

A report on one man's engagement with exercise, evaluating his motives or barriers to doing so

Introduction

For many years, the importance of engaging in exercise in order to maintain 'good' health has been discussed (Potteiger, 2018). There are many studies conducted across genders and age demographics, providing such supporting evidence that adherence to engagement with exercise is always a positive behaviour pattern, in order to stave off - or improve - symptoms associated with many conditions such as Cardiovascular Disease, Diabetes, and hypertension, amongst others (Anderson et al, 2001. Reid, 2021). It is worth noting that many of the conditions that benefit from increased engagement with exercise are also those that can occur due to - or can be exacerbated by - increased levels of body fat (Pop et al, 2020).

In addition to this, exercise conducted in different social or environmental settings has shown effective in not just obesity and its associated physical conditions, but also in mental conditions such as depression and anxiety, which can either provide a positive or negative chicken-and-egg relationship between the condition and exercise – that is to say that they can either help or hinder each other (López-Torres Hidalgo, 2019).

Despite these known benefits, obesity levels are consistently increasing through all age groups across the country (World Health Organisation, 2022), and activity levels have been consistently decreasing (Sport Wales, 2022), albeit at a slower rate than levels of obesity are rising. Therefore, it's certainly important to determine how to best to ensure adherence to exercise across the population.

In order to successfully increase engagement with exercise it's important to assess which barriers and motives come into play, however these can all be subject to context and individual variables (Dishman, 2013). In efforts to make sense of and predict patterns of behaviour within the general public and individuals, many theories are applied to the data gathered using methods such as in-person interviews. Accordingly, this report will be based on an interview with Participant 19250776, which will aim to find some background on his childhood relationship with exercise, find out why he currently does – or doesn't - engage with exercise, how the COVID 19 pandemic affected his engagement, and how best to encourage adherence going forward.

Method

The questions used within the interview (shown in the appendix) were chosen to fulfil certain criteria; the aim was to accurately find any-and-all factors affecting Participant 19250776's engagement with exercise, to then apply behavioural theories to those answers, in efforts to then properly devise interventions to improve adherence. Due to the fact that inaccuracies can occur in answers reported by participants during in-person interviews (whether intentional or not) (Cannell, 1968), questions were also designed to be open and conversational, in an effort to make answers as natural and accurate as possible (Smith, 1995).

Further to this, it was determined that a 1-to-1 interview would be more accurate than a focus group with multiple participants. Whilst focus groups can have their positives, in contexts such as this one a focus group may not be the preferred method of data collection; whilst an increase in participants at any one time should make data collection more time-efficient and more numerous, in reality focus groups on topics of a potentially sensitive nature have proven to gather less accurate data. With focus groups being used on topics such as this, studies have shown that participants don't always feel completely free to answer accurately for fear of being judged, or simply due to not having the opportunity to speak amongst other participants (Smith, 1995).

Results

Following conduction of the in-person interview, there were several themes identified as both potential barriers and potential motives to exercise such as feelings of Relatedness, Health concerns, Perceived Ability to take part, Perceived lack of time, environment, and the participants upbringing. Whilst some themes can be extrinsic factors, some can be intrinsic, and some can fluctuate between the two. For example, when the participant reported that for them exercise "...for a few years it was a weight loss thing... I knew I was overweight by a fair way" this demonstrates externally motivating health concerns, involving a measurable achievement on completion. However, as the participant continued to engage, they reflected that "...once I got the mood boosts from achieving longer distances as a faster pace..." arguably showing that adherence to exercise has become less about 'goal scoring' and more about the internal mood boost obtained through engagement. These findings support points in previous study that show the relationship between exercise and psychological state (Maltby, 2001), however this study was conducted on a cohort which was almost an even split between males and females (N = 227, M = 102, F = 125), and since this study was conducted it has been found that females are more likely to be affected by internal psychological factors than males, arguably skewing the results (Craike, 2014).

