

Has the pandemic killed the gym?

By Poppy Surplice, Intern, Centre for Brexit Studies

After the closure of all gyms back in March due to the Covid-19 crisis, there was good news for gym fanatics last month when fitness centres were allowed to reopen. But after months of no gym, and many of us enjoying exercise from our own homes and surrounding areas without having to pay to take part, do people still have the time, motivation and most importantly, money, to keep fit?

Statistics show that exercise increases energy levels and increases serotonin in the brain, which leads to improved mental clarity, says Atkinson, director of program development for Cooper Ventures (1). But as we know, many adults find it hard to fit regular exercise in their day to day lives, with work and childcare responsibilities to deal with.

During lockdown, many programmes were introduced to promote healthy eating and regular exercise. Free programmes such as 'Joe Wick's daily PE workouts' and 'Courtney Black's Warrior Workouts' (2) helped people to keep fit and healthy during lockdown. However, now many people are 'back at work', there is, once again, the struggle to find the time and motivation.

The NHS recommends that adults do some type of physical activity at least every day. This can range from walking to high intensity workouts. And while daily exercise is a big factor of weight loss, it also helps hugely to stabilise mood (3). It's understandable that during lockdown, many of us wanted to use the extra time we suddenly all had to improve physical fitness and well-being due to no daily disruptions, more freedom with work and barely any appointments.

Last month, Prime Minister Boris Johnson claimed he plans for a fitter nation (4), announcing that Britain will ban advertising of unhealthy food before 9pm. Other additions included calorie counts in takeaways and restaurant's, and encouraging people to take part in regular exercise and give initiatives for cycling to and from workplaces. Statistics show that 17% of people were more excited for their local gym reopening rather than pubs and restaurants. This suggests people can't wait to get back to healthy eating and fitness, but will people have the time like they did during lockdown? One of the biggest barriers to regular physical activity is that it can be difficult to figure out how to "make" exercise happen. Not only does work life get away, but our commitments are longer and home responsibilities can take up the rest of our time.

Many were eager to get back into their fitness routine as lots of gyms across the UK had queues outside when reopening (5). Of course, gyms are different to how they used to be, with new layouts, one way systems and temperature checks. Returning customers are thankful for the reopening, however some are still worried about coming back to the gym for safety reasons. Gyms are limiting the number of people inside at any one time and at peak hours, people may be asked to book ahead of time.

But the main reason why gyms may very well see a drop in memberships is the money. In June, 9.4 million employees had been placed on furlough (6), and now the UK is in a recession, every penny counts. Many of us simply won't have the money to still pay for gym memberships and personal training sessions this year, and perhaps for a long time to come. As we were shown new ways to exercise and get out and about during lockdown thanks to online classes, why would many of us continue to go to pay for a gym membership when we could just continue to exercise from home or the local park?

Likewise with the risks that going to the gym could cause right now; if there is even a slight chance of someone, especially those at high risk who until recently had been shielding, picking up the virus, they're simply not going to take the risk.

After all, exercise doesn't have to be weights or treadmills; even simple movement like taking the stairs rather than the lift, or short walks on your work break in your local area can be as beneficial. The increase of fitness tracking apps, and devices such as Fitbit's and Apple Watches, offer a fun but competitive way to keep track of your fitness journey.

With many of us continuing to work from home for the foreseeable future, it's not just exercise that will help us stay motivated. Working from home has allowed many people more freedom throughout the working day, giving people more time to cook healthy breakfast, lunch and dinner options, by swapping the queues in the coffee shop next to work, and expensive pre-packaged lunch choices, for healthy, homemade food and drink.

Combine the fear of returning to fitness spaces, lack of money, and suddenly not having the same amount of spare time and motivation as many of us did a few months ago; could we soon be looking at the death of gyms all together, and instead, finding new ways to get our fitness fix? Only time will tell.

1 <https://www.webmd.com/men/features/exercise-benefits#1>

2 <https://www.courtneyblack.co.uk/>

3 [https://www.goodtoknow.co.uk/wellbeing/health/how-to-lose-weight-lockdown-](https://www.goodtoknow.co.uk/wellbeing/health/how-to-lose-weight-lockdown-538876)

[538876](https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/08/01/boris-johnsons-plans-for-a-fitter-nation) 4 <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/08/01/boris-johnsons-plans-for-a-fitter-nation>

5 <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-07-10/gym-reopenings-are-people-going-to-return-or-work-out-from-home>

6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-july-2020/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-july-2020>