

Social Support Among Older Adults in Group Physical Activity Programs

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Purpose

- To determine social support needs & challenges experienced by older adults participating in group physical activity (PA) programs
- To identify social support functions & behaviors that enabled older adults' engagement in PA classes



Study Methods

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

- **Phase 1:** Observations of group PA classes at 4 recreation sites (295 participants observed across 16 programs)
- **Phase 2:** Focus groups with PA program participants to understand social support needs, challenges, & experiences (38 participants aged 55-80)

Results

1. Fulfilling a need for fostering social relationships

- Positive, non-judgemental interactions, viewing other older adults as similar to oneself, creating smaller social groups or attending smaller programs, participating with the same group, & receiving help when needed facilitated effective support
- Discriminatory or exclusive actions & lack of diversity among participants undermined social interactions

2. Initiating participants' engagement in (more) physical activity

- Participants acknowledged that PA activity was beneficial for their physical functioning & fitness
- Support from family, friends, & other program participants was important for initiating engagement in PA, trying new programs, increasing amounts of activity

3. Helping participants sustain engagement in physical activity

- Family, friends, & other older adults helped participants sustain their engagement by providing assistance (e.g., accommodating participants' PA schedules, driving them to & from classes, helping with equipment during classes, & offering advice based on similar experiences with injuries or health conditions)

4. Assisting participants with recognizing successful engagement in physical activity

- Older adults acknowledged other participants' accomplishments verbally or by applauding them
- Seeing other older adult participants succeed was only motivating if participants thought they had the abilities to succeed

5. Providing comfort and reassurance during difficult times

- Family & close friends taking part in the programs with participants was reassuring
- Other older adult participants were supportive by providing encouragement to continue, making light of difficult situations, & checking in on participants

Take-home Messages

- **Fostering relationships** among program participants is crucial for them to receive **social support perceived as sensitive & responsive to their needs**
- Instructor training should include how to create **positive & inclusive atmospheres with diverse groups**
- Instructors should encourage **individual goal setting & participation at a level matched to participants' abilities**

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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



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