

Exercise or physical activity? The Mediterranean way!

I may be the only health professional in the world that has joined a gym, paid in advance for one whole year, and never went! Not even once! That happened 30 years ago, and it had a profound influence on the way I approached the science of exercise and health in my work. If I cannot do it, how can I ask others to do it?

We all know that exercise is good for our health. It prevents diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and some forms of cancer. It helps us maintain a healthy weight and adds “life to our years”. Nevertheless, two out of three adults don’t exercise enough. Why is this happening? Why are we not doing something that we know will help us live a long and healthy life?

I will try to answer these questions and provide an alternative to exercise, which is easier to do, and has even better health outcomes. My hope is that I will change the way you view “exercise”, or to be more precise, the way you view “physical activity”! I know I have set the bar high, but I will try!

Let’s start with a question: are exercise and physical activity two different things? Yes, they are! The term “exercise” refers to an organized type of physical activity. For example, going to the gym to run for 30 min on the treadmill, or doing 5 sets of bicep curls, 10 reps per set. On the other hand, physical activity refers to anything we’re doing while we are awake that requires muscle movement: e.g., going to the bathroom in the morning, walking to the bus stop, riding our bike to work, tending to our garden, carrying the groceries, washing dishes, dancing at the club, having sex with our partner.

The main reason that we cannot stick with organized forms of physical activity (i.e., exercise) is because it is counterintuitive! After millions of years of hardship, our bodies “think” and “behave” in a survival mode: “Why should I run on a treadmill for 30 min, burn all these valuable calories, and end up at the exact same spot, without having achieved any of the primary means of survival, i.e., collecting food or finding a spouse to have babies?”

On the other hand, physical activity, as I described above, makes perfect sense. Going to the bathroom is a biological need, tending to my garden gives me food and pleasure, carrying in the groceries is essential if I want to eat, dancing is fun, and having sex will continue the existence of humans (and it’s fun)!

So, what I'm proposing here is to change our mind set, from setting goals, like "I want to improve my health through exercise" to a gentler and stress-free approach: "I want to be physically active". If you do this, then good health will follow.

This is why I suggest that we should follow the traditional Mediterranean-style physical activity model. In the old days, physical activity was part of daily living. People had the opportunity, or the need, to walk to work (which involved some form of manual labor), use the stairs, carry their groceries, dance and have fun during celebrations or festivals; they swam, walked, and even played for fun. And even though the conditions have changed significantly during the past few decades, people in the Mediterranean region still walk more and spend more time outdoors than people living in other areas of the western world.

But are the daily activities enough to contribute to good health? Don't we need to "exercise" to achieve good health? The answers to these questions are yes and no; yes, daily activities could be enough to contribute to good health and no, we don't necessarily need to "exercise" to achieve good health. In the past we thought that for good health we needed to exercise for at least 30 – 60 minutes per day. However, recent scientific evidence suggests that adding even 10-15 min of walking per day, on top of what we normally do, is more than enough to improve our health.

How do we achieve this modest goal? By simply using the stairs instead of the elevator or the escalator, starting a garden, walking to a colleague's office next door instead of calling them, dancing to our favorite music alone or with company, and having more sex! Of course, if we want to do more, then we will get even more benefits!

However, even though being physically active is very important for our health, it is not enough to gift us a healthy life. The other lifestyle factors are equally essential: following a healthy (Mediterranean) diet, getting adequate sleep, controlling stress and addictions, having a purpose in life, and maintaining meaningful relationships. All factors working in sync will provide the best chances to live a disease-free, long, and active life, up to the minute that we join God!

Thank you for your attention and stay active!