



center for
Healthy Aging
model health programs for communities

Maintaining Participation of Older Adults in Community-Based Physical Activity Programs



“There is good news for all Americans. Scientific evidence shows that physical activity done at a moderate intensity level can produce health benefits. If people have been sedentary, they can improve their health and well-being with regular, moderate levels of activity each day.”

*Physical Activity and Health
A Report of the Surgeon General, 1996*

Introduction

This issue brief is the third in a three-part series about motivating, recruiting, and reengaging older adults in community-based physical activity programs. The first issue brief in this series, *Motivating Participants to Be More Physically Active*, describes the combined impact of historical perspectives and personal belief systems on older adults' perceptions of physical activity, the negative impact of biases and stereotypes created by the media, and social norms and personal perceptions about aging that influence an individual's motivation to be active. It also provides a list of action steps to change these perceptions. *Motivating Participants to Be More Physically Active* is available at www.healthyagingprograms.org/content.asp?sectionid=73&ElementID=305.

The second issue brief in the series, *Recruiting Older Adults Into Your Physical Activity Programs*, outlines the key components of a social marketing framework for designing a recruitment plan, shares successful recruitment tips from community-based organizations that conduct physical activity programs for older adults, and provides practical, one-on-one communication techniques for recruitment. This issue brief is also available on the Center for Healthy Aging Web site, <http://www.healthyagingprograms.org/content.asp?sectionid=73&ElementID=384>.

To increase participation in physical activity programming, older adults need help not only in getting started, but also in staying involved for the duration of the program. Research shows that 22% to 76% of older adults who attend physical activity programs drop out within six months (Guerna, 2003; Schmidt, 2000). Some reasons why older adults leave physical activity programs include: illness, joint and muscle problems, pain, limited mobility or loss of ability to perform activities of daily living, reluctance to leave home, an unattractive program location, loss of interest in the program, logistic issues like schedule conflicts, weather and transportation, caregiving responsibilities, vacations, and the preference to exercise in one's own home (Center for the Advancement of Health, 2006; Seymour et al., 2006). In this issue brief, we focus on strategies that challenge the notion that attrition of older adults from physical activity programs is unavoidable.

What Do Retention and Reengagement Mean?

Retention activities motivate older adults to continue their program participation. As we explained in the second issue brief in this series, efforts should be made to discuss retention with older adults during recruitment, prior to their enrollment in the program. Program staff need to ask about potential barriers to ongoing participation and proactively address those barriers. When retention is treated as part of program enrollment for seniors, the importance of continued participation is reinforced. Further, if staff members talk about the importance of staying in the program, the older adult may appreciate the support staff offer.

Reengagement refers to overcoming obstacles and restoring interest in program participation. For staff to be successful at reengagement they need to be familiar with high-risk periods for disengagement; for example, when there's a change in the health status of the older adult or a family member, unanticipated competing demands or priorities, unexpected losses and grieving periods, a change in income or housing, or a change in program location or leadership.

Strategies That Work

Research has identified factors that are likely to keep older adults attending physical activity programs. In one physical activity study targeting urban minority women ages 40 to 70 years, investigators used a variety of retention methods to keep participants involved, including: intensive telephone contacts, scheduling meetings at convenient times and locations, using bilingual and bicultural staff, and offering incentives (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2002). Other researchers have found that older adults are more likely to stay in physical activity programs if they perceive benefits to their health or fitness, have spousal support, find the program to be in an accessible and convenient location, and the program has built-in reinforcements to participation (Dishman et al., 1985). Because these research findings reveal that ongoing participation is affected by many factors, retention and reengagement efforts must likewise be multifaceted.

Retention Strategies

We have collected tips and practical strategies for retention from staff at organizations that have implemented physical activity programs at the ten best practice program sites, and have successfully retained participants. They recommend the following:

- **Celebrate milestones**—Keep track of anniversary dates of participants' enrollment in the program and celebrate those anniversaries. Also acknowledge other personal milestones, like welcoming a new grandchild or celebrating a birthday. Milestones provide opportunities to reaffirm commitment and contributions to the program or group, and to talk about benefits of the program.
- **Use incentives**—Incentives have been used successfully to strengthen commitment to participation. Incentives can help instill friendly competition and re-ignite excitement for the program. Providing incentives for meeting individual-level goals, or for maintaining regular or long-term participation is effective.