When the subject of historic exercise engagement was discussed, it was made clear by the participant that it was not something that was actively encouraged in either his school or home environments. At home "... there were things to do on the farm... that came first before all of that" and in school "...the rest of them were playing the sports because they were the ones in the after-school teams..." showing that whilst the participant did enjoy team sports, the opportunity to engage wasn't present, and so this has arguably affected his relatedness with such sports as he has developed in age, demonstrated when he stated that "...I found I wasn't enjoying it as much as everyone else, I didn't really connect with it." This supports study showing that relatedness with peers can play a crucial role in developing self-determination and prolonged engagement (Aleksavska-Velickovska, 2019, Lox, 2020). However, this study was conducted on students in an eastern European population, whereas the participant in this report is a British middle-aged male father, and so arguably there could be a differentiation in context needed to be applied to results.

An overriding theme across the interview with this participant was the perceived lack of time and, by extension, work-life-balance. It was acknowledged by the participant that in previous employment he found it easier to disconnect from work and find the time to exercise in his downtime, however in current employment he finds this impossible due to long hours and extended commute times, stating "...I have very little time to myself." Whilst this finding is supported by studies showing that on average parents find it more difficult to

make time for exercise than those without children (Mailey, 2016), it has also been argued that a lack of time is only a perceived barrier, not a physical one, and therefore shouldn't influence engagement. Contrastingly to that however it is arguable that a 'perceived' barrier is still a barrier and should be treated as such when devising interventions, a point made in studies detailing the relationship between self-efficacy and perceived barriers that did involve participants of a similar age bracket and demographic to participant 19250776 (Ayotte, 2010).

Once it was determined that the main barriers to exercise engagement were time and self-efficacy, whilst the main motivators appeared to be a sense of relatedness and time spent in the open air, an intervention involving routinely-scheduled green-space exercise seemed most suitable – preferably a team sport or another group exercise. Previous study on walking football directed at males within this age bracket has previously seen adherence rates of 90% (McEwan, 2018), with participants reporting results of weight loss, feeling fitter, and a sense of relatedness gained through spending time with teammates of a similar description to themselves.

In the interview data the participant showed that green-space time and relatedness were important to them, but they also stated "...I find having someone else there a bit of a pain really..." and so another option could be the local ParkRun course if they preferred to engage in running as opposed to a team sport; ParkRun has been shown to have up to 90% engagement, owing to the fact that the program is free, is at a set time every week and so easier to fit into a diary, volunteers and participants are encouraging and sociable, the course is outdoors and there is the option to have a cup of tea afterwards for those who wish to be more social without the commitment of having a running partner (Quirk, 2021).

Whilst both walking football and Parkrun fulfil meet the motivations deemed important through interview, they could also arguably be hindered by the perceived barriers. The local Parkrun and walking football groups are both a half hour drive away, so would still face the same environmental barriers faced by a run down the road – "...when the mornings are so dark in January you don't want to go..." and so either intervention may be easier to adhere to in the summer months vs the winter, whilst ultimately if the participant deems a lack of time to barrier to engagement, it will continue to behave as such.

Following this interview, it is understandable why participant 19250776 finds it difficult to engage in exercise. Living in a rural community it is difficult to find a variation in exercise options, and once that is paired with the perceived lack of time following a change in employment, along with falling out of the routine put into place through the COVID-19 pandemic, any intervention would be hard-pressed to adhere to.

Ultimately, more study needs to be conducted on those from a rural background, who themselves had little-to-no education as to the importance of maintaining adherence to exercise. Preferably this study should be conducted on men within the 'middle-aged' bracket, as this would most closely match participant 19250776s characteristics, arguably helping to forge interventions for those within that group.

Appendix

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Okie dokie. So - Could you tell me what your past relationship was like with exercise please - was physical activity encouraged at home? Were your parents physically active?

Participant (19250776)

No (it wasn't encouraged). And growing up on the farm it was very difficult to sort-of try to engage in school; back in the day it wasn't really sort-of something that was encouraged. All my friends had football practice, but I had to go to work on the farm. I did want to go to football training down in Goodwick, and a couple of times I did ask my parents if I could go, but that was met with "Who's going to milk the cows in the evening then", So that put a stop to that really. The thing is that when you go to school, it's those boys who went to the football club evening training that got into the school team. So yeah, if you don't get encouraged at home it isn't really followed up in school and vice versa. I suppose then growing up on the farm, you're always doing physical things anyway. So yeah, it's more sort of natural sort of exercise you don't really think about as opposed to organised walking, lifting weights or team sports.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

And so I suppose your at-home lifestyle then was physically active, but the actual engagement with exercise wasn't there.

