

2017 Physical Activity Forum

Don't Overthink It!

Promoting Physical Activity in a Busy Media Environment

Presented by:
Alberta Centre for Active Living



Keynote Speaker:

Tanya Berry, PhD, Professor
Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta &
Tier II Canada Research Chair in Physical Activity Promotion

Dr. Berry's presentation provided insight on what to consider when developing physical activity messages including how people think, what motivates them, and why people do the things they do.

HIGHLIGHTS

Physical activity professionals continuously work to craft messages to support active lifestyles for various groups of people.

Yet, they are also challenged with competing and conflicting messages from the broader media environment, which together, can influence people's thoughts and behaviours.¹

Researchers continue to explore and learn how physical activity messages influence the way people think and behave.

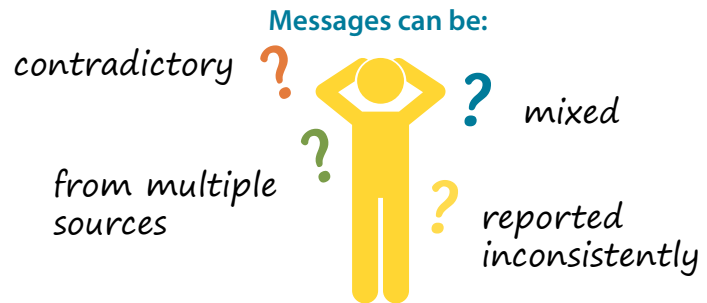
Evidence suggests that automatic responses ("gut reactions") to physical activity information are often very different than what people report on surveys after they have had a chance to think about the message.²

The emotional nature of automatic responses can influence decisions to be active that are quite different from more reasoned and thoughtful responses.²



MIXED MESSAGES ARE PROBLEMATIC

The general public is exposed to a variety of messages framed in many different ways. As a result, messages are often confusing and/or not received the way they were intended.



Like and Dislikes

Behaviours are largely influenced by activities that individuals like and/or dislike.

If people know exercise is good for them, why are they not exercising? In the absence of true barriers, people do activities that they enjoy.

It is difficult for people to enjoy something if they are not confident, motivated, or believe in the activity.

To influence behaviour, messages can target psychological concepts such as:

- attitudes
- self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to accomplish a task)
- beliefs
- motivation

In the absence of true barriers, people do activities that they ENJOY.



Affective vs. Cognitive Messages

Affective messages elicit emotion, while cognitive messages are ones that require thought.

Affective message



Cognitive message



Affective messages have shown to POSITIVELY influence exercise compared to cognitive messages.³

GUT REACTIONS OR REASONING

Processing Messages

People do not spend a lot of time thinking about physical activity messages. Messages are processed in two different ways:

Gut Reactions

- Associations existing in memory
- Often linked to emotion
- Created through learning and experiences

Reasoned Responses

- Take the time to think about the message
- Are motivated, willing, and capable to think about the message

People tend to follow their automatic (gut) reactions unless they stop to think about the message. Their reactions can also be affected by their mood at the time.

Gut reactions can be motivating. However, connections to messages may be both positively and negatively viewed, such as:

- appearance
- health
- social
- fun
- boring
- pain
- weight
- body shape

“Positive ‘gut reactions’ and emotions were related to the decision to do planned exercise in the face of decisions such as being invited out for a drink with friends.”

— Brand & Schweizer ⁴

Prior Experiences and Learning

How we think about ourselves is based on prior experiences and learning.⁵

Active Exercisers

Tend to pay attention to exercise-related information



Non-exercisers

Tend to pay attention to words like *lazy* and *unmotivated*

Exercisers tend to IGNORE negative feedback about not being fit or attractive compared to non-exercisers.⁶

Health promoters can help people by encouraging them to think of themselves as exercisers.

Tips for Developing Messages

- Know and understand your audience.
- Keep your main message simple and straight forward.
- Ensure consistent and unaltered message delivery to avoid misinterpretation — work with trusted and proven journalists.
- Assume motivation is low when creating messages — it takes effort to think and people rely on gut reactions.
- Be aware of competing and contradictory messages as these may influence people's associations and behaviour.
- Create positive and fun messages. These can put people in a good mood and increase positive associations.
- Avoid counter-arguments or threatening-style messages — begin with positive points and remove negative points. E.g., avoid statements like, "You don't have to go to the gym to be active" because they create an association between *active* and *gym*. Instead, choose statements like, "There are many fun ways to be active".
- Conduct a formative evaluation to understand what associations are activated by the messages and which messages draw attention.
- Do not associate weight-loss messages with physical activity messages.

Simple key message:

*Physical activity
is for EVERYONE!*



References

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