



# Exercise – Why Bother?

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

Lifestyle changes and modern advances have created an environment where it doesn't seem odd to drive to the gym so we can run around in circles or walk on a rubber conveyor belt. Computer games entice children to run races and fight battles, while physically exercising only their fingers. These accepted routines are taking a health toll. Heart disease in children and the rise in diabetes and circulatory diseases in adults are undeniable indicators of unsatisfactory lifestyle choices.

One aspect of Health Promotion provides individuals with the knowledge and skills to enhance well-being. We already know that exercise offers many benefits aside from enriching fitness and self-image. Unfortunately, we don't always act on our knowledge. Specific risks linked to poor physical fitness include illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Eating nutritiously and maintaining a healthy weight are two components essential to well-being. Independent of these, physical activity provides its own health benefits.

## Benefits

Benefits of a physically active lifestyle include:

- *physical “body fitness”*: body toning, circulation, strength, endurance, energy level, flexibility and mobility are substantially improved with increased activity. It also boosts the body's immune system and prevents diseases or minimizes their impact. Heart disease and Type 2 Diabetes, serious health problems in Newfoundland and Labrador, can be prevented or their onset delayed or the magnitude of their health effects diminished by regular exercise. This is a remarkable preventive strategy when you consider that diabetes can be developing for seven to ten years before it is detected and by then there is already damage to the small blood vessels of the eyes and kidneys.
- *pain control “distraction”*: pain can be modified by regular activity, due to improved joint flexibility, muscle tone and circulation and a direct impact on the brain's processing of pain information.
- *mental “focus and direction”*: a physically active routine creates a healthier body and prepares us to handle stress or offer relief. It provides the opportunity to take

a mental “time out” and think only about the body's movement, or to focus on one issue at a time. Either way, the body experiences less stress, the muscles are forced into rhythmic motion and the overall feeling can be one of calmness. Emotional balance is also promoted through the release of negative energy.

- *social “connection”*: many activities are designed for group involvement, others can easily accommodate pairs. This creates the opportunity for social support, extra motivation and a sense of belonging.

Whether it is formal “exercise” or a deliberate effort to increase ordinary daily movement, any behaviour which gets the body moving, increases circulation, improves muscle tone or assists in achieving optimal flexibility qualifies in contributing to enhanced health.

## Motivation

Initially we may be interested in boosting our activity because we become aware of the potential health or image benefits, we learn of family genes which put us at risk of developing preventable illnesses, or we receive an unfavourable medical report. In any case, we believe that by being more active we will reap benefits. Choosing to take action depends on several things: our belief about the level and magnitude of our risk; the amount of effort required; and the pleasure involved. In other words... how likely are we to develop heart disease, diabetes or high blood pressure? (Lots of relatives lived to be old and healthy.) How serious is elevated blood sugar or cholesterol anyway? (Mine is not as high as Mary's and she is healthy.) How inconvenient is it to start an activity regimen? (It takes too much time, money and planning.) Do we enjoy physical activity? (I'd rather have my teeth pulled without anesthetic.) To initiate or maintain an activity program we can adjust attitudes, incorporate realistic expectations and overcome reasonable obstacles.

## Overcoming Obstacles

*Interest*: To generate initial interest, weigh the benefits. Explore family history and check your vitals against your age and how long you plan on living healthy. Then you decide. It may be difficult to maintain a new lifestyle. Tips to keep you going are: involve a friend –

it's not easy to quit on a friend; include variety; set small goals and celebrate achieving each of them. To prevent relapse, scrutinize your reasons for not wanting to continue. When obstacles are defined and anticipated you can plan ways to overcome them.

**Time:** If you can't fit everything into your schedule, you may want to consolidate interests, demands and responsibilities. Some activities have the advantage of accomplishing multiple tasks. If you have ever tried ironing or using a treadmill while watching the news (or your favourite TV program) then you understand the concept well. Family responsibilities or a desire to spend time with friends may be priorities which can be satisfied by arranging an outdoor hike. Create combinations within your time and activity restrictions to meet personal, social, family and recreational needs.

**Cost:** When cost is a limiting factor, select activities which are free or low cost, or balance the benefits so the cost is justifiable.

### Matching Purpose and Activity

Focusing on **Physical Fitness** means: trying to achieve optimal fitness and preparedness; attempting to overcome health conditions such as high blood pressure or insulin tolerance; or trying to lessen the impact and limitations of chronic illnesses. By starting out conservatively, you can build personal capacity. One mistake often made is to start off with such vigor and determination that it leaves you feeling stiff and aching all over. That isn't usually a suitable motivating factor to continue. Attaining good muscle tone requires regular activity but it need not be extreme. Weight control is best achieved in combination with appropriate nutrition and reduced stress. Illness prevention or control responds to specific routines designed to increase heart rate, metabolic rate, circulation or flexibility.

Unless you have significant lower limb problems (feet, ankles, knees, hips), walking is a great way to start. It allows personal pacing, offers a great chance to socialize or enjoy solitude, may have no cost, and can be easily altered to increase or decrease exertion. These factors put you in control of the process.

If you do have joint problems, swimming is easily modifiable and presents a gentle, non-weight bearing alternative without putting added pressure on painful joints or limbs. This is particularly beneficial for people with arthritis. Exercise intensity can be increased by introducing a few variations in movement or by using water toys. However, accessing a pool in the winter may be difficult and costly.

For those ardent exercisers looking for ways to push their strength, endurance and flexibility to the limit there are plenty of organized programs or self-initiated ventures. Fitness classes offer routine and predictability.

Hiking, skiing and kayaking are more demanding and throw in the bonus of adventure. These selections are usually associated with a significant cost and often only embraced by earnest exercise enthusiasts.

Focusing on **Mental Fitness** uses physical activity to meet mental health needs by choosing activities which enable us to feel better mentally, emotionally and socially. This positions activity as one of many possible methods of accomplishing the desired goals. Engaging in hobbies, crafts, volunteer work, socializing or other non-active behaviours also serve these needs.

Leisure activities soothe or clear mental congestion. Focusing on an enjoyable activity is sometimes all that is needed to provide a distraction from mental or emotional distress. Gardening, taking a nature walk, or even doing housework attempt to calm the mind, not exert the body but they add health benefits by increasing overall activity level and reducing stress.

---

**“... any behaviour which gets the body moving, increases circulation, improves muscle tone or assists in achieving optimal flexibility qualifies in contributing to enhanced health.”**

---

Emotional balance is expressed in our ability to handle anticipated and unexpected life events which have positive or negative implications for us. We can use physical activity to provide release for the sporadic and intense emotions of anger and grief or to ease the swing between emotional highs and lows. The level of activity will match the intensity of the emotion. High energy exercise is necessary to minimize the physical impact of anger. Comforting exercise routines will assist in balancing out the body's response to natural emotional reactions.

Social interactions are our primary means of learning where we fit in the world, verifying our values and judgements, and establishing a sense of belonging and connection. Joining an exercise class, walking with a friend, or going on a wilderness weekend course are examples of integrating social and physical health goals.

**D**on't put your life on hold until some magic point is reached. Look around... there are no guarantees. Act now. Appreciate now. Live now!

---

*Claudette Coombs is an EAP Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Claudette Coombs (ext. 242) or Marie Wall (ext. 265).*