

The Consideration & Application Of Referring Others To Take Part In Physical Activity

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Introduction

Jōbu's mission is to improve physical, social and mental wellbeing through social, outdoor physical activity. The social element being imperative, and therefore reflected within this paper exploring how referrals can influence others to become active. One cost effective approach to adding new clients or participants to any business or activity is referrals. This paper considers the reasons why specifically participant based referral to physical activity is a worthwhile approach and considers behavioural science techniques that may help encouragement and completion of referrals.

By their nature, referrals are social interactions, with one person encouraging someone else to attend, or engage in, a physical activity session. The evidence behind the influence of social support on physical activity is strong ¹. This social support can be offered through a range of connections, such as family, friends, and co-workers. Moreover, this support can take various forms such as emotional (praise and encouragement), practical (equipment and travel) and informational (how and where can you get active). In a broader sense, social connections can influence referral behaviour based upon what those individuals do. Given the influence of social connections and support on behaviour it seems natural to consider referrals as a key to action, in this case, attending a physical activity session.

We know that 61% of adults in the UK meet the CMO guidelines for physical activity, meaning they do 150mins or more of moderate intensity physical activity a week, on average². We also know that 27% of adults complete less than 30 minutes of activity, with 11% in between the two².

The premise of focusing on referrals to encourage attendance at exercise sessions is capitalising on interrelated individuals and social groups. It seems reasonable to consider 'inactive' and 'active' individuals as connected in daily life whether it be as colleagues, friends, or family. Therefore, focus on referrals seeks to move away from defining someone by their activity levels and more by their social groups, in order to build upon trusted relationships and support to encourage someone to move more. The theory of 3 degrees of influence³ highlights this premise that your behaviour not only influences your direct friend it influences your friends' friends' and your friends', friends', friends ... and their behaviour influences you. An individual who looks after their physical, mental, and social wellbeing influences their friends'.

Consideration

In order to explore the literature around physical activity behaviour, and in particular referrals, we have sought to understand the MINDSPACE framework (Behavioural insights team). MINDSPACE is a framework that focuses on nine forces that drive behaviour across a variety of contexts⁴. These nine effects are as follows: Messenger, Incentives, Norms, Default, Salience, Priming, Affect, Commitment and Ego. The framework is considered key to embedding theoretical principles of human thought and behaviour into real world practice. Therefore, the nine factors should be reflected upon when understanding how a behaviour may be effectively steered. With this framework in mind we will use research to explore why referrals may be effective in encouraging physical activity behaviours.

Perhaps the broadest of the factors is norms*, and therefore we will start the exploration of behaviour through the framework here. Social norms are effective determinants of health behaviours, including physical activity i.e. we are more likely to do what those around us are doing, particularly those we feel close to. One influence of social norm congruence is social identity. Social identity is a sense of self based upon group membership such as sports club, employer, political affiliation or charity affiliation. Social identity can be harnessed to promote engagement in physical activity ⁵.

“the more a person identifies with a gym class or exercise group (e.g. as a CrossFit exerciser), a running group (e.g. as a parkrunner), or a team (e.g. as a soccer player of team X), the more that person will be motivated to discover and align themselves with the norms, values, and ideals of what it means to be a member of that group” ⁵.

Therefore, it should be considered that referrals could focus on individuals within social groups that already exist e.g. family, friends, work. Additionally, if referral behaviour within the group can be a normalised phenomenon this will further strengthen the likelihood of group members referring. These social connections also highlight the importance of the messenger*, whereby we are more likely to listen to someone we respect and are close to ⁶. The significance of this is that the person who shares a message or makes a referral can be as influential as the content of the message, or the invitation for someone to join an exercise group ⁷. An example of this would be role-models and the influence their words and actions have on those that look up to them. Moreover, individuals with high status in society are more likely to be heard and the message, or ask, respected. Alternatively, should an individual we do not like share a suggestion, or encourage something, we are less inclined to engage in that behaviour, even if it is relatively achievable and attractive. Therefore, when encouraging individuals to make referrals their social status and relation to those they are referring is important and efforts should be focused on those they have a positive relationship with.

An individual commitment* to completing a behaviour can also be highly valuable, to follow through in order to prevent the guilt that comes with not doing something we have intended to. In particular, public commitments can be really difficult to waiver from as a result of the social implications. Therefore, encouraging someone to make a commitment to referring someone to an exercise class, particularly one with their group or coach, could be a strong determinant. Cialdini states “Once we have made a choice or taken a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment. Those pressures will cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision” ⁸.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, recent research found that “100% of active people strongly agreed that exercise is an automatic aspect of their lives, whereas 92% of inactive people disagreed” This research highlights the importance of behaviour becoming default*. When a behaviour is default it doesn’t require conscious decision making, it’s automatic. Defaults are widely utilised behaviour change techniques given their effectiveness. Examples include automatic renewals on insurance or opting out of marketing emails, as opposed to opting in. In regard to referring others to an activity session, this may be default to someone who is naturally sociable, extraverted and confident. For others this will be more challenging, and utilisation of an inbuilt ‘commitment’ may be beneficial.

