

Opinion

Exercise for health: Serious fun for the whole person?

Mark Stephen Nesti *

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, L3 3AF, UK

Received 15 January 2016; revised 3 March 2016; accepted 4 March 2016

Available online 30 March 2016

1. Introduction

After more than 50 years of research investigating physical activity and exercise there appears to be a clear consensus on the health benefits of this form of human behavior. Evidence from numerous studies examining exercise points to the physical, psychological, and social improvements that can accrue through regular participation in activity.¹ Given this accumulation of scientific knowledge and its promulgation through the offices of academia and governmental agencies, it seems remarkable that the World Health Organization has identified the lack of physical activity and exercise as one of the most pressing health concerns facing the developed and developing nations in the 21st century.² In considering this, a skeptic might observe that it seems the more we study exercise and its links to a range of so called life style diseases, the greater the increase in these same diseases and ailments! This conclusion of course would be to confuse correlation with cause and effect. Nevertheless, there must be something that can explain this strange mismatch between information and theory on the one hand, and action and practice on the other.

One of the features of most research into exercise is that it is carried out by individuals and organizations that have a vested interest in the topic. In fairness, it should be pointed out that this is quite normal, and is what happens in many other areas of research. It also seems safe to assume that those who dedicate their lives to the scientific study of a particular problem are passionately interested in finding a solution. The benefits emerging from this scenario in terms of motivation and desire are obvious, but are there any possible drawbacks? Well, one problem might be that scientists, researchers, and policy makers are ignoring, or at least forgetting about some of the potential negatives associated with exercise. I would argue that one of the most important of these negatives is that for many people, exercise tends to be an uncomfortable experience. Although studies³ point to a general acceptance that exercise is beneficial for us, after many years of promoting this idea to encourage

greater participation, the evidence is that in most countries fewer people than ever are engaging in this type of health related activity. In recent years there has been an attempt to change the message to encourage greater acceptance of the benefits of this form of physical activity by proposing that “Exercise is Medicine”.⁴ This could be understood in any number of ways such as from a physiological, epidemiological, or economic point of view. None of these perspectives are likely to be especially controversial or problematic. However, “Exercise is Medicine” may be a very unhelpful phrase in that it could quite easily be interpreted as a threat. That is, it plays on the universal idea that medicine is good for us and *we had better take our recommended dose, or else!* The exercise as medicine mantra sounds a little like a desperate attempt to convince that exercise is good for us, given it seems from epidemiological work on health and physical activity the positive message about its benefits has had insufficient impact on participation levels.

I will argue that there are a number of new perspectives that researchers could begin to consider their work in exercise and physical activity. One new approach to understand the challenge of declining levels of exercise could be to reconsider the concept and its definition. A more holistic perspective for example, might enable scientists and policy makers to envisage a broader range of benefits that could accrue from engaging in exercise. This could allow a deeper exploration of the reasons why people do or do not take part, and what personal meaning they ascribe to their involvement. I feel that it is timely to consider more comprehensively what sport can contribute to the “Exercise is Medicine” debate. Modern sport, which emerged as a huge global phenomenon in the second half of the 20th century, remains the single most important resource to increase exercise levels apart from changing habitual physical activity levels. Sport has many advantages over the idea of exercise as medicine; the most important of these is that sport is grounded in the innate human capacity for play.⁵ We *play* sport, badly or well, gently or with intensity, but usually with passion. In contrast, we *do* exercise, or *participate in* physical activity, and it is very rarely described as a passion. Another important shift might be that researchers begin to use a greater range of methodologies and methods, for example phenomenology, that emphasize the importance of an

Peer review under responsibility of Shanghai University of Sport.

* E-mail address: m.s.nesti@ljmu.ac.uk

individual's subjective experience, and attempt to shape research questions based on the *lived* concrete reality of a phenomenon rather than its theoretical description.

Before I consider each of these new perspectives in relation to motivation, positive experiential states, and methodological issues, there is a very important issue that seems to have been overlooked. I believe that for too long there has been little recognition or acknowledgment in the academic literature that exercise is often painful. While this is not to fall prey to the silly mantra of *no pain no gain*, it is worth remembering that sustained physical exertion is challenging.

