

## Sport, Physical Activity and Society – A1.

### Part 1:

In March 2020 the world stood still as the Covid-19 pandemic took over globally, this meant that athletes and the public had all access to their physical activities withdrawn for the necessary duration, all leisure facilities and sports clubs had to stop operating so it became increasingly difficult for people to stay active, especially with only key workers retaining their ability to go to work. Schools were closed which meant that children were unable to attend and participate in their physical education lessons, which alongside their breaks which constitutes a large proportion of their physical activity levels which the NHS recommends peoples aged 5-18 should complete 60 minutes a day of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity. The World Health Organization (2022) has recommended that all adults aged between 18 and 64 should complete around 75-150 minutes of intense aerobic exercise every week. The Couch to 5K app issues a progressive 9-week, 3 times a week plan for your runs which helps you build towards these recommended figures by the WHO and not be daunted by creating your own plan. The first run on week 1 begins with a 5-minute walk followed by alternating 60 seconds run time to 90 seconds walking. By week 9 the 5-minute walk is still the starting point but now followed by 30 minutes of running.

As a knock-on effect of all that came with the Covid-19 lockdown many online intervention projects become very popular as for most people it appeared to be the only option. One programme that specifically become very popular was the Couch to 5k programme which between March 2020 and the end of June 2020 had more than 858,000 new downloads what was a 92% increase in comparison to the same period in 2019 where it was downloaded 448,000 times (BBC News, 2020). Couch to 5k was created to inspire beginners, it was developed by someone who was in the same position as its intended participants, a new runner named Josh Clark, he started the intervention programme back in 1996 with the intention to inspire his mother, who was in her 50's to get off the couch and get into running. In 2016 the free fitness app was launched by the NHS in partnership with BBC Sport, by 2024 it had reached a monumental milestone of 7 million downloads.

Clark began his journey with running after going through a painful breakup at 23 years old, he did not want his mother to go through the same agonizing first few weeks of running which he endured so decided to create a 9 week exercise plan which integrated walking and running to ease her into it, thus created the Couch to 5K as we know it today. (McManus, CNN Health, 2021)

Active Wellbeing Society (2019) has gone into detail the journey one individual named Gemma had experienced after beginning the Couch to 5k programme and she says that she had started with the aim of getting fit and healthy via a new hobby of running. The individual stated that before she began the programme her life consisted of taking medication to control her anxiety and that her health and

fitness levels were not at a good level. While she found it tough, the encouragement provided by the run leader helped to motivate her each week, making her feel good within herself. Upon completion of the programme, Gemma expressed that her life had changed completely, and the medication for her anxiety was no longer necessary as running is now the medication. That is an example of a massive success from the programme which has completely changed the life of an individual who was a complete novice to running upon starting who understood that they needed to make a change to their life to combat the mental health issues which were holding them back daily.

Mark Kennedy, founder of the None to Run has published an article which includes what they would call three flaws about the Couch to 5k app, stating that they do not include any strength and mobility exercises, the incorporation of these would help a lot with beginners as they may not have the lower body strength that is required when running. These exercises could also reduce the likelihood of any injury occurrences and require no equipment. The source also claims that week 1 of the programme is far too intense for beginning runners, claiming that a 90-second rest is not enough recovery time after a 60-second run. The article also claims that having a daunting week 1 of the programme physically and mentally will tend to make a lot of people drop out before seeing any results and picking up momentum to persevere for the remaining weeks. (Kennedy, 2024)

Swain-Wilson, (2020) writing for business insider has shared her experiences with the Couch to 5k process, she begins by saying that the app she used was very user-friendly, which is important as you would want to have a positive from the get go before beginning the programme, a lot of people find working technology difficult and if they were struggling to work the app then they would be frustrated before even stepping outdoors to tackle the first run. Swain-Wilson was also impressed that her programme allowed her to choose how to structure her 3 runs a week and decided to go for every other day to allow herself a rest in between runs which I have found a lot of people have followed too. The author says that she is in a much better shape after participating in comparison to beforehand and feels much more confident in her abilities during her runs. Another thing that impressed her was that Couch to 5k is not just for outdoor running and you can still log your running on a treadmill which allows you to see how fast you are moving and not just how far which enables you to see further results too.