Aside from practical considerations, there are also individual elements that influence behaviour. One example of this is ones affect*, which is the mood and emotions we experience as a result of daily life. For example, it is known that when we are in a good mood, we are more likely to approach others and socialise ⁹, or chat to someone about joining a physical activity session. This should be considered within a referral model, for example if someone has had a mentally draining week at work, it would be unfair to expect them to have encouraged a colleague to join them in an exercise class within that time.

Moreover, ego*, is important to an individual completing a behaviour, or acting in a way that benefits ourselves. This means that we will likely behave in a way that reflects well, gives a good impression and aligns to our beliefs, whereas if engaging in a negative behaviour it can be tempting to blame others. Therefore, referrals to exercise groups may be supported by the physical, social and emotion benefits the individual will gain from attending, and therefore someone may be more inclined to invite someone. More specifically if you know your friend would benefit from becoming more active and meeting new people your influence on them joining the session will reflect well on you.

Another individualistic factor of the model is salience*. This suggests that one is more likely to engage in a behaviour that is personally relevant, that our attention is drawn to. For example, someone may be more likely to exercise after being diagnosed with pre-diabetes, despite previously being aware of the health implications of being inactive. Therefore, if someone is worried about their sister's wellbeing, they may be more inclined to invite them to join an exercise session. One behaviour may be salient to someone for different reasons, for example one person may join a volleyball session because they have always enjoyed volleyball, or as we saw during COVID19 lockdowns people began to walk because it was one of the encouraged behaviours and was an activity that could be done with friends and family at a safe distance, moreover there is evidence that physical activity increases vaccine efficiency and supports weight management which were significant points. These different personal perceptions on the same activity could be crucial to making an effective referral.

Moving away from internal motivators of behaviour, one of the key external motivators of a behaviour is incentives*. Incentives are known to encourage physical activity behaviour if based on behaviour instead of outputs, such as attendance¹⁰. Additionally, financial incentives have proved successful in encouraging physical activity¹¹. Aside from finances, social incentives are known to be effective, whereby a verbal or non-verbal reward will be delivered if and only if there has been effort and/or progress in performing the behaviour. This could be that if a new member arrives at the exercise session through a referral this individual is congratulated by the group and thanked by the coach. Providing a tangible extrinsic reward to referrers, or referrers providing a reward to their friend, is an incentive that is proven to work. However, this motivator must be managed due to diminishing returns on extrinsic incentives as they become expected and can also diminish the value of intrinsic rewards.

Finally, Priming* is the phenomenon of being influenced by one stimulus when responding to another, more recent. This is the idea that our actions can be impacted by sub conscious cues. Priming is often used to encourage decision making and incentivise actions. Research has found that priming can enable positive health behaviours, including physical activity¹². Priming can be created by the trainer/coach by providing information on why working out with others, including family, friends, colleagues, is a good thing. Alternatively, it could be an app explaining that setting goals and training with others are more likely to keep you active. This then places a positive feel to the idea of referring someone to physical activity. Within apps in particular, often priming is effective visually, so within activity apps utilising imagery of happy groups of people, or two friends enjoying exercising may also positively prime for social referrals to a session.

The above considerations touch on each element of the MINDSPACE framework, and how this is relevant to health behaviours, and in this case referrals to physical activity programmes. It is worth noting that each individual element does not need to be included within an intervention, these can be selected based upon the context. Therefore, it is worth reflecting on the separate elements, which ones feel applicable and relevant to begin considering your intervention.

Application

Moving away from wider, policy-based framework the next section intends to consider the how in practice we can encourage referrals to physical activity, this paper employed the EAST Framework. EAST was developed by the Behavioural Insights Team to complement the MINDSPACE model of understanding in order to steer the application of insights into practice¹³. In essence, in order to encourage a behaviour, make is Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely. This section explores how this may look for referrals to physical activity.

Easy

If something is easy it is more likely to be pleasurable. Therefore, if we can reduce the decisions and other mental and physical pressures around activity it is more likely one will engage¹⁴. Therefore, we should consider how referrals can be made within everyday life, or current routines, with minimal effort. For example, encourage word of mouth during social conversations at work, or as a friend if they want to join you in a workout during your next catch up. Alternatively, virtually we should consider built in referral functions within apps that make it easy, almost automatic, to share an activity, or if asking someone to post about it on social media provide them a template that they can simply share, as opposed to creating their own. Developing QR codes for advertising/sharing is also a good way to reduce the steps someone has to take to access something. Providing something for referrers to hand out also helps make it easy to recommend.