Participant (19250776)

No, I think it wasn't sort-of good enough to ride the bike on Saturday with the friends and stuff. I wasn't going to play football. There was work to do on the farm that came first before all that.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

So would you say that school was encouraging exercise, but at the same time they were picking who was getting more engaged with it?

Participant (19250776)

Yeah absolutely. So in your PE lessons you'd have around 10 minutes of everybody doing the same sort of warm up exercises, but then the boys who like myself who weren't doing the sports outside of school were told to run on the track, but the rest of them were playing Rugby and Football because they were the ones in the teams. So you weren't even, you know, you weren't even there playing rugby for fun the fun of it. You were just treated as not there, which is disheartening as a kid. Hopefully that's not the case these days. Me talking to you now, you know we're go back to the early 80s. Yeah, it's a different time. You know, everybody's encouraged now to be included even if you don't want to engage for other reasons there seems to be more of a focus on inclusivity. But back in those days, it was almost like we were actively discouraged from the sports because it was easier for the teachers to not deal with us.

We were almost discouraged from participating in the 'proper' stuff. To be honest it wasn't even stressed to us how important physical activity was in those lessons either; like you were told to go and run about but you weren't told why it was so important to keep active, so you have none of that base information to even build on as an adult. In a similar way we

weren't told how important food was back then, and meals on the farm – although there was nothing heavily processed or full of additives – were still very substantial to see you through the working day. So when the healthier alternative 'norm' to that isn't stressed to you in school you have no point of reference to compare to what you grew up knowing.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Did you find that that affected anything to do with your friends - Did you find that you weren't friends with people that were particularly active?

Participant (19250776)

Yeah. Probably. You know, I started smoking when I was in secondary school, and they were all the same kids who didn't do the sports so you yeah you could say your peer group was sort of an influence on that. But then saying that, towards the end of school I did get friendly with 2 boys that happened to be related to the PE teachers, so all of a sudden I was playing the team sports again because I was friends with them.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Okay so you mentioned smoking and that was obviously established early on - do you think that affected your engagement with exercise?

Participant (19250776)

Not really because you're young; Doesn't make much difference to be honest. You could smoke a packet of cigarettes and still run some laps afterward - You can kind of do it all. It's only when you get into your 30s and 40s, really, that makes a massive difference, but by that point you've already been not exercising for so long it's hard to start new habits.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

So apart from smoking – that I know you no longer do - What about the lack of encouragement to engage with exercise in school; do you think that's affected your relationship with exercise as an adult?

Participant (19250776)

Yeah, because you're not being encouraged, and I had no encouragement to engage at home either so as an adult you've not really got anything to build on because it just wasn't there when you were a kid. You know a lot of my friends now have children so luckily they're getting their children into exercise early, even farmers children are being encouraged to take part in after school clubs etc. The whole mindset has changed a little bit and you know.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

So did you watch sports on tv as a child? Were there any local clubs that you followed?

Participant (19250776)

Not really, we didn't watch any at home and if I wanted to go and watch any local games the farm always came first, so I couldn't go that often. But then when I did go and see a game or watch one down the pub, I found I wasn't enjoying as much as everyone else anyway – I didn't really connect with it. Don't get me wrong, I didn't spend much time

indoors on my tod at all, but that was kind of the running joke – if you enjoy the outdoors so much then there's always something to do on the farm. Plus, in my generation there wasn't much anything to do inside anyway, video games had only just started becoming a thing and with mum being a stay-at-home mum we were very much encouraged to be out of the house. So in hindsight yes I was physically active and we were always doing something, It just wasn't team sports or organised activities so to speak.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Do you find that you enjoy any amount of physical activity now?

Participant (19250776)

Yeah. Yeah, I would say so yes. It's just finding time at the moment now, isn't it.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Okay, so do you know what current guidelines are for physical activity?

