

Why might adults belong to outdoor walking groups? A qualitative study using photo elicitation methods in a population with poor health & physical activity indicators



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Background

- Walking groups have multiple health benefits
- Walking interventions tend to be social patterned
- Taken up by those who need them least
- Promoting walking groups has the potential to increase health inequity

Research Aims

- To add to our understanding of how outdoor walking groups can be more effectively promoted
- How to better target a public health intervention to those in lower socio-economic groups who would not typically engage in a walking group

Method

- Study conducted within an area with poor health profile and socio-economic indicators
- Sample of 10 walking group members (6 female, 4 male)
- Participants from an exercise referral scheme with physical and psychological health problems
- Participant generated photographs of their neighbourhood and the walking group (210 photographs)
- Photographs used as basis of semi-structured interview
- Thematic analysis



Results

Little evidence of walking in everyday life

- Manmade environments as barriers to walking
- Captured images of non-walking habits



“I’ve got my iPad, my TV, I mean what would I need to go out for?”

Breathlessness was a common feature

- To judge poor health at outset and health improvement
- As inhibiting walking



“I used to run out of breath, get right out of breath before I even got to the top.”

Low expectations of health improvement

- Walking not viewed as purposeful activity / ‘proper exercise’
- Expectations very general, such as, ‘to feel better’



“I thought, walking, is that really going to help that much.”

Social aspect of the group

- Concerns about social interaction with other people
- Have to get used to the group as much as have to get used to the exercise



“I am happy to walk on my own but it’s also nice to know that people are there.”

Motivators to remain with the walking group

- Physical changes: e.g. Reduced breathlessness, Change in clothes size
- Psychological changes e.g. improved mood, happier,
- Able to walk further and faster in everyday life
- Sense of achievement – comparison with others
- Group (presence of other people) sustains involvement
- Group (comparison with others in the group) facilitates improved walking ability (faster and further)

“It’s surprising, I feel a lot more energised. I don’t know what it is, you do exercise and you feel energised. I don’t get that bit.”

“I am happy to be within the confines of the group because that gives me the motivation and the regime to work to and to attend.”

“Allows you time to think, or chill out or just think of nothing.”

“It’s company and it’s a laugh and you are sort of pushing yourself as well.”

“I am more confident to walk. I used to have to push myself to go out but now I get up and go out and am more confident to go out.”

Discussion

- Group walking not seen as purposeful exercise or of health benefit therefore not a natural choice
- Social awkwardness created a barrier to joining a walking group
- Promoting sociability would be counter-productive rather focus on purposeful activity with multiple health benefits
- Cohesion comes from shared goals and social encouragement
- The walking group became an unexpected enjoyable physical activity

Word cloud generated from participant interviews

