



Exploring mental health benefits of physical activity using a social marketing approach in community settings

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For information on taking this work forward
in the West Midlands

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Executive Summary

Project aims

This project was designed as a scoping exercise within two segmented population groups to identify ways of marketing physical activity for its mental health benefits. The aims were threefold:

- Explore the perceptions within two segmented groups relating to mental health and associated benefits of physical activity and exercise.
- Identify barriers associated with physical activity participation.
- Identify ways of 'selling' physical activity for its mental health benefits.

Key outcomes

Focus groups highlighted a number of issues within each population group.

Group 1: Adults living in a deprived community

1. Health was significant to participants, particularly the health of children and family. Physical activity interventions should emphasise the general health benefits for children and families. Family support is important factor for positive mental health.
2. The term 'mental health' should be avoided in marketing to promote physical activity for its mental health benefits given the negative connotations associated with the word 'mental'. Participants came up with alternative phrases and could see the mental health benefits of physical activity:

"Build your confidence" "Have a laugh with your family"

"Jumping for joy" "Get up and out" "Make new friends"

"Come and join the fun" "Something for the family to do"

"Physically fit. Mentally well" "Active minds, better health"

"Exercise doesn't have to be hard" "Improve your life"

"An active mind takes the stress out of your life"

3. Participants stressed the need for low cost family activities.
4. Local access to facilities, public spaces and opportunities for physical activity was very important.
5. The physical benefits of physical activity were the main motivators for participants to undertake physical activity, rather than the psychological benefits.

Group 2: Older adults

1. Social aspects of physical activity was very important to this age group. Interventions aimed at this population group should include group-based activities and market the social benefits of participating.
“we meet people we didn’t know, it creates a community”
2. Maintaining independence in later life was a major concern for this population group.
3. The mental health benefits of physical activity were more important to participants than physical health benefits. Maintaining a good level of cognitive function was key; and a good way to promote physical activity.
“[it] gets you out of your depressions”
“exercise makes you more alert”
“relaxing afterwards, you feel better”
“you’ve got company, you see different people”
“we meet people we didn’t know, it creates a community”
“you feel pleased with yourself for making the effort”
4. The majority of participants associate ‘exercise’ with more intense physical activities (e.g., gyms); terminology used in marketing should be considered.
5. Local access to opportunities for physical activity was important.

Conclusions

It is clear that perceptions of these two populations were different with regards to their perceptions of the benefits of physical activity and key issues relating to participation. In general, both groups were more aware of the physical benefits of physical activity than the psychological benefits. The term “mental health” was perceived to be limited to a relatively narrow range of factors – mostly negative. Participants tended to focus on the individual and interpersonal level, rather than the wider context of “community” or “neighbourhood”. However, through engagement in the focus groups participants could move to a position where they acknowledged positive mental benefits of physical activity.

Further development of this work should include;

- Exploring perceptions from different market segments e.g. working professionals, BME groups and younger people.
- Further exploration of the social and cultural context for differing perceptions to mental health benefits of physical activity
- Pre-testing marketing approaches on these different segments
- Physical activity programmes should consider measuring mental health outcomes for participants.

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For more information about social marketing and mental health and to download the full report go to

<http://www.wmrhc.org.uk/mental-health/mental-health-and-wellbeing/social-marketing-and-mental-health/>