After conducting research and looking at statistics, it is fair to say that the Couch to 5k has been a success so far, changing the lives of a lot of people with the positives most certainly over weighing the negatives amongst a collection of articles published. The feedback which has been provided online has a great variety of ages, cultures, gender, weight groups and more which shows that the programme is there for all walks of life to use and get along with. However, there have been some recommendations on how to adjust the programme to make it easier and focus on injury prevention too in the beginning weeks which would be a welcome addition to the programme and make participants more comfortable and trusting in the process.

## Part 2:

It is very well documented that exercise has links to improving not only your physical well-being but also to mental health, keeping yourself active and exercising regularly can help you to take your mind off certain things which may be causing you to feel stressed, anxious or face depression. Ecotherapy is a formal treatment which involves taking part in activities outside in nature and it has been proven that it can help people that suffer with mild to moderate depression. The government has prioritized improving the physical and mental well-being of the public with the hopes of preventing diseases and improving the quality of life. A lot of people do not understand what exactly physical activity is and would think it is typically just participating in sports but that is not the case. The World Health Organization's definition of physical activity is “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure”

Exercising is a great way to help you feel better about yourself, with the increased production of endorphins, these are a neurotransmitter which help with pain relief, stress reduction and mood improvements. Participation in physical activity helps to stimulate social inclusion therefore will provide a reduction in the number of people who suffer from isolation.

Outdoor exercising is a great route to take as it can also help to strengthen the immune system and provide exposure to vitamin D. Vitamin D has got many potential health benefits, it helps the body with the absorption of calcium, which our bones need to stay strong, it also helps to regulate blood pressure and can reduce tension in the arteries and also it could help to fend off some types of cancers.

Going back to the Covid-19 pandemic and all leisure centre closures causing a lack of facilities being available to use, many people started turning to outdoor exercises to stay active and found a lot of benefits in comparison to the indoor training people would do when facilities were an option. For starters you do not have to pay at all to get outdoors and get active and instead of being on the same tedious gym floor you can explore and see new natural beauties while staying active. When you are training with beautiful landscapes around you it can make it a lot easier to carry on and is a sense of motivation. Even if you do not have the time to fit a proper outdoor exercise into a busy lifestyle, active commuting whether that be by foot or by cycling is associated with a rough 10% decrease in cardiovascular diseases and can help with a 30% reduction in chances of becoming a type 2 diabetic.

With the rise of social media in recent years, many people have fallen to the ease of sitting and scrolling your phone for hours a day and have neglected the necessity of fresh air, Gregory Bratman PhD, an assistant professor at the University of Washington shared his findings that being in contact with nature is associated with feeling a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Without this connection to nature many people can begin to lose this sense of meaning and purpose and can then start to suffer with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

## Reference list

## Part 1

1. NHS (2024) *Physical activity guidelines for children and young people*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people/>
2. BBC (2020) *Coronavirus: Lockdown boosts Couch to 5k downloads*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53242779>
3. NHS (2023) *Get running with Couch to 5k*. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/get-running-with-couch-to-5k/#:~:text=Couch%20to%205K%20is%20a,each%20of%20the%209%20weeks>
4. The Active Wellbeing Society (2019) *Couch to 5k – Gemma's Story*. Available at: <https://theaws.co.uk/couch-to-5k-gemmas-story/>
5. Kennedy, M (2024) *3 Flaws In Couch to 5k (And A Better Plan For Beginner Runners)* Available at: <https://www.nonetorun.com/blog/couch-to-5k-running-plan-alternative>
6. Swain-Wilson, S (2020) *I tried a Couch to 5K program for a month and saw impressive results*. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/i-tried-couch-to-5k-program-2019-3>

## Part 2:

7. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/how-nature-benefits-mental-health/>
8. <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/07-06-2022-cycling-and-walking-can-help-reduce-physical-inactivity-and-air-pollution--save-lives-and-mitigate-climate-change#>
9. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>