

WellSpring

Physical Activity Messages for Older Adults in Rural Areas

Physical Activity in Rural Canada

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Alberta



Exploring leisure-time activity in unique population settings may help social scientists understand how communities' efforts might both promote and discourage healthy aging. In particular, gerontologists are interested in strategies for physically active aging, since sport and exercise participation in later life is strongly linked to successful aging.

Chad Witcher's article in this issue of *WellSpring* offers some interesting insights into the leisure-time activity decisions of Fogo Island elders off the northeast coast of Newfoundland. The author interviewed older men and women in this formerly bustling fishing village and listened to stories about their retirement years. Fogo Island elders were apparently retired, not simply by age, but also by historical and social expectations of appropriate lifestyles in old age.

Strategies for successful aging involved keeping busy, mainly with indoor hobbies, but this "busyness" did not involve health-promoting forms of physical activity. Picking berries and physical chores were a minor part of everyday living and not even considered leisure choices. Walking for pleasure was limited by the lack



of connecting pathways between neighbouring communities and also by the reluctance to expose themselves actively and publicly to the gaze of the small community.

For more information about physical activity and older adults, please visit the Alberta Centre for Active Living's web site at
www.centre4activeliving.ca/category.cgi?c=1;s=d.

The centre has recently revised its 101 Active Living Ideas for Older Adults. To order this free resource, visit our web site at:
www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/101%20order%20form%20April%2006.pdf.

Designing Health-Promotion Messages for Older Adults in Rural Areas

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Despite the many health benefits of regular physical activity, over 60% of Canadians who are 65 and older remain physically inactive (Craig, Russell, Cameron & Bauman, 2004). In addition, most health research on older adults has been carried out in urban areas (Higgs, 1999)—research that may not apply to older, rural Canadians. Given the uniqueness of many rural areas, developing effective health-promotion initiatives means examining health issues through a “rural lens” (Pong et al., 1999).

The success of rural health promotion may depend on the broader rural context. Strategies to promote health practices in rural areas may need to be designed differently from those in urban areas. For example, we currently know little about exercise/physical activity motivation among rural older adults. Rural older adults, who have limited access to health-promotion resources, should receive special attention given current trends of large out-migration of younger people and the “aging in place” of older adults in particular rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2001).



A Case Study on Fogo Island

In 2004, I travelled to Fogo Island, Newfoundland & Labrador, to explore physical activity participation and perceptions of being physically active among older adults in rural Newfoundland for my Master's thesis. Over that summer, I interviewed 10 older adult participants (aged 70 to 94) to learn more about their

- current health;
- current leisure-time activity participation;
- expectations about being physically active;
- work and leisure activity experiences over their lifetimes;
- perceptions of and beliefs about physical activity.

Main Results of the Fogo Island Study

Three main themes emerged about the nature of participants' physical activity participation and perceptions of being physically active (Witcher, Holt, Spence, & O'Brien Cousins, 2006).

1. History and Context of Work on Fogo Island

Men and women on Fogo Island were socialized into a culture of physical labour during their childhood. By adolescence, they took on the responsibilities of adults and engaged in cyclical patterns of work throughout their adult lives. The culture of work activity for men and women primarily involved the fishing industry.

2. Marginalization of Leisure-Time Physical Activity

In the local culture of work activity, participation in leisure-time physical activities was marginalized to the edge of acceptable societal norms. As a result, leisure-time physical activity was something that the participants engaged in only after finishing all necessary work tasks.

As children, participants played sports and games after work. However, as adults, work activities were the focus of their daily routines. They

generally saw time spent in leisure-time physical activity as time not well spent. Being raised in an environment that did not support leisure-time physical activity seemed to result in the devaluing and marginalization of these activities.

3. Strategies for Successful Aging

Interviewees thought that it was too late to expect to receive any real health benefit from participating in leisure-time physical activity in their post-retirement years. As one participant put it, "...we know no matter what we do we're going to get frail..." (Witcher, Holt, Spence, & O'Brien Cousins, 2006, p. 18).

O'Brien Cousins (2000) noted the tendency for older adults to perceive themselves as unable to perform physically active tasks because of their age. The key strategy for aging successfully among Fogo Island residents involved "keeping busy." Keeping busy meant being involved in activities thought to be productive rather than leisure-time physical activities.

A desire to keep busy may have come from the value placed on tasks seen as meaningful or productive in their earlier years. Given the few physical activity options open to participants and society's tendency to push older adults to one side (Marshall, Heinz, Kruger & Verma, 2001), staying busy may be one of the few ways in which older adults feel that they can actively contribute to society. In my study, participants kept busy by engaging in various activities viewed as productive (e.g., sewing or woodworking).

"The findings of my study suggest that older adults will most likely participate in activity that they see as relevant and purposeful or productive" — Chad Witcher.



Tailoring Health-Promotion Messages for Older Adults in Rural Areas

The findings of my study suggest that older adults will most likely participate in activity that they see as relevant and purposeful or productive. Physical activity promotion for older adults should thus focus on activities with productive, tangible outcomes (e.g., walking to pick berries, rather than walking for the sake of health). In addition, education is needed to help break down traditional stereotypes of inevitable frailty and the perceived pointlessness of being physically active in late life.

In the Newfoundland context, community-level interventions may involve creating projects that allow older residents to use their work skills to benefit the community as a whole. As an example, older adults may be interested in cutting timber that could be collectively shared as a fuel source or used to construct boardwalks and recreational centres.

The findings from this study may be relevant for other rural areas of Canada. For example, the experiences of older adults raised on farms in the Prairies may be similar. Developing a broader understanding of how the larger context can affect older adults' participation in leisure-time physical activity is an essential step towards developing appropriate and effective physical activity promotion initiatives.

Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans through physical activity.

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IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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