

# SOCIAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES WITHIN IN-PERSON AND ONLINE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS: A RAPID REVIEW



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## THE PURPOSE

To synthesize primary literature on practical strategies used to support adults in PA published 2020 onwards, including physical activity programs delivered online.

## THE STUDY

- A rapid review was selected in order to provide practical and action-oriented information to community partners and physical activity organizations
- Article search included terms related to social support AND physical activity and excluded terms related to children
- 104 studies were included

## STUDY CHARACTERISTICS

- Articles were published between 2020 and 2025
- Studies were primarily published in Canada (n= 27), the United States (n= 25), the United Kingdom (n=19), and Australia (n=13)
- Numerous adult populations were represented, most commonly adults living with cancer (n = 28), older adults (n = 19), or adults living with Parkinson's (n = 12)
- Participants ages ranged from 18-94 years
- A wide variety of physical activity programs were included. E.g., clinical settings, groups or individual, general exercise, or sport/activity specific
- Physical activity was delivered in person (n = 86), online (n = 13), and hybrid (n = 5)

## RESULTS

This work built upon previous research (Craig et al., 2025) which identified nine categories of social support within the adult physical activity context.

All nine categories remained consistent, however some new strategies were added, or the name of the strategy was refined.



## WHAT WE LEARNED

- Greater diversity of populations was included in the rapid review, compared to the previous conducted overview of reviews (Craig et al., 2025)
- Many of the social support strategies could be implemented within in-person and online delivery
- Providing and fostering social support in online delivery can be particularly challenging
- Emotional support was one particular category where implementation in online delivery was limited
- Fitness professionals play an essential role in fostering social support, however other exercisers also are important, specifically when it comes to modeling

### Open-access publication!

Craig, B.-A. P., Paglione, V., Morrison, L., McDonough, M. H., Stephen, S. A., Sabiston, C. M., Bennett, E. V., Doré, I., Won, S., Culos-Reed, S. N., Din, C., Hewson, J., Kenny, S. J., Zimmer, C., Wurz, A., Kitchen, A., Stone, K., Jones, S., Giancarlo, A., & McDonough, R. (2026). Social support strategies within in-person and online physical activity programs for adults: A rapid review. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*.  
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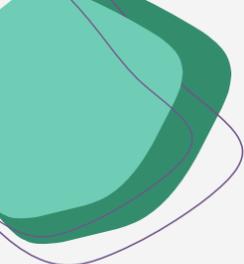
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# RESOURCE PAGE

## 1. FEELING WELCOMED AND INCLUDED

### Supportive strategies

Be open and share about self to put others at ease.

Offer assistance or encourage participants to assist each other with overcoming exercise barriers (e.g. physical assistance with transfers, transportation, childcare).

Sharing information about your certifications and experience with PA and the population you are working with to engender trust in your instruction/suggestions/support.

Orient participants to the space, equipment, facility, PA, program, other participants, staff, etc.

Structure collaborative activities and spaces so participants can socialize and meet many people.

Be available (e.g. depending on the activities, consider circulating among the participants) and attentive to individual's needs so you are approachable and can address questions, concerns, and doubts one-on-one.

Be mindful of your language and actions to avoid stereotypes and be open, accepting, and non-judgmental.

Introduce yourself, introduce participants, and learn names.

Greet and check in with participants regularly, ask how they are doing, and following up about things they have talked with you about.

Initiate speaking to new participants.

Show genuine interest in participants, listen to them, and make an effort to get to know them.

Normalizing appearance/condition by not explaining or drawing attention to it.

## 2. MAKING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FUN

### Supportive strategies

Play energetic/upbeat music or music everyone likes to enhance enjoyment.

Frame PA and the specific context as fun, social, and interesting (e.g. variety of activities/exercises).

Intentionally include or repeat physical activities that participants find fun.

Participate in and encourage respectful and inclusive social interaction, laughter, joking, bantering, rapport, celebrations, compliments, and friendly competition.

When safe and not interfering with participants' ability to hear the instructions and do the activity, allow or be open to participants talking to others during activities.

## 3. MODELING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

### Supportive strategies

Relate to participants about being sore or tired during the exercise and reassure that it can get better/it's a normal experience. Requires caution to not overlook soreness or fatigue associated with overexertion or injury.

Demonstrate how to execute PA and modifications.

Adjust settings to maximize visibility of demonstrations when instructing online

Draw attention to other people's PA behaviour (e.g. participation, improvement, using modifications, correct technique) to help participants learn, and to enhance their commitment to the group and to their PA goals.

Participating together can create an obligation to show up and work hard.

Modelling being positive and passionate about PA and that it is fun.

Modelling being physically active and coping with limitations if applicable.

Comparing to similar others when they are doing well (e.g. being in good health and coping with disease).

Seeing similar others engaging in PA and showing what they can do.

## 4. PROVIDING INFORMATION

### Supportive strategies

Provide guidance (e.g. suggesting equipment to try, how much exercise to do, which exercises to perform, proper technique), demonstration, physically support, and answer questions on how to work all equipment.

Assist participants in learning technology required for attending PA if instructing online.

Regularly check in, answer questions, and remind participants about information they need relative to their current class/program/group/etc. verbally or using online functions.

Provide evidence-based information about the benefits of participating in PA, especially to any conditions participants have.

Provide guidance on identifying and overcoming barriers to PA.

Provide information or options for other programs/resources/opportunities for PA. This is particularly important if current opportunity is ending.

Provide personalized recommendations for physical activities based on participants' capabilities, interests, likes/dislikes, needs.

Share information or exchange ideas; if similar experiences or adversities are shared, provide suggestions or information about treatment, coping, etc.

## 5. ENCOURAGEMENT

### Supportive strategies

Encourage participants to return.

Help participants create and maintain a safe environment for performing PA at home and assist in finding modifications to accommodate space if program is delivered online

Give encouragement even when online participants have cameras off.

Give clear, repeated instructions, and explain in multiple ways.

Challenge participants to try things they have the ability to accomplish through intentional, proactive, positive comments.

Provide assistance and guidance on what to do and how to do it safely and effectively considering the specific needs and abilities of the participant.

Provide verbal encouragement prior to and during class.

Provide nonverbal encouragement when appropriate (e.g. hugging, pat on the back, applauding, high five the screen).

## 6. MASTERY FEEDBACK

### Supportive strategies

Share own progress or achievements with participants.

Remind that mistakes are irrelevant and to let them go.

Helping participants set measurable, individual and/or group PA goals focused on effort and improvement.

Emphasizing the class is a non-competitive, non-judgemental environment.

Vocalizing positive, individualized feedback, praise, and reinforcement.

## 7. AUTONOMY SUPPORT

### Supportive strategies

Vocalize that you are prepared to go at participants' paces and follow their lead.

Ask for participant preference for receiving public feedback in online delivery.

Ask about and listen to participants' goals and perspectives, as well as preferences for interaction with others; tailor suggestions and reminders to align with their goals without being pressuring.

Remind participants to listen to their body, set limits based on their abilities and how they are feeling.

Provide meaningful choices and incorporate participant ideas and feedback.

Support self-initiative and make room for participants to contribute their skills and expertise (e.g. peer instructors or mentors).

Being patient and flexible.

## 8. EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

### Supportive strategies

Listen to participants.

Provide physical comfort (e.g. a hug if appropriate).

Serve as social coordinators, ask participants what support they want/need, and direct participants to appropriate support within or outside the group (if applicable).

Be sincere, genuine, understanding, non-judgmental, accepting, caring, empathetic, gentle, conscientious, kind, friendly, positive, and respectful in communications with participants.

Check in with participants who were absent or who are facing adversity.

Express care, concern, and compassion for participants' feelings and provide reassurance.

Show understanding, empathy, and share own experiences when participants are facing adversity.

Use humour and break taboos about adversity; share dark humour and tell jokes that may be awkward in other settings.

## 9. FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

### Supportive strategies

Encourage participants to practice PA outside of program, pursue new or additional PA opportunities, or follow an enjoyable instructor together.

Redirect or change topic to avoid potentially contentious conversations (e.g. politics, gossip, discriminatory comments, or complaining).

Manage any conflicts that may arise directly and professionally.

When online, use language to foster a group identity or feeling of community when instructing online.

For online instruction, use breakout rooms to facilitate discussions.

Acknowledge things happening on participants' screens (when online) to initiate conversation.

When delivering classes online, call on participants to speak.

Encourage participants to unmute in online platforms.

Adjust online settings so participants can see everyone on their screen to prioritize a sense of being in a group.

Structure partners or small groups to be similar (interests, needs, functionality, demographics, etc.) and keep them together and predictable over time. Facilitate new participants having a partner.

Facilitate group discussions that invite all participants to be involved and help participants get to know each other. Particularly those with shared experiences, interests, and understanding.

Provide opportunities for informal socializing and encourage conversation before, after, or during formal activities.

Encourage, suggest, assist with, and/or participate in social gatherings outside of the PA setting.

