

Older Adults' Experiences with Social Support from Group Exercise Instructors

L. Morrison, M. H. McDonough, C. Din, C. Zimmer, J. Hewson, A. Toohy, P. Crocker, & E. V. Bennett

Purpose

To examine older adults' experiences of social support with group physical activity (PA) program instructors and perceptions of instructor behaviours that encourage participation.

1. What social support behaviours enable and hinder engagement in group PA programs for older adults?
2. What social support behaviours help participants have positive psychosocial experiences?
3. What needs do these social support behaviours from instructors serve?

Study Methods

Conducted and analyzed observations and focus groups using interpretive description methodology.

- **Phase 1:** 4 observations of group PA classes at each of 4 recreation facilities (295 participants from 16 programs were observed)
- **Phase 2:** semi-structured focus groups with PA program participants regarding their experiences with social support in the program (38 participants aged 55-80)



Take-home Messages

- Instructors should focus on **supporting autonomous engagement, developing caring connections, fostering trust through expert instruction, and managing conflict directly and effectively**
- Instructor training should **consider older adults' social support needs and help instructors enact behaviours that enhance participants' experiences and support continued engagement in PA classes**

Results

1. Supporting autonomous engagement

- Asking participants for feedback, listening to suggestions, and incorporating requests/suggestions into future classes, considering individual abilities when giving feedback, providing exercise modifications, telling participants to listen to their bodies, explaining benefits of each exercise, giving verbal encouragement, and using words of affirmation and an energetic tone of voice.

2. Developing caring connections

- Taking time to speak with participants to understand their motivations for taking the class, encouraging them to thank and congratulate each other for doing their best, and incorporating laughter and smiling.

3. Fostering trust through expert instruction

- Offering alternatives for each exercise so participants could choose the safest option for themselves, disclosing their credentials, explaining anatomical and physiological information relevant to the activities, breaking down movement sequences to help participants follow along, making corrections, modelling correct techniques, incorporating a wide variety of exercises, giving cues and options for intensity levels, and providing appropriate modifications.

4. Managing conflict directly and effectively

- Providing participants with means of reporting conflict/conflict management, and addressing interpersonal conflict immediately and professionally.

5. Creating a climate where people want to go

- Participants followed their favorite instructors to different classes or locations, avoided classes with instructors they did not enjoy, and shared instructor preferences with each other.

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For more information on this study and the Relationships and Exercise Lab, contact Dr. Meghan McDonough at meghan.mcdonough@ucalgary.ca



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
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