opportunities due to concerns about transportation barriers such as steps, inaccessibility to parking, or other inconveniences.

Also, some of the sites have found it helpful to:

- Ask older adult participants to share their physical activity experiences with other, less active peers;
- Engage volunteer activity leaders who are older adults;
- Organize support groups and volunteer coaches to promote and maintain physical activity;
- Convey an expectation of participation in physical activity programming to all new center participants and staff members; positioning active older adults as a social norm; and
- Help participants set relevant goals with short-term outcomes to help reinforce a commitment to physical activity participation.

To motivate older adults to be more physically active, health promotion and aging service professionals should consider taking the time to:

- Understand how personal belief systems about physical activity influence perception of all physical activity programs and messages;
- Recognize the impact of negative stereotypes and media images on perceived health status and health behavior choices;
- Create messages and programs that link fitness to the ability to remain independent while remaining mindful of challenges faced by individuals; and
- Work with older individuals to set goals that are realistic, motivating, and personalized.
References


Suggested Web sites

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Growing Stronger: Strength Training for Older Adults
www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/growing_stronger/growing_stronger.pdf

International Council on Active Aging
www.icaa.cc

National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Aged 50 and Older
www.agingblueprint.org

National Institute on Aging
Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging

NCOA’s Center for Healthy Aging
www.healthyagingprograms.org
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