Attractive

Consider how referring someone can be pleasing, appealing or interesting to someone. Ultimately, is it something someone will want to do? Of course, this will differ between individuals, but there are a couple of key things to consider. First, extrinsic motivators, such as financial incentives for example, 'bring a friend to the session and both come for half price' or 'bring a friend and earn extra credits for charity'. Moreover, social incentives could be attractive such as the idea that if everyone brings a friend to the session, there are more people to meet and a wider variety of activities to do.

Aside from the outcome being attractive, this factor can also reflect attracting attention. Ultimately, an individual is more likely to engage in something that grabs their attention. So, for example, is there a clear and colourful referral button within an app, are posters for the session eye catching, does the person being referred have a personalised note. Moreover, priming can help make referring others attractive. For example, providing statistics or rationale on why working out with others is a good thing, such as increasing diversity, being inclusive, supporting a friend to stay healthy; supporting each other can be positive pieces of information to prime someone to make a referral.

The referrer may also be attracted to gaining both a tangible reward and recognition such as a place on a leader board, a T-shirt, or other merchandise, indicating the number of referrals with stars or stripes etc.

Social

Reflecting on the consideration section above, participants should be encouraged to refer to those close to them, both physically and emotionally, such as friends, family and colleagues. Moreover, referrals should be made in a way that matches the current social norms, or dynamics. For example, if colleagues often use messaging apps such as WhatsApp this should be utilised, if they tend to engage and share on social media such as Facebook, or LinkedIn, they should utilise this. Additionally, make it clear that lots of people engage in physical activity themselves, for example, the 'the majority of adults in the UK are physically active' and equally, for the referrers, make it clear that it is usual to refer people, perhaps highlight members who have joined through someone they know.

When making a referral the social benefits should be reflected on, such as the opportunity to be part of a team, or to meet new people by joining the activity session. In particular creating a group identity will be a strong influence for referrals, for example giving your group a nickname such as The Tractor Boys, for Ipswich Town Football club, this will provide a strong group dynamic for someone to join as well as for someone to refer into. Perhaps there's an opportunity here for governing bodies to consider a term to identify social outdoor activity, our suggestion is Social Physical Activity (SPA). This is in effect in Japan who have Radio Taisō, which is national exercise broadcast over local radio systems since 1928.

Finally, by making a commitment to the physical activity group an individual is a part of can be a key motivator to ensuring completion e.g. intentions to invite someone to the exercise group should be shared with other group members in order to better motivate this happening. In order to encourage this commitment individuals should be exposed to positive messages, for example the idea that those who work out with friends maintain the behaviour for longer.

Timely

Referrals should be encouraged at a time that works for both the referee and the referred. For example, referring a colleague to a physical activity session when they have recently mentioned a wish to lose weight or to move more will likely be better received than someone who has recently had a negative experience, or injury. Ultimately the time in their life someone decides to begin exercise and the time at which they regularly exercise needs to be dependent on that individuals' motivations, opportunities, and ability at the time.

When applying this to referrals it should be considered that some participants will be in a position to refer when others aren't, so prompting when receptive is important. Moreover, linking into relevant events or contexts e.g. when numbers get low and the need for new members is clear, for local charity events or have a week of tasters for new starters to capitalise on Olympic games viewership, Wimbledon, London Marathon and inspiration. Other times to encourage referrals are; 'New Year's resolution' in January, Mental Health Awareness Week ¹⁵, National Fitness Day ¹⁶. Moreover, the immediate costs and benefits of making a referral should be considered, so in this case what may prevent someone from making a referral? App based reminders to refer someone to the activity session this week including a link of how to do so could provide enough of a push.

Conclusion

Referrals are by their nature inclusive and socially driven. We should bear this in mind as referring across demographics is key to increasing participation. The sector would benefit from recognising intersectionality and considering the role social allies can play in encouraging physical activity as opposed to categorising individuals and developing interventions based upon characteristics. Those most likely to influence inactive groups are groups with higher levels of physical activity that interact with and have a reciprocated appreciation and respect for someone on a fundamental social level irregardless of age, sex, ethnicity, or socio-economy, which are often at the forefront of activity interventions and policies.

This paper has reflected on the MINDSPACE framework to consider influences at policy level to support physical activity promotion. Moreover, the paper utilises the EAST framework to share tangible examples of how activity referrals may work in practice. Jōbu will be working to integrate these insights into future app developments, workshops, free consultancy and activity sessions to support the increase of activity levels for social, mental and physical benefit of those involved and those yet to be involved.

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