When considering incentives for attendance, have participants fill out tickets for each physical activity session they attend. Draw three winning tickets each month. Provide tangible incentives, like coupons to purchase videos or dumbbells for strength training, tote-bags, fanny-packs, CD holders, exercise bands, water bottle holders, and small zipper bags.
- **Minimize costs**—Establish scholarships or fees on a sliding scale basis, provide transportation, or arrange for car pools. For grandparents helping to raise their grandchildren, provide no-cost child care during physical activity programs.
- **Use a tracking and follow-up system**—It is important to have simple and effective tracking systems that alert you to changes in an individual's participation. Systems that trigger prompt responses to resolve problems immediately are particularly helpful. Assign the program instructor, another staff member, or a volunteer to be responsible for reviewing attendance records on a bi-weekly basis. Call "no-shows" after they have missed two class sessions to find out their reasons for being absent. Is there something about the physical activity program that the older adult does not like, or has he or she lost interest?

When following up with a participant who has been absent, stress the benefits of the program and how much the person is missed. Be humble and accept responsibility if the problem is one that you or your team may have caused. "Please give us another chance" may be an appropriate response. Talking with the older adult can also help assess whether the absence is due to a temporary personal issue, or a problem that is likely to be long-term. Determine if there are ways you can help overcome these issues. If absenteeism is due to illness, send a get well card to reinforce your support. Assess whether the individual can rejoin the program or be linked to another program at a different location or at a later date.

- **Enlist the support of family, friends, and other providers**—Use all potential members of the older adult's support system. If he or she has made friends with program participants, ask them to help make contact with the absent older adult, and encourage him/her to rejoin the program. Educate relatives about the importance of physical activity and ask them to help you explain to their older adult family member the benefits of staying in the program. Ask family members to notify you if an emergency or illness arises. If appropriate, identify a case manager or health care provider who is familiar with the older adult, and who can help reinforce the importance and benefits of program participation.
- **Be patient and flexible**—Be flexible, responsive, and willing to negotiate with the senior and what he/she can and is prepared to do. Thoughtfully assess how ready or capable an individual is to get and/or stay physically active. Nurture and support older adults' desire to stay involved in physical activity programs. Avoid telling individuals what to do and giving information to those who may not be ready or interested. Unwanted advice elicits resistance. It is preferable to wait and suggest a temporary hiatus like, "It sounds like you may be more willing to join after your husband gets out of the hospital." Try to agree about a date when the individual will leave the program and when it would be okay for the program staff to re-initiate contact.

Reengagement Strategies

Successful reengagement requires competent, committed, and resilient staff who approach those who have become disengaged with respect, without judgment, and with gentle persistence and optimism. Here are tips for avoiding attrition:

- **Be understanding**—Avoid negative labels to describe older adults who stop participating in a program. Tailor your recovery approach to focus on the older adult’s agenda, not yours. Consider negotiating a “time out” or time away from the program. Use affirming statements like, “I care about you” or “You have been missed.” Remember that if anger is expressed, it may well be about something unrelated to you or the physical activity program.
- **Be supportive yet persistent**—Contact those who have been absent in the evenings or on weekends. As you contact those who may have drifted, it is important to think positively and prepare a script of what you plan to say in advance. Emphasize a fresh start or a new beginning—“Can we start over?”

It may be necessary to remind individuals that their participation is not “all or nothing.” This communicates that you are sensitive to what is going on in their lives. Give the older adult the opportunity to successfully manage life events, without being a program disappointment or failure. Offer to incorporate review sessions to re-engage individuals who must miss sessions.

Final Thoughts

During the site visits NCOA staff and its partners made to the ten *Best Practices in Physical Activity Programming* sites, we had the opportunity to meet with a number of older adult program participants. Some of these participants had been taking part in the physical activity programs for a relatively short period of time—a few weeks or months—but many of them had been participating for several years. Overall, those people who had been enjoying the classes for many years seemed to feel the classes offered a sense of community—they enjoyed interacting with their fellow classmates, as well as the program instructor(s) and/or program staff. Creating a friendly environment—where the staff are encouraging and helpful, the location is appropriate and accessible, and the older adults are treated as valuable clients who are not only gaining physical fitness from participating in the programs, but are also contributing to the success of the program, helps ensure that participants will keep coming back for many years to come.

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Additional Resources

- ICAA Strategy Session. (2005). *Motivation and Reward Systems That Encourage Activity, Post-event Summary Report*. www.activeforlife.info/resources/files/ICAA_Strategy_Session_Summary.pdf.
- NCOA's Center for Healthy Aging. www.healthyaagingprograms.org.
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