

Nurse Practitioners: Your Own Physical Activity Journey

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ABSTRACT

This article was written not to tell you what you already know but rather to give you strategies on what you need to do in order to see improvements from your own physical activity/exercise program. This article is appropriate for all health care professionals regardless of where they are on the continuum of wellness. The contents included within provide context on physical activity/exercise recommendations, address barriers, explain how to make the most out of your efforts, and discuss how physical activity/exercise can impact other areas of your life as well.

Keywords: energy management, exercise, health promotion, nurses, nutrition, self-care, strategies, wellness

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I have 2 young children who frequent their primary care practitioner's office, particularly in the winter months. I get to know many of the nurse practitioners (NPs) and nurses who run the clinics. I talk with them about health and wellness when they are taking care of my children. On 1 recent visit, I was talking with 1 of the NPs who works full-time in the office. We talked about what I do for a living as the director of health promotion and wellness.

My background is in exercise science and nutrition. The NP and I talked about her struggles with taking care of herself physically. It's hard to have a complex answer for someone in a 3-minute conversation, so I referred her to a couple of resources she could use.

My colleague, coauthor Dr. Brenda Buffington, a wellness program manager, and I are frequently asked questions about physical activity and exercise. These questions oftentimes involve physical activity and exercise that are very specific to the person's age, sex, and occupational and family-related time commitments. We get these same questions from NPs. Making one's health a priority is not easy, especially in a world where many people have multiple responsibilities and obligations. Regardless of where you are in your journey, a beginner or experienced exerciser, this expert opinion article was written not to convey to you what you already know but rather

to give you strategies on what you need to do in order to see improvements from your own physical activity/exercise program. We feel it is very important to address you on a more informal basis, so we have moved away from the formal article format and intend to have a conversation with you.

THE HEALTH STATUS OF NURSES IN THE UNITED STATES

In a study conducted in 2009, Zapka et al¹ found that nurses have high rates of overweight/obesity. Currently, 60% of the adult population in the United States is overweight/obese; the prevalence of overweight/obesity for nurses ranges from 30% to 55% depending on the geographic area, race and ethnicity, and work setting.²⁻⁴ Nurses have been found to experience higher levels of stress-related burnout compared with other health care professionals.⁵ According to Tong et al,⁶ nurses are 6 times more likely to smoke than physicians and 2 times more likely to smoke than the general population. Additionally, nursing professionals are 2 times more likely to have depression than the general population.⁷ With the overwhelming amount of evidence on the current health status of the nursing profession, it is evident a majority of nurses find it difficult to balance self-care and taking care of the patient population.

Before an airplane takes off, passengers are asked to put on their oxygen mask first in the event of an emergency before assisting others. The reason for this is if you are not getting proper oxygen, you will not be able to help anyone else on the plane. This analogy holds true for health care professionals. You need to better take care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally. In doing so, you will take better care of your family, friends, and patients.

THE KEY STRATEGIES OF SELF-CARE THROUGH EXERCISE: MAKE IT HAPPEN

Continuously engaging in a behavior such as exercise is not easy. Performing exercise may sound simple, but maintaining a program is not. Adults have many barriers when it comes to adhering to exercise; time is the number one cited barrier.⁸ When it comes to changing behavior for the better, the best approach is to select 1 behavior and work on it for several months in an effort to “master” it (or perform it to the best of your ability). For example, instead of starting off trying to incorporate 60 minutes of physical activity 5 days per week, one should start with a 10-minute session 3 times per week and build from there. While knowing behavior change is not easy and often adults spend years trying to adhere to a change that is better for their health, the goal is to implement the best strategy (or 2) that allows you to become better at managing the health-related aspect of your life. To accomplish your goals, first make a serious commitment to yourself. Identify the reasons why you want to engage in the healthy behavior. Once you do that, there are several evidence-based strategies you can use to help you better succeed.

In the field of health behavior, exercise adherence, or what is more commonly referred to as exercise behavior, a well-known theory that is often applied to the process of change is Bandura’s social cognitive theory.^{9,10} Concepts from this theory, when implemented, assist with the behavior change process. One of the highly suggested strategies to use is a construct called self-regulation, a key aspect to Bandura’s theory. Self-regulation is commonly referred to as self-monitoring. Self-monitoring can come in various forms. When people monitor their behavior, they keep track of what they are doing. For example, they record their behavior in a log, diary, or

app. People make appointments, for example, in their work calendars, an appointment to keep just like any other appointment. By tracking exercise, this then allows the person to view his or her progress after a certain amount of time, such as a week. Another successful method that is used is goal setting. Goal setting for physical activity/exercise can be extremely useful when designing and evaluating your plan.¹¹ Goal setting for exercise will be described a bit more later, but, generally, when people set a goal, it helps them monitor their behavior because they have a plan for what they want to accomplish. An additional exercise adherence strategy called social support^{9,10} can be critical in the beginning and helpful in advanced stages of behavior change. A person you trust and who can lend constructive feedback on your progress will help you better stick with your behavior. He or she can help you evaluate your successes and provide suggestions for areas of opportunity. Using these exercise adherence evidence-based strategies helps make your program “happen.”

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY WITH PURPOSE AND MEANING

The recommendations for physical activity are 150 minutes of moderate intensity and 75 minutes of vigorous intensity per week.¹² This includes cardiovascular and strength training. Individuals need to strength train all of the major muscle groups 2 to 3 times a week (a minimum of 1 set with 8–12 repetitions) and stretch to increase flexibility and decrease the risk of injury.¹² As is commonly known, there are many benefits of engaging in the recommended amounts, including physical and mental health benefits as well as some social, environmental, and financial benefits. Experts recommend everyone do something on a daily basis, such as achieving 10,000 steps. However, many individuals in the health care field are occupationally active; therefore, they may not think they need to get the additional recommended cardiovascular and strength training conditioning.

Exercise, by definition, is performing physical activity with a purpose, has a structure, and is repetitive, meaning virtually every day. Movement throughout the day is important, but if one begins to think about quality and purpose, they will think

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