2. Exercise is uncomfortable

If we are to understand why efforts aimed at increasing exercise participation have not been as effective as hoped, it is important to identify the scale and type of challenge faced. One way to do this is to briefly consider what seems to me to be at the heart of the issue. This could be summed up as, exercise is always uncomfortable, and the best form of this activity, that is, intense exercise,⁶ is even more uncomfortable. I believe that until we accept this empirical fact, much of what we do will miss the target, resulting in poor use of scarce resources and frustration for those of us who support the importance of exercise and physical activity as part of a healthy life.

The challenge facing exercise is that in order to increase participation levels, individuals must take greater responsibility for themselves. The idea of individual responsibility appears to be more acceptable than ever. Many commentators on the modern world have pointed out that the cultural turn is toward greater autonomy and self-determination of people and nations. Taken too far, these forces can contain a destructive element, especially when they are allowed to undermine human solidarity, community and shared belief. At an individual level however, this growth in personal freedom and responsibility makes it harder to direct behavior and attitudes. It is this universal development of independent thinking that the "Exercise is Medicine" idea is up against. The scientific data strongly support the claim that increasing levels of physical activity is good for us, especially in the form of high intensity exercise. But unless governments are going to try to force or coerce people to become more active, the problem will grow. Maybe instead of blaming people for not heeding the messages, researchers need to look more closely at what our assumptions have been. A major oversight it seems to me is that we have failed to remember that exercise is up against the competing attractions of sedentary behavior.

Much of the literature in the area seems to ignore the empirical fact that doing exercise is often an uncomfortable experience, at least in comparison to sitting, reading, watching television, or playing computer games. As many countries experience growing industrialization and urbanization, their populations have become less accustomed to the kind of hard physical labor associated with rural living and an agricultural economy. This type of work, in similar ways to intense exercise, places the individual under physical and psychological stress. Stress is not bad in itself, and indeed as the first scientist to define the term pointed out, it can be experienced negatively as

distress, or more positively as eustress.⁷ Surely one of the reasons many try to avoid taking more physical activity and exercise is the type of stress associated with this behavior. In plain English, exercise hurts; maybe only a little and sometimes a lot, but we need to accept that for most people it is uncomfortable and distressing. This is supported by the most recent advances in research which emphasize the importance of high intensity exercise to gain health benefits. Now, there are no doubt many possible explanations of why we have failed to consider the empirical fact that exercise is distressing (and should be) for all, from recreational to elite levels. It could be argued that this conundrum has been overlooked because we have not started our work often enough from the ground, that is, by understanding just how much of a counter cultural experience exercise activity is for many people in the modern technological world of easy living.

3. Change of direction

Beyond debates about exercise and discomfort, there are a number of other themes I feel could provide a new direction and challenge the "Exercise is Medicine" paradigm. In the following section I will briefly examine 3 of these more fully. Specifically, I will be looking at the need to adopt a more holistic view about the benefits of exercise and sport, the importance of positive experiential states in understanding exercise and sport participation, and methodological implications for future work.

3.1. Holistic motivation

Despite not being primarily concerned with the physical or psychological benefits relating to increased levels of exercise, a recent study has reported that individuals may achieve a sense of identity that connects to spiritual or other sources of meaning in life through their involvement in physical activity.⁸ Although the research participants were former and current high level sport performers, it does suggest that more work is needed to understand the deeper reasons for involvement. Very few studies have looked at this in relation to exercise, tending to focus more on various forms of sport. However, Fahlberg et al.⁹ carried out one of the first pieces of research into existential psychology and exercise and found that this type of activity can provide an important source of meaning for some people. They described how exercise gave them emotional, physical, social, and spiritual benefits, and that it helped them find meaning in their lives. Since that time, very few studies have looked at exercise from such a broad holistic perspective,¹⁰ which represents a missed opportunity to understand exercise participation in a more comprehensive and person centered way.

While "Exercise is Medicine" makes sense from a physiological perspective, it is more likely that the health benefits associated with sport will appeal to more people. Sport is truly holistic, or at least, it can easily be approached in this way. The distance runner and golfer can both benefit physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. In just the same way, veteran age group athletes can enjoy their sport just as much as the young and highly trained. And what is more, the passion to keep

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1084027>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1084027>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)