

## Changing Wellness Behavior

By Kay Van Norman

### Motivation to Make Change

Behavioral researcher R.J. Shepard states that motivation to make change is impacted by:

- attitudes towards behavior,
- perceived “norms” for behavior,
- an individual's belief that certain referents (friends, spouse, co-workers, healthcare providers, etc.) think she/he should or shouldn't perform behavior,
- motivation to comply (or not comply) with perceived wishes,
- belief that change is positive,
- belief that action taken will result in desired change.

### Attitudes and perceived norms

Behavioral intention is formed by weighing attitudes towards, and perceived norms for a specific behavior. For example, most 40+ individuals consider regular physical activity a positive aspiration (even if they don't actually do it!). However, for many 65+ individuals, sedentary behavior may be the perceived norm and considered an *earned right*. To understand this perception, take into account common attitudes and beliefs developed about physical activity (exercise) through the generations.

In the past “voluntary” or recreational exercise was often considered a frivolous use of time for men, and unladylike or even harmful for women. In addition, physical activity was largely associated with hard work. During the Industrial Revolution financial success was linked with how well one avoided physical exertion with the purchase of labor saving devices and/or hiring others to do physical work. After spending a good portion of their adult lives trying to reduce the demands of physical work, it is not surprising that many older adults now shun physical activity.

Overcoming this belief system requires making physical activity personally relevant to an individual regardless of how they feel about exercise, i.e. they must address one or more immediate need. Preventing falls, maintaining bone strength, and retaining physical independence would be relevant to some, while increasing sports performance, reducing stress, preparing for a physical challenge or optimizing fitness would be relevant to others.

### Perceived wishes

Existing wellness “environments” both at home and work also impact motivation. For example, does an individual who chooses to walk/jog before breakfast receive reinforcement from family or thinly veiled resentment? Does standing up from the computer to stretch and move bring stares or others joining in? In senior housing would an individual stopped in the hallway at an exercise station feel conspicuous, or believe that his behavior was in line with perceived norms? In short, what are the attitudes of family, friends, and significant acquaintances toward physical activity? Some individuals will desire to comply with the perceived wishes of others, some will be motivated to do just the opposite; either way, it is a strong dynamic impacting change.

### Is change positive?

Another key factor in behavior change is how much a person believes that the change will positively affect their life. Individuals considering physical activity may ask themselves, “*will it take too much time, will I be tired, will I get hurt, will I have to give up something I enjoy, will I be successful, and will others support my efforts?*” In short, will this behavior result in an overall positive change in my life?

**Will actions result in the desired change?**

Motivation also requires an individual's confidence that the action taken (physical activity) will result in the desired change (increased physical performance, weight loss, etc.). Factors impacting this belief are whether *others appear to believe* she can improve, *and evidence that others have improved*. Infomercials for exercise equipment use these factors almost exclusively to sell their products, i.e. "*you too can have hard rock abs in just 8 minutes a day*", followed by testimonials by others who have done it.

Unfortunately, this confidence often motivates only the purchase of the equipment. The belief that *8 minutes a day* will actually result in rock hard abs is seldom internalized, so many people never progress from purchasing the equipment to making exercise a regular part of their day.

**What now?**

If you want to become more physically active, first consider your personal beliefs about physical activity and how it relates to each aspect of your life. Go through the bullet points at the beginning of this article and determine where you may have a disconnect between beliefs, intentions and behaviors. Awareness is the first step towards motivating action and supporting lasting behavioral change.