

## **Making Fitness fun**

The benefits of physical activity are well known and range from physical and psychological benefits to all ages of the population. The current PA guidelines for adults, proposed by the American College for Sports Medicine and American Heart Association (ACSM/AHA), recommend the accumulation of at least 150 min of moderate intensity aerobic PA per week (Nelson et al., 2007). It is also recommended for a complete fitness package benefit that we engage in muscle-strengthening activities at least two times per week (Garber et al., 2011).

There is no "best time to exercise", the best time to exercise is when it works for you, let's beat Non-Communicable Diseases by moving more. But how do we overcome this inclination towards sedentary behavior? How do we make healthy choices for our body, health and mind? The key importance of leaving your couch towards a healthier tomorrow lies in making your fitness regime fun. We are aware repeated exposure to the same stimulus could cause a decrease in involvement and enjoyment therefore we should introduce novel ideas to our daily physical activity routine. Let's look at some ways we can incorporate fun concepts into the different settings of our lives, as we at the Directorate of Non-Communicable Disease call it the setting approach.

### **Creating a healthy fun workplace**

One of the main excuses of not engaging in physical activity is lack of time due to work. So what's stopping you from creating an active environment at your workplace? It's time to create a culture of movement at your workplace. The Directorate of NCD has considered workplace as an important stepping stone towards decreasing the sedentary behavior of our workforce and is in the process of finalizing a guideline for all the policy makers on how to integrate an active work atmosphere in all institutions. Sedentary behavior is any waking behavior characterized by an energy expenditure  $\leq 1.5$  metabolic equivalents