



Choosing to Be Active

Given the choice between passive and active pursuits, sedentary individuals usually choose the passive alternative. This choice is not cast in stone, however. It may shift as a function of the alternatives available, the competing demands on the person, and the value attached to physical activity.

Behavioural choice theory has been guiding research on people's choices. Researcher Leonard Epstein draws four general principles from this body of research and shows how they can be applied to sedentary individuals.

1. Choice of an alternative depends on the behavioural cost.

The cost of physical activity can be reduced by increasing the proximity and convenience of physically active pursuits. Conversely, the cost of being sedentary can be increased by reducing the accessibility of sedentary behaviours.

One study showed that requiring people to walk for five minutes to get access to sedentary activities was enough to shift their choice to physical activity. In another study, obese children and their families were randomly assigned to groups in which they were rewarded for

- 1) being more active,
- 2) being less sedentary, or
- 3) a combination of the two.

One year into the program, the largest decreases in obesity were seen for children rewarded for being less sedentary.

Other research suggests that reinforcing children for reducing sedentary behaviours, and thus promoting a choice in how to reallocate leisure time, is associated with larger increases in physical activity than removing television, VCR, or computer games that compete with being physically active.

Monetary incentives could be used to foster physical activity but may be less

effective than changes to the environment. Environments have a significant impact on our choices. Take a common flaw in our buildings: who would rather take stairs that are hidden, locked, or dirty when they have easy access to elevators that are well lighted? And who but the hardest cyclists would dare to commute on streets with no bicycle lanes during rush hour? But paint the stairs, build safe bicycle lanes, and physical activity suddenly becomes much less onerous.

2. The value attached to an alternative depends in part on the available alternatives.

Providing a reinforcing alternative to sedentary activities can shift choice toward physical activity. In one study, a colorful sign depicting a heart using the stairs was placed at the choice point between the escalator and the stairs. The use of the stairs doubled, and remained doubled over 15 days. Small prompts to be active may thus shift people's choice toward physical activity.

When given the choice between a highly valued sedentary activity and physical activity, children chose to be sedentary. But when given the choice between a low-preference sedentary activity and physical activity, they chose to be more physically active. Reducing access to high-preference sedentary behaviours may then be one way to increase activity.

3. Choice is important to motivate people.

If people perceive that they are forced to initiate activity programs as part of treatment, they may not be motivated to make physical activity part of their lifestyle.

In one study, subjects were asked their activity preferences and then assigned to one of two groups. One group was provided with a standardized exercise program set up by staff while the other participants were told their program was based on individual preferences. At the end of six weeks, adherence was greater for subjects who perceived that they had a choice over their exercise program.

physical activity [adj.]

energizing, healing, invigorating, strengthening, nourishing, restoring, stimulating.

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Similarly, other studies showed that home-based exercise programs had better adherence than site-based exercise programs where people had less flexibility regarding when and where to exercise.

4. Choice depends in part on the delay between choosing and receiving the alternatives.

The ability to wait for the preferred but delayed alternative also comes into play in people's choice to exercise. As the more valuable option is delayed, people may switch from this option to the less valuable option that is immediately available.

This is very relevant to physical activity since some of the benefits of being active are delayed, while benefits of sedentary alternatives may be immediately experienced. Emphasizing short-term benefits of physical activity, such as stress reduction and increases in well-being, may help people to pair physical activity with immediate, pleasant outcomes.

Interventions to increase physical activity can draw from behavioural choice theory by maximizing the convenience of physically active pursuits, toting their benefits, short-term and long-term, all the while respecting people's need to control their own choices.

For More Info...

Epstein, L.H. (1998). Integrating theoretical approaches to promote physical activity. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 15(4), 257-265.