Participant (19250776)

Not a clue honestly. If I were to have it a guess, I'd say it's probably half, half an hour to an hour a day. So I'm probably achieving less than half of that honestly. It was easier to do when I had a less stressful job – I wasn't taking my work home with me and it was easier to detach myself and get some exercise done. But with current job I find I have very little time to myself – work often carries on outside of the 8-5 hours. I'm looking forward to starting my new job in the coming weeks; I'm hoping I can make exercise a priority again.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

We mentioned earlier that you were quite active as a child mostly due to work on the farm – Is the work you currently do (and are about to start) also physically active?

Participant (19250776)

No. Definitely not. Some days you're so busy at work you find you're eating all your meals at your desk, and the most exercise you get is walking to and from the printer or the bathroom. You know, you're lucky if you get 3000 steps in some days. The hours are long here too; in my previous job it was 9-5 and those were the hours you did. This new job will be the same. But here in my current position there's too much for one person to cram into the 8-5 hours, so you end up starting earlier and finishing later, but of course that means getting up earlier and coming home later. Add that to the hour commute each way and you end up with a very long day, with not much time for anything else before or after shifts. I know I'm technically a student too but that's very much incorporated into work time, so that doesn't affect my time spent outside of work really.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

So if you had the choice of when and where you could exercise around work, if timings and length of shifts weren't an issue, when and where would you do it?

Participant (19250776)

Definitely the morning, I'm very much a morning person. One of the reasons I took this new job is that the hours can be flexible, so I could do 7am-3pm if I wanted to, or even 10am-6pm if I need more time in the morning to get my run done. When work was less busy my

exercise was a 2-mile run down the road. I find that when I can manage to get the exercise done in the morning and get some fresh air with it it sets me up for my day. I feel like I've already accomplished something that morning and once I've done the exercise and had a shower and got myself ready for work, I feel invigorated. It is hard to get out though this time of year when the mornings are so dark. You know, 7am in July is drastically different to 7am in December. When you wake up in July and can see the sunshine and hear birds it makes you want to go out in it. But when you wake up in December, it's dark and you can only hear wind and rain it is really difficult to find the motivation to go out in it. It's not even like we're that close to a gym – If I wake up in the morning and don't want to go outside then the nearest gym is a half-hour-one-way car journey away. So that's an hour out of the day before you even done the workout, so you just don't go, not that I like the gym anyway – I've always found it to be a bit boring. I like my exercise to have a view and fresh air, not 4 walls and other peoples' sweat. I have just started to take up golf now as well though, so I'm hoping that will get me the extra bit of fresh air and some activity done.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

OK, so when you do get the chance to engage with the exercise and activities like golf and running, Why do you do it? I know you just mentioned fresh air there, what else is it that compels you to exercise?

Participant (19250776)

I asked myself the same question. I'm joking, I do feel so much better mentally once I've done it. Getting yourself going can be hard work, especially if you've been out of habit for a while or it's the middle of winter, but you always feel so much better on completion. I find that feeling doesn't change depending on distance though – I get the same boost whether I've managed 1 mile or 10. As much as you do have that extra sense of pride if you've managed to go further/faster than you did before, you'll always get that endorphin boost however many miles you put in.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

So when you're sat thinking about going for the run, what is it that actually makes you put one foot in front of the other and go? Is it that you know you're going to feel good after - The vision of you at the end feeling better?

Participant (19250776)

So for a few years it was a weight loss thing – I wasn't exercising as often but if I did it was because I'd forced myself out the door to lose weight. I knew I was overweight by a fair way and knew that I'd have to exercise to get the pounds off. It wasn't until a few months in that I realised I had started doing it because I enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment after more than the prospect of losing weight. Once I got the mood boost from achieving longer distances at a faster pace in a more comfortable feeling I decided to start entering races; not with any massive aspirations of winning them, just to give me something to aim for with that greater sense of achievement at the end. Things like local 10ks or the Cardiff Half Marathon which I did for charity the first time I took part. I felt like doing it for charity also had an added pressure though – other people were depending on you to do it cause you'd promised them the money you'd raised. I haven't done a race like since the before the pandemic and I do miss them; it spurred me on when I had something to aim for.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

I understand, so the motivation to exercise is very much achievement or even performance based like losing a pound or completing a 10k. Would you say there are any other reasons for you to take part?

