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Observations Yankee Doodling

Why don't people exercise, even a little?

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One person's reality is another person's illusion

In a recent paper published in the BMJ, Kamerow¹ laments why so many people do not exercise at all. I am not convinced that it really is as surprising as the paper's title may suggest.

Firstly, there is the issue of time, perhaps an easy excuse, but therefore not less realistic. Employment and family can take up so much time that even for the most motivated athlete exercise no longer becomes possible unless drastic changes are made, which is not always possible. Earlier this year we presented a case study² about a former elite athlete who past his forties still used to go to fitness once, and run at least twice per day. A change of employment put a firm stop to that. His employment contract, cunningly conceived by his employer, did not specify the number of working hours per week, but indicated workload expressed in "units", an accounting trick used by some organizations. Every employee, of course, had to work the same number of units, but the number of hours that equaled one unit could be 3 to 4 times as much in one department when compared to another. In brief, his working week in reality consisted of roughly 110 hours, allowing him about 2 hours of sleep per night, except for his weekends. His ensuing severe sleep deprivation went on for 7 years (the time he remained employed) causing him to double his body mass and developing metabolic syndrome. Finally, he quit his job, promptly started running and exercising again, and over the next 2 years he lost close to 45 kg with his health restored.

One may think that his just proves the point made in the title of this paper. However, the point is that it is far from evident for a person with a BMI of 41.7 to still go running. Serious exercise at a similar body mass is also not free of overuse injury risk given the considerable stress on joints, ligaments and tendons. It is questionable whether the average person has that kind of perseverance and pain tolerance. People with far less overweight often feel unable to run; at best, they walk. However, this leads to another problem, namely that, after weeks of walking they will barely have lost any weight. So they have put all this time in exercising with virtually no tangible result, hence the motivation quickly disappears, especially considering that when they finally will have a lost a few miserable kilogram, not much needs to happen or they will quickly regain it, killing whatever might have been left in terms of motivation. Risk for weight regain, contrary to what has often been suggested in the past, indeed is similar irrespective of whether the initial weight loss was rapid or gradual³.

It is pertinent to point out that people who recommend exercise to non-exercising people tend to forget one crucial detail: in order to train at a decent level, you need to be trained, and in order to train hard, you need to be very well trained⁴. Health providers recommending exercise need to be honest and inform their patients of potential failures, drop-out rates, poor motivation and minimal effect. If not, is it really a surprise that subject start doubting their physician or personal trainer ?

In considering why people do not exercise, a very interesting case is presented by former elite athletes. One

would imagine that these people once at the zenith of healthy life should be the prime example to the non-exercising population when it comes to lifestyle. However, the reality is different, and even among former elite athletes, especially those who used to practice sports in weight classes, there is a considerable incidence of *adipositas athletica*⁵⁻⁷. This suggests that a large proportion of those who do have the framework and once did have the perseverance to vigorously exercise, somehow lose that with advancing age and increasing job and family obligations or economic challenges. Furthermore, it prompts us to think twice when criticizing the lack of exercise among ordinary people, when it turns out to be a problem as well in past elite athletes.

Even athletes in their prime may be poor propaganda for encouraging people to exercise. Between March and May 2015, football players Cristian Gomez (27 years, *Atletico Parana*, Argentina), Gregory Mertens (24 years, *K.S.C. Lokeren*, Belgium), Tim Nicot (23 years old, *F.C. Beerschot*, Belgium) all suddenly collapsed and died on the field despite their young age and apparently healthy appearance. The list is even longer if one considers other sports besides football. These incidents prompted many questions from the general public as to whether exercise really was healthy, and many people for themselves decided it was not ...

Economy is the next reason that requires attention. Increasing urbanization with people living in flats in cities rather than on the countryside means that unlike three to four decades ago oftentimes there are no longer any free-access playing grounds around. Fitness centers have attempted to fill that vacuum. However, large fitness center chains such as *Gold's Gym* or *Bally Total Fitness* charge around \$250 per year for a membership in most US cities, but that amount almost doubles in large metropolises such as New York. Such fees are still moderate compared to yearly memberships in many European countries, and certainly when compared to London where several fitness centers charge up to £150 per month! Add to that the price for a good pair of running shoes and you quickly reach a number that in terms of expense is totally unrealistic for someone who is unemployed or on sick leave, or who is not middle class. There is a reason that type-2 diabetes is endemic among the poorest people rather than among the middle or upper class⁸.

Just a few years ago an extensive systematic review and meta-analysis published in this journal⁹ shed considerable doubt on the effectiveness of exercise referral schemes for increasing physical activity and fitness. Offering explanations to why the situation is as it is, does not seem to have advanced any solutions. Unfortunately, no exercise physiologist is a match for Rocky Balboa. If one recalls, the plot of the various *Rocky* movies revolves around a failed, and in later sequels, a retired, professional boxer, who after several weeks of training—often using improvised or unorthodox ways—succeeds in making it back to the top and defeating the most feared grand champions who often are half his age and in the prime of their career. Inspiring storyline, no doubt, but hardly realistic. The plot of this well-known movie series is not as irrelevant as one might think to the paper's topic why people in reality often do not exercise even a little. The answer really is simple: "One person's reality is not the same as that of someone else".

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Competing interests: Competing interests: I try to exercise more than just a little.

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