

The Research File



Summary from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute and ParticipACTION

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Life Events and Their Impact on Women's Physical Activity

Discussions of psychological, social and environmental factors are prevalent in the research literature but little has been done to date to examine whether life events impact physical activity levels. An article by Brown and colleagues has recently set out to add to the knowledge in this area by examining the associations between life events in young, middle age and older women and changes in their physical activity levels.

Time constraints for young and mid-age women

Many life events, which reduce the amount of discretionary time and place demands on women as caregivers, are associated with a reduction in physical activity in young and mid-age women. This study found that young women (aged 22-27) who had given birth were more likely to have decreased and less likely to have increased their physical activity levels over the three year study period. Getting married was also associated with decreased physical activity levels. In addition, those who began work outside the home, or had a child with a serious

disability or illness were less likely to have increased their physical activity levels.

Among mid-age women (aged 51-56), increased physical activity was more likely among those who reported retirement, changing conditions at work, death of a spouse/partner, and decreased income. The authors suggest that many of these events are likely associated with an increase in personal time: the death of a partner may signify the end of a caregiving role; and a decrease in income may reflect retirement or a reduced work load. This hypothesis is further supported by the finding that there was a lower likelihood of increased physical activity among women who reported the birth of a grandchild.

Other life events that were found to be significantly related to physical activity levels may also involve time constraints. Reporting that a family member had been arrested or jailed or being pushed, grabbed, shoved, kicked or hit were each associated with decreasing physical activity among mid-age women. The authors hypothesize that these life events may reduce discretionary time through having to visit a family member in jail or having to deal with the legal system.



Coping with life's challenges

Some life events associated with changes in physical activity levels may not change demands on time but present challenges in other ways. Distressing harassment at work was



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associated with greater likelihood of increasing physical activity among young women, suggesting that some may use physical activity as a way of coping with stressful events. Also among this age group, a drop in income is associated with both a greater likelihood of decreased physical activity and the lower likelihood of increased physical activity. This suggests that cost may be a barrier to physical activity.

Finally, among young women, divorce or separation is associated with decreased physical activity, while starting a new close personal relationship is associated with an increase. While the authors do not suggest reasons for this, marriage breakdown may bring a drop in income, involvement with the legal system, and perhaps a greater share of caregiving, if young children are involved. On the other hand, perhaps starting a new relationship is associated with an increase in income or an increased interest in health. Indeed, when discussing the finding that mid-life women who reported infidelity of their spouse were less likely to decrease their physical activity over time, the authors suggest that women may choose focusing on their health at such a time.

A final finding for mid-life women is of an association between reporting a major personal achievement and both a lower likelihood of decreasing physical activity, and greater likelihood of increasing it. One might speculate that this may be related to improved feelings of self-efficacy.

Changes in health affect older women

Among older women (aged 73-78), decreased physical activity was

associated with major personal illness or injury, major surgery and moving to an institution. There were no significant associations between life events and increasing physical activity in this cohort. Surprisingly, in contrast with the finding in the mid-age women, death of a spouse was not associated with physical activity changes in this group.

Study Methodology

Over 6,500 women in each age category were included in the data analysis. Data were collected over a three year time period as part of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, and included frequency, duration and intensity of physical activity undertaken in the previous week for at least 10 minutes each time, and whether a series of events had recently occurred in their lives. Participants were then categorized as consistently sedentary, consistently low active, consistently active, decreasing (moved from active or low active to a lower category), or increasing (moved from inactive or low to a more active category) activity levels over time.

Summary

The authors suggest that these life events may play an important role in women's physical activity choices and should be considered along with factors such as psychological, social and environmental influences in programming decisions and promotion efforts. They further suggest that there may be considerable interactions among them. For example, getting married and starting a family may be associated with moving to a new neighbourhood,

What's happening in Canada?

CFLRI research has found

- 48% of women are sufficiently physically active for health benefits
- Women are more likely than men to state that they have little or no personal control over fitting physical activity into their personal routines.
- Men and women are equally as likely to report lack of time as a barrier to physical activity, but women are more likely to report lack of energy or feeling too tired as a barrier. Canadians older than 65 are less likely than younger Canadians to cite this latter barrier.
- Women are more likely than men to state that supportive services would help them to be more physically active.

necessitating greater travel time and less time for physical activity, or retirement and children leaving home may involve moving to a neighbourhood where walking to amenities is a greater possibility.

More Info...

Brown, WJ, Hoesch, .KC and Miller, YD. Life Events and Changing Physical Activity patterns in Women at Different Life Stages.

Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. (2008) Physical Activity and Sport Monitors Bulletins.

Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. (2008) Kids Can Play Bulletins.

What have we learned?

- Knowledge of the potential impact of life events on the physical activity of women can help in anticipating when potential declines in physical activity may occur.
- Supporting the care-giver role of women throughout various life stages will likely help them to find time for physical activity.
- Institutions for older adults have a role to play in combating the decrease in physical activity seen among women once they move in.
- Life's ups and downs can be used as opportunities to promote physical activity as a way to celebrate or cope with these events. Adopting positive health behaviours as a way to deal with stress may offset health problems often associated with stress such the onset of cardiovascular disease and Type 2 Diabetes.
- Supporting older women in their efforts to be active should involve helping them to overcome concerns about exercising and reassuring them that physical activity will help them manage any health problems.