HPER 2150 Reading:
Phat Exercise
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How Young Adults Enjoy and Sustain Physical Activity

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*Intrinsic motivation promotes exercise adherence, but how can it be instilled?*

Studies show that typically half of the students on any college campus are sedentary and that the frequency with which they exercise declines even further after graduation. A national survey showed that only 33 percent of students on college campuses exercised at recommended levels for disease-risk reduction and that more than 35 percent of students were overweight or obese (Douglas et al., 1997). If young adults leave college as sedentary individuals, it will be increasingly difficult for them to adopt and maintain a physically active lifestyle upon entry into the workforce. Although many behaviors affect people's health and well-being, there is no doubt that exercise and fitness are significant factors not only for college students, but for all age groups.

Physical activity interventions and programs for college students are usually no different than those implemented for children and adults. The interventions are generally based on the disease-prevention model of change, which attempts to use a rational approach to adopting and maintaining exercise by linking it to disease-risk reduction, longevity, and fitness (Wallace, Buckworth, Kirby, & Sherman, 2000). Basically, this is the "do it because it is good for you" approach. However, from a sustainability perspective, this motivational approach is a hollow one, with major limitations in building a foundation for long-lasting change for the vast majority of the population. Instead, physical activity interventions need to make exercise "phat" ("pretty hot and tempting," cool, or attractive).

Sport psychologists know that many people who do a behavior voluntarily over a long period of time have discovered for themselves an inner feeling that motivates them to perform the behavior, such as exercise, for its own sake (Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush, & Doell, 2002). This form of motivation has been labeled "intrinsic" by some researchers (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000). The concept of intrinsic motivation, when applied to physical activity, focuses on helping people develop a mindset that elicits enjoyment and fun from the experience itself. The experience then becomes a more powerful one, strong enough to draw the person back time and time again.
Mountain climbers—who generally receive few accolades, speed records, or awards—need a great deal of intrinsic motivation to pursue their sport.

What this approach suggests is that cultivating the experience of the intrinsic exerciser is essential for sustainable change, whether in children, young adults, middle-age adults, or older adults. The concept of intrinsic motivation is especially important when helping young adults, because they are continuously bombarded by external stimuli and are at a high risk for losing touch with the joy of movement simply because they lack attention skills. Without the experience of fun or enjoyment, behavior change will not be sustained because performing the behavior becomes drudgery. In my view, four psychological concepts—vision, mastery, flow, and energy—can help people of any age become more intrinsically motivated through physical activity, thereby increasing enjoyment and motivating a more regular exercise routine (Kimieczik, 2002). This article provides an overview of each of these intrinsic ideas and how together they provide opportunities for optimal physical activity experiences that can be sustained throughout life.

Vision
The first step on the intrinsic path is vision. Heinrich (2000) notes that humans have the ability to keep in mind what is not before the eye. This vision allows people to reach into the future. To become intrinsic exercisers, people must take advantage of their innate ability to visualize themselves as exercisers. The vision begins to make exercise personally meaningful, which kick starts the entire mindset-transformation process.

To develop this vision, individuals can start working on the image they have of their present, and their future, physical selves. They must activate what Markus and Nurius (1986) originally labeled a possible self with respect to moving the body. They must see and feel themselves exercising before they actually do it. Top athletes do this all the time; they visualize themselves exercising and performing at their peak. Nonathletes can do this too. Creating a vision of what we want our bodies to do, and how we want to feel when moving, begins to make exercise more personally meaningful.

Mastery
As people develop their own vision for how they want to experience exercise, they can begin to work on mastery. Mastery focuses people on the experience of exercise itself. With mastery, people draw on their natural desire to improve and to grow. They learn to focus on their own exercise performance by setting self-referenced goals that parallel the three aspects of intrinsic motivation: to learn, to accomplish, and to stimulate (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

With a mastery focus, people can be successful no matter what is happening around them. In fact, a key characteristic of mastery is that people base success on their own self-referenced criteria, not by comparing themselves to other people. What is important with mastery is that an individual’s goals are always related to the exercise itself and not to the outcomes or the environment. The participant does not focus on comparing his or her physical ability or performance with other people. Rather, mastery-oriented exercisers challenge themselves within the workout—seeking to lift five more pounds or walk five more minutes; they may choose on one day to walk faster, or on another day to walk slowly and focus on the surroundings.

