

# Promoting Ongoing Participation in Group Fitness Among Older Adults: An Application of the Psychological Continuum Model

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## INTRODUCTION

- The notion of healthy aging is critical for the growing aging population.
- Leisure time physical activity (LTPA) can positively affect physical health and wellbeing.
- LTPA can allow for more social interaction and consequently more social support.
- Nevertheless, our knowledge about how older adults maintain their LTPA engagement is still limited.
- Thus, the objective of this study was to explore older adult's overall participation experience in a group fitness program at a local recreation center that has been thriving for years.

## AGING AND LEISURE-TIME PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (LTPA)

- The proposed benefits of an activity do not always result in motivation to do that behavior.
- Older adults as a population have been shown to be task-oriented in that the type of activity they choose to engage in must be appealing and meaningful to them.
- Furthermore, there are barriers to physical activity participation for older adults such as physically limiting health conditions, not having time to maintain their activities, transportation issues, and the cost of attendance.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUUM MODEL (PCM)

The Psychological Continuum Model is a four-stage theoretical framework that aims to explain how an individual's attitude progresses from awareness of an activity to allegiance to it.

- (1) *Awareness* of the existence of an activity
- (2) *Attraction* to, or a more demonstrated interest in the activity
- (3) *Attachment* to the activity where their attitude becomes more enduring
- (4) *Allegiance* or significant commitment to the activity.

## METHODS

- A case study methodology allowed for the study of a fitness program that had a significant portion of participants who had been involved in the program long-term.
- Data included interview with 23 students in the fitness program and the instructor
- Mean age = 70.4 (Range = 60 to 85)
- Mean attendance = 13 years
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically

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## FINDINGS

### AWARENESS

Many participants became aware of the program through informational catalogs put out by the local park district.

Some participants were specifically looking for a physical activity program and looked for options in the community.

Many also mentioned learning of the class through friends which also motivated them to join.



### ATTRACTION

The course offered a sense of structure for participants. With most participants being retired, the early morning course allowed participants to get up and start their day.

It also gave them a sense of routine as the class occurred several times throughout the week.

Some remarked that it helped them deal with life events like transitioning to retirement or coping with the death of a loved one.



### ATTACHMENT

The instructor played a key role as a socializing agent who fostered the participants' attachment to the program.

Notably, the participants mentioned the instructor's ability to create a welcoming and accepting environment.

Participants felt that there was an appropriate level of challenge while also feeling safe in class and free to modify the activities to suit their needs and abilities.



### ALLEGIANCE

The social aspect of the class cemented allegiance to it. The participants felt that they have friends in the class that they have become close with.

Many mentioned the importance of social support and feeling cared for that went beyond the program.

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## DISCUSSION

The findings depict how participants' engagement developed progressively and correspondingly to their personal, psychological, and environmental factors.

- It is important to have the necessary resources readily available to older adults so that they can become and stay active.
- Unidirectional information input is not enough to trigger actual engagement. Having the intrinsic motivation to take an exercise class made them more receptive to available information.
- An instructor is a governing factor that influences overall quality of a program. The instructor (whose age was around the age of the participants) was able to offer what participants wanted and needed. Participants deemed the instructor's ability to maneuver the class very unique and mentioned it as what kept them coming back.
- The social interaction and social support within and beyond the program is what differentiated it from the others.

## IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

- This study identified essential characteristics of a fitness program that promotes long-term engagement of older adults. This information has implications for further study into the motivations behind physical activity participation in older adults.
- The findings advance understanding of the Psychological Continuum Model in a new context (older adults' fitness).
- The findings can be used by health and leisure service professionals to design more successful LTPA programs that cater to older adults.