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How to Begin Change

Time for change: using implementation intentions to promote physical activity in a randomised pilot trial



Principle

People are busy, but if they take a minute to determine when, where, and how they will exercise, they are more likely to follow through.

Quote

“This suggests that the intervention helped participants increase confidence in their ability to exercise under perceived time constraints.”

So What - Application

If setting an implementation intention increases your likelihood of exercising as a middle-aged adult, then the practice seems worth trying.

Start with a small, reasonable goal that can fit into your existing schedule. Specify when, where, and how you will meet your tiny goal. For most people, as you continue, your confidence in being able to exercise even when you're busy will increase.

So not only do you get a bit more exercise, but you grow in confidence which will encourage you to continue exercising.

The Research Story

Five researchers from Brandeis University and University of North Carolina studied 62 middle-aged adults who were working full time and not very active. They all took some pretests about what was stopping their activity, their happiness level, their confidence that they would exercise during various scenarios, and their actual physical activity.

They were all given fitbits to wear for five weeks. The first week everyone wore it to establish baseline activity. Then they were split into a control group and “implementation intention” group. An implementation intention is a formula for stating when, where, and how you intend to do something in the future. They checked in with both groups each night with a daily email asking them about their experience and to record their steps.

With the intention group, they also asked them to look at their schedule and find one or more times they could choose to walk or get in a few more steps, then they would write it as an intention. They also gave them maps around their home and work with possible walking paths and the approximate number of steps for each path. They were also given a list of strategies for how to get in more steps (parking at the end of the parking lot, stairs, coffee break in another building, etc.) Then intention group was given a moderate goal that slowly increased over the month. Some studies have participants set an intention for the whole study, but this one realized that people's schedules change, so they created new intentions every day.

The intention group had more steps and more active time during the 4 test weeks. They tended to accomplish 80% of their goal (which was given to them and gradually increased).

One of the most interesting results, was that the intention group that increased their activity and steps also increased their confidence that they could exercise even when they felt like they were too busy and didn't have enough time. In past studies, one of the most common barriers to exercise is perceived lack of time. So planning when, where, and how you are going to get in a few extra steps not only increases your activity, but removes a typical barrier for choosing to exercise in the future.

Robinson, S. A., Bisson, A. N., Hughes, M. L., Ebert, J., & Lachman, M. E. (2019). Time for change: Using implementation intentions to promote physical activity in a randomised pilot trial. *Psychology & Health, 34*(2), 232–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2018.1539487>