Participant (19250776)

Body concerns. But it was never anything to do with appearance or anything like that really; I've never been massively focused on how I look. Yes, it's nice sometimes if someone mentions you look slimmer and you know to take it as a compliment, but ultimately when you were never that bothered by appearance those things go over your head a bit. I was motivated in the latter part of 2018 to lose weight for my health though really – high blood pressure is common in my family, and I am on medication for it, but I know exercise and weight loss can help the problem, without the problem itself necessarily affecting my ability to do exercise. So as much as yes it is achievement and performance reasons that I do it, I consider bettering my health an achievement to a certain extent. Like it's great to get home and not be as out of breath or sore as you were the last time you did that distance, so noticing things like that in your own health does also spur you to keep going with it; you can feel you're improving.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)³⁴

So with that, did you find that the COVID-19 lockdown had any effect on your exercise engagement? By the time we went into lockdown you will have been exercising fairly regularly for around a year.

Participant (19250776)

Yeah, by that point I was fairly fit anyway, had some good habits in place and had already done my first Cardiff Half Marathon, but then all of a sudden you had more time because you couldn't go and do other things you did before. You know, working from home and you weren't travelling to work so already you have more time, you couldn't go and see family or friends, food shopping trips had to be really well organised and happened once a week maximum, and all non-essential recreational stuff was closed, so you had so much more time on your hands. You exercised more almost because it was something to do. I was lucky in a sense because the only exercise you could do was the exercise I was already doing; you could only go walking, running or cycling from your home. I did start using Strava more through lockdown though; it became a conversation topic with friends; talk of lockdown all got very boring so getting a bit competitive through what was essentially a sporty social media was a nice distraction that also encouraged exercise. Back then when I was fitter I found Strava motivating, but now I find it a bit intimidating; I've fallen out of the habit of running so I'm finding that I'm nowhere near as capable as I once was, and I don't really want to display that for my friends to see. I can see they're doing better than I am. I'm hoping with this new work structure I can get back into the habit of running, improve my relationship with it, and get back to having fun.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Speaking on the social aspect of things like Strava, do you find having someone physically with you whilst exercising helpful? So not necessarily comparing times/distances but just having some company – would that help you keep to an exercise programme or not?

Participant (19250776)

Not really, I'm sure in something like a fitness class having someone else there would be motivating, but because my main exercises are running or cycling I find that having someone else there a bit of a pain really – they probably have a different pace to mine and they may even be a 'talker', so I find both of these things to be a bit of a hindrance to my own progress. I enjoy peoples' company generally don't get me wrong, but in that context I don't always find it helpful. I'm fairly independent too anyway, so if my partner didn't want to come for a run on that day it wouldn't affect me going if I wanted to go.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

I can see that you currently have a Garmin watch on, do you find that a help or a hindrance to your exercise?

Participant (19250776)

It's quite nice to see what I'm doing, or lack thereof. Like I know the recommendation is to get 10,000 steps done a day, but when I know I'm reaching a maximum of 5000 on a long busy day in work 10,000 is an often-impossible undertaking. You know, when you leave at 7am and get home at 7-8pm when are you supposed to fit in another 5000 steps when its taken you all day already to get that far? Honestly, I just try to get 'more' in than average, put a huge unrealistic number just means you feel a bit defeated before you even begin. The Garmin does help in that sense; it keeps a record of what your 'average' is and just encourages you to do more than that, so I think at the moment it's trying to get to me to do 6000 steps a day, but that number changes based on what 'average' looks like at the time.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Okay, so I think we've covered everything - That is the end of the interview. How do you feel it went?

Participant (19250776)

Really well, I think it was good.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Do you feel that you were able to tell me everything you wanted to?

Participant (19250776)

Yeah, I don't think I've missed anything out.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Great, was there anything that you were uncomfortable with me asking?

Participant (19250776)

No, I knew to say no comment if I didn't want to answer anything.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Brilliant, do you think that I lead or influenced your answers in any way?

Participant (19250776)

No, no, no, not at all. I think it went really well.

Laura Mowlam (2108165)

Wonderful, Thank you for your participation.

Participant (19250776)

You're welcome.

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