

Attention All Dog Owners! Do You Want to Adhere to a Healthy New Year's Resolution? A Commentary on Dog Walking for Physical Activity and Health

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Abstract Every year, millions of Americans and Canadians pledge to become more physically active as part of their New Year's Resolution, only to ultimately fizzle by the end of three months or less. Although the benefits of physical activity (PA) are understood universally, the majority of Americans and Canadians do not meet the recommended PA guidelines. Exercise, which is more planned and structured, has been robustly promoted for years. More recently research has indicated that many adults prefer a more realistic, natural, and enjoyable way of moving through lifestyle PA, such as walking. Walking is inexpensive and can be carried out just about anywhere at a variety of intensities such as strolling, walking, brisk walking, and power walking. The probability of meeting the PA guidelines is four times greater with dog walking owners. Our recent research demonstrates lack of time, whether real or perceived, is the major barrier to PA, and that there is a widely held belief that other obligations and responsibilities are more important. In addition, affective motivators such as "feeling good and happier afterwards" was indicated as a preferred motivator towards physical activity. Consequently, specific intervention strategies need to be implemented where adults can realistically partake in lifestyle PA. If people's preferences for lifestyle PA consists of taking care of their dogs, and knowing the health benefits derived from walking, it stands to reason that promoting dog walking is an effective way to encourage more people to participate in PA.

Keywords: dog walking, New Year's resolution, physical activity adherence, lifestyle physical activity, intervention strategies

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1. Background

Every New Year, millions of Americans and Canadians pledge to become more physically active as part of their New Year's Resolution. In keeping to our passionate, beginning of the year goals, males and females initiate a quest to fitness that often includes a new gym membership. The workouts start out strong, only to ultimately fizzle by the end of three months or less due to too much, too soon. Although the benefits of physical activity (PA) are understood universally, the majority of Americans and Canadians do not meet the recommended PA guidelines of a 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous PA plus 2 or more strengthening activities per week, regardless of decades of promotional efforts [1]. Exercise, which is more planned and structured, has been robustly promoted for years. Only more recently has research indicated that many adults prefer a more realistic, natural, and enjoyable way of moving through lifestyle PA. Examples include gardening, cleaning the house, raking leaves, mowing the grass, and walking the dog [2,3,4,5].

Walking is considered by many adults to be the most feasible, practical, and accessible approach to complete goal driven tasks in and around the home and workplace, as well as through active transportation such as biking [6,7]. In addition, walking is inexpensive and can be carried out just about anywhere at a variety of intensities such as strolling, walking, brisk walking, and power walking. A wealth of past research irrefutably points to a greater level of PA among dog owners versus non dog owners due to the increased number of daily steps taken during the dog walking activity [8,9,10,11]. In many cases, dog owners participate in walking their dog because of the responsibility they feel towards taking care of their dog as well as the meaningful experiences that can take place between owner and dog [8,12].

Studies clearly support the health benefits of dog walking. The probability of meeting the PA guidelines is four times greater with dog walking owners [11]. Pet owners tend to be healthier than non-pet owners and healthier than those who were not ever pet owners [13]. Even if homes have a fenced in back yard, dog walking recreationally around the neighborhood is highly beneficial health wise, lowering

cardiovascular risk factors such as blood pressure, LDL cholesterol levels and triglycerides, ultimately leading to lower medical costs [13,14,15,16].

Moreover, some dog owners enjoy the social interaction with their dog and therefore are intrinsically motivated and look forward to dog walking [12,17,18]. As a result, many dog owners can look forward to embracing the fresh outside air, clearing their minds, engaging in PA through walking, and spending time with their best friend. The combination of preference for lifestyle PA rather than traditional exercise, and the enjoyment of bonding with their dog, makes dog walking attractive for adults to live a less sedentary life and meet PA guidelines [19,20]. Furthermore, dog owners who dog walk tend to adhere to PA day in, day out [8,21]. If a dog walking routine is established, the owner is physically designated throughout the day to break up otherwise long spells of sitting in front of a computer, watching the television, etc. The leisurely or brisk walk, whether it be 5, 10, 15 minutes or more, becomes a health benefit daily, weekly, and monthly [7,22] as well as a mental health benefit [17,23,24].

2. Recent Research Examining Preferences, Motivators and Barriers to Physical Activity in Two Geographical Locations (Southern Ontario and South Carolina)

Two mixed methodology studies were conducted with 234 and 175 diverse adults from various backgrounds in Southwestern Ontario and South Carolina respectively [20,25]. Focus group participants shared their experiences and feelings towards PA and exercise with a trained investigator, giving feedback on guiding questions such as “What do you think of when you hear the word exercise? What do you think of when you hear the word, physical activity? Is lack of time a PA barrier to you? Do you prefer a more structured, regimented, repetitive way of moving? Do you prefer to move while you are gardening,

landscaping, walking the dog, or playing with your children? Do you think the US PA guidelines can be reached through lifestyle PA? Is there a difference between PA and exercise? Do you find lifestyle PA to be more natural, doable, realistic, and enjoyable than exercise? What motivates you to want to engage in PA?” Overall, the conversations were used to explore consistent preferences, barriers, and motivators that contribute to partaking (or not partaking) in PA or exercise. Using the themes that emerged from the focus group interviews, a unique research-generated survey was created to validate and quantify these findings.