Mastery helps people become immune to changes in their environment. They develop a mindset that allows them to exercise under any conditions, good or bad. With mastery, people base their success solely on their own self-referenced criteria; they are in control of their own goals and success, which is what being intrinsically motivated is all about. This does not mean that mastery exercisers never compete against others. Some intrinsic exercisers love to compete. The key, however, is that people with a mastery focus use competition to help them achieve personally relevant goals. They still base success on their own self-referenced criteria. When people develop a strong sense of success based on their own standards, they will in the process gain more confidence in their physical abilities and naturally transform themselves into an intrinsic exerciser.

Flow
The third key to becoming an intrinsic exerciser is flow, which Csikszentmihalyi (1991, 1998) has defined as an optimal psychological state involving total absorption in, and connection to, an activity. Getting into flow during exercise offers a sense of self-expression and leaves people with a feeling of satisfaction. Staying in the moment during an exercise session is what flow is all about.

Similar to vision and mastery, flow is a vital, innate part of being human. Individuals in flow are concentrating on the task at hand and are not easily distracted. The idea is simple: flow experiences help people enjoy the activity so much that they will want to perform that activity for its own sake and will go to great lengths to do so (Kimieczik & Jackson, 2002). Csikszentmihalyi calls this an "autotelic
experience,” one that is intrinsically rewarding. Statements such as “I was on a high” and “I totally lost track of time” illustrate people's typical descriptions of flow experiences. A flow state is such a positive experience that people begin to desire to perform the activity for its own sake. When people begin to stretch their physical capacity, integrate mind and body, and fully immerse themselves in the activity, the outcome is likely to be autotelic.

Flow can help people create a very strong mental and emotional connection to their moving body. Attaining a flow experience, at least some of the time, will help motivate people to exercise when others choose not to. Achieving this state of mind can be easier than people think; the science of flow shows that flow can occur in any activity and that the actor, player, or exerciser has a great deal of control and choice over the mental state attained. Flow also generates positive emotions, helps to control the activity experience, keeps one from getting bored and anxious, builds concentration and attention skill, and develops the “for its own sake” attitude.

**Inenergy**

The fourth concept related to becoming an intrinsic exerciser is what I call *inenergy*—energy that comes from the inside out. Inenergy is based on the science and philosophy of well-being. Well-being comes through human striving for wholeness. This integration of one’s life needs should be as natural as a baby learning to walk. This is why inenergy fits so well within the intrinsic exerciser experience. The idea is to tap into what is natural about each of us, what some have referred to as our “daimon” (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Inenergy helps to push us along an inner path that in some sense most of us are already aware of as it relates to moving our body. The inenergy experience helps awaken the body-mind-spirit connection and to show that a life without movement is not really living.

The idea with inenergy—like vision, mastery, and flow—is that it is a natural part of who we are. Well-being is about the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. It is not just about balancing life needs or indulging in one life need—it is about integrating or synergizing them. That is when the oneness or the wholeness occurs. That is where optimal well-being occurs as well as learning and personal development. The idea of inenergy within the context of the intrinsic exerciser is to synergize, connect, and integrate our physical needs with our other life needs: mental, social, and spiritual. Through inenergy, people create the last link in a powerful inner motivational chain that spurs them on to move their bodies on a regular basis.

People can begin to transform themselves into intrinsic exercisers by paying closer attention to how their physical activity interacts with their other life needs. In fact, intrinsic-oriented exercisers plan and structure many of their physical activity experiences to optimize inenergy opportunities. In essence, they consciously plan for inenergy. Inenergy is a powerful motivator; it fuels the fire to help people keep going, and it helps them maintain the passion for exercise that they gained through vision, mastery, and flow. Exercise should not be separate from other parts of our life; in fact, the more we keep it separate, the more difficult it is to change.

**On Becoming an Intrinsic Exerciser**

To optimize the intrinsic exerciser mindset, people need to integrate the four components—vision, mastery, flow, inenergy—as much as possible. These factors work together to reshape attitudes and experiences with exercise.

The first two inner steps—vision and mastery—work to get people connected to moving their bodies. In essence, these first two keys work to activate and focus the mind on how to begin changing behavior with intrinsic motivation. These two intrinsic components are the catalysts of action; they create an inner desire to begin moving. Vision helps people begin to feel like exercisers, and mastery helps them feel successful.

The next two inner steps—flow and inenergy—work to keep people connected to the joyful inner experience of moving their bodies on a regular basis. Flow keeps them in the moment to optimize each and every exercise experience, while inenergy helps them connect exercise with other life needs. Flow provides the enjoyment in the moment; inenergy fuels the fire to keep going. Combined, these four

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inner steps provide a powerful inner motivational system for becoming an intrinsic, regular exerciser for the rest of one's life, no matter the circumstances.

**References**


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