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Sharing physical
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Rethinking how physical activity messages are thought about:

Implications for successful promotion

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It is almost impossible to know where people get information about physical activity. Consider that information, of varying degrees of quality, can be obtained from news organizations, social media, popular magazines, blogs, and physical activity promoters.

Traditional news media often report on research studies about physical activity, sometimes accurately and sometimes not. Our social media networks share stories and information about topics that are of interest, but where do our “friends” get their information?

Popular magazines promote a very prescribed lean and toned look that can (not!) be achieved through exercise. The “fitspiration” bloggers overlay these impossible lean and toned images with strong, wrong and judgmental opinions of what “lazy” people “should” do to “get fit”.

Then there are those whose job it is to promote physical activity to the public, using the best available evidence and generally on very small budgets.

All these sources influence how physical activity and exercise is thought about, but it is unfortunately not necessarily the voice of the physical activity promoter that is the most impactful.

To increase the impact of promotion efforts, there are important points to consider regarding how information is attended to and thought about. To start, “thinking” (i.e., cognitive processing) is not necessarily a purposeful activity. That is, we can consciously work to think about physical activity or exercise, but there are other cognitive processes that operate automatically, without intention.¹ These automatic processes, which can be thought of as “gut reactions”, are based on the associations we hold in memory between concepts. These associations develop over time and can be influenced through exposure to information and personal experiences. So, repeatedly hearing variations of the same information (e.g., lose weight through exercise) creates associations that are automatically activated when we see or hear something related to a topic.¹

S U M M A R Y

In the world of physical activity and exercise, the messages delivered to the public can often be complex and compete among each other. Within this, the physical activity promoter’s message may be limited.

This article provides insight for practitioners on aspects to consider to increase impact of promotion efforts.



This is particularly important in light of the myriad things different information sources associate physical activity and exercise with, such as health, appearance, weight loss, fun, and suffering (no pain, no gain!), amid many other outcomes and emotions.² As Daniel Kahneman (who won the Nobel prize for his work studying automatic thinking) has demonstrated, repetition of information can lead to agreeing with a message, regardless of accuracy. In this way, without thinking too much about it, a person might agree that the reason to be active is to lose weight or to achieve a certain look, because of how many times those messages are repeated. Commercial marketers exploit these concepts and strive to make their product the first thing that comes to mind through strong branding and novel presentations, and they work hard to make associations with their brands positive. Similarly, successful physical activity brands like ParticipACTION are positively remembered by many Canadians.³

It is also necessary to consider whether attention is even paid to physical activity messages. The automatic attention allocated to things in our environment (including messages and advertisements) is called attentional bias, and it refers to how we attend to things that match our interests and goals. This process occurs without consciously choosing to see or hear something. For example, several studies have shown that only exercisers automatically paid attention to words commonly associated with exercise like “fit” and “motivated”.^{4,5} One of these studies also found that non-exercisers automatically attended to negative words associated with sedentary lifestyles such as “lazy” and “unmotivated”.⁴

This process is guided by schemas — generalizations we make about ourselves that are based on past experience; schemas guide how we process information.⁶ So, if we have experience with being active and think of ourselves as exercisers, we are more likely to attend to and think about related information. Thus, it is possible that physical activity promoters are “preaching to the choir”, and people who are not already active do not even notice messages at the most basic level. This is why evaluation is so important before messages go out (formative evaluation) and after the messages have been presented to the target audience. A basic question to ask is whether members of the target audience are likely to notice and pay attention to a message.

Physical activity promoters may also consider that familiarity (that feeling that you “know” something) or affect (e.g., “ugh! Exercise...😞”), triggered by images and messages, can influence decisions to be active.¹ For example, research has shown that having positive automatic exercise associations are related to exercise behaviour, regardless of what people report on a questionnaire.⁷ Another study found that having positive “gut reactions” about exercise were related to the decision to do planned exercise in the face of competing alternatives, such as being invited out for a drink with friends.⁸ Others showed that people who automatically associated exercise with appearance messages, such as those found in popular magazines, had lower intentions to exercise.⁹

Another study found that having positive “gut reactions” about exercise were related to the decision to do planned exercise in the face of competing alternatives, such as being invited out for a drink with friends.

It is important to highlight that automatic associations can change. For example, guided imagery, where one imagines positive exercise experiences, can change automatic associations.¹⁰ As already noted, associations are created through repeatedly pairing concepts (e.g., exercise with weight loss), and physical activity promoters can use this process to their advantage. Consider that human behaviour is largely influenced by one's likes or dislikes.¹¹ So, repeatedly presenting physical activity in fun contexts (regardless of whether the activity itself is depicted as fun) can create an association between these concepts, increasing the likelihood that when someone encounters a physical activity or exercise situation, the concept "fun" will spring to mind.



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Conclusion

If you hope to persuade your target audience, it is wise not to assume that people are thinking about your message. Do, however, consider what associations may be activated by a message about physical activity and be aware of competing messages. Messages created by physical activity promoters do not exist in an information vacuum and the influence of one message may be limited in light of the larger, very complex, physical activity and exercise messaging world. It may be that the targeted individuals are not sufficiently interested in the message to attend to it or that unwanted associations are activated (e.g., appearance rather than health). By using these concepts to your advantage, more impactful physical activity messages may be created.

Through formative evaluation, consider what features of a message spark interest, even among people who are not active or do not consider themselves as "exercisers". Think about which positive emotions you can generate through strong branding and repeating variations of a message in novel and positive ways. By trying these strategies, there is a better chance that the voice of the physical activity promoter may be heard over the many other sources of (mis)information.

To learn more about how to promote physical activity, attend this year's Physical Activity Forum, on May 8 & 9 in Edmonton and Calgary. Dr. Tanya Berry will present *Don't Overthink It!: Promoting physical activity in a busy media environment* and will include a discussion for practitioners and decision-makers of what effective messages might look like. We welcome you to attend and be part of the conversation with other practitioners from across the province. Reserve your spot today! <https://www.centre4activeliving.ca/our-work/physical-activity-forum/2017/>

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Dr. Berry's research focuses on understanding how people react to health messages at both automatic (gut reactions) and conscious (intentional thinking) levels, and how these reactions influence behaviour. Her goal is to find effective ways to talk about physical activity in a way that has positive influences.

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