A major finding of our work is that the overwhelming majority of adult participants, ages 18-64 years, from both Southern Ontario and South Carolina do perceive a difference between lifestyle PA and exercise (Southern Ontario, 84% of males, 80% of females; South Carolina, 82% males, 74% females), and that engaging in lifestyle PA is a more natural, realistic and enjoyable part of their day than exercise (Southern Ontario, 83% of males, 78% of females; South Carolina, 81% males, 74% females). Overall, 74% of the males and 57% of the females from Southern Ontario, and 67% of the males and 63% of the females from South Carolina, thought the PA guidelines which are shared by both Canada and the United States, could be achieved through lifestyle PA alone. In addition, most participants thought that PA was easier to incorporate into their day than exercise (Southern Ontario, 77% of males, 75% of females; South Carolina, 77% males, 75% females). Most Southern Ontarians, males (65%) and females (57%) and South Carolinians, males (67%) and females (64%) respondents indicated a preference to engage in PA such as energetic yard work or brisk walking, over traditional planned exercise sessions. Moreover, the majority of males and females from both regions (83 to 90%) thought that lifestyle PA and traditional exercise were both easier to do when goal-oriented or purpose driven (e.g. gardening, washing the car, walking to work). Overall, Southern Ontarians and South Carolinians were consistent in their preference for a more unstructured, natural way of being physically active throughout the day.



Figure 1.

Better health and losing/maintaining weight were highly ranked as motivators to be physically active in both Southern Ontario and South Carolina. But perhaps the most significant outcome of these studies is the fact that many adults were motivated by “Feeling good and happier afterwards.” This affective component for many is essential to successfully find purpose, enjoyment and meaning which contributes to increased PA adherence.

Ultimately, the question of “why are people not physically active?” must be understood and addressed in order to implement strategies that will actually work with a majority of the population. To date, this has clearly not been the case. Lack of time was the most common type of general barrier to PA chosen among South Carolinians and Southern Ontarian adults. The most commonly indicated barriers were: “Other things are more important and require my time and energy; I have a difficult time finding the time needed to fit the gym into my day; Once I get home, it’s difficult to find time to be active”; and “There are so many other things for me to do, it’s easy to make excuses rather than exercise”. Surprisingly, inclement weather was not a commonly indicated barrier (only for Southern Ontario females). The bottom line is that lack of time, whether perceived (psychological) or real, is the major barrier to PA in most adults.

3. Discussion

Within approximately 6 months or less, many people who initiate a structured, regimented exercise program, stop participating (3). Since there is a widely held belief that other obligations and responsibilities are more important and require one’s time and energy, participation in traditional exercise during the day may be unrealistic for many. As a result, specific intervention strategies need to be implemented where adults can realistically partake in lifestyle PA. Furthermore, because most people prefer lifestyle PA over traditional exercises [2,3,5,20] and that the affective motivator of feeling good and happier afterwards is vital to want to participate in PA [25], dog walking is a wonderful way to enjoy time with your dog while refreshing your mind and boosting health.

Specifically, dog walking can prevent a PA sedentary lifestyle [23,26], positively encouraging the owner to engage in recreational PA while bonding with their pet. Dog walking is a perfect way to break up the day with frequent recreational walks in bouts of 10 minutes or more rather than a longer duration one time during the day [11]. In essence, dog walking can prevent a physically inactive lifestyle while building physical, psychological, and social health [17,23,24,27]. Time spent dog walking allows for relaxation, social interaction with other friends and neighbors in the community which contributes to strong mental health. Dog walking can allow the owner to change the scenery and clear the mind from being indoors for long periods of time and by allowing time to enjoy walking one’s canine companion, PA levels can increase while boosting spirits. Dog walking is a pleasurable, rewarding way to connect with the owner’s dog while splitting up what would otherwise be an inactive day.

Importantly, dogs offer companionship [26,28,29,30] that make the walk enjoyable, refreshing, and fun, with a greater likelihood to establish a consistent routine that is not abandoned in a matter of weeks or months. In addition, many dog owners, specifically women, feel a sense of security when walking with their canine friends which adds to the bonding experience [31]. Since many Canadian women find winter to be a physical barrier to PA [32], there may be a higher degree of motivation for dog walking in inclement weather due to the perceived need to walk the dog and the satisfaction and gratification gained from the experiences of dog walking.

Finally, dog walking can be a viable way to combat lack of time barriers, whether real or perceived. Finding time to be physically active once home after work, stopping in the middle of the day to change clothes and drive to the gym, and the feeling of not having any time, prevents adults from doing any kind of purposeful, pleasurable, and recreational PA. Dog walking can be a powerful option to partake in a rewarding lifestyle PA activity. Nearly 45% of American homes who own dogs and the 46% Canadian households who are also dog owners have an opportunity to improve their quality of living through dog walking [33,34].

If people’s preferences for lifestyle PA consists of taking care of their dogs which includes dog walking, and knowing the health benefits derived from dog walking, it stands to reason that promoting dog walking as a viable form to better health while enjoying the experience is an effective way to encourage more people to participate in PA. Partaking in higher levels of PA while embracing the dog walking responsibility [28] is a perfect way to enjoy time away from more humdrum household and work responsibilities with a fun and gratifying walking buddy, particularly considering the stress from the current COVID-19 virus pandemic. More efforts should be made to facilitate and promote dog walking as a realistic and pleasant means of meeting our US and Canadian PA guidelines with built environments that provide safe, aesthetically pleasing neighborhoods, accessible parks, and trail and sidewalk connectivity pathways for all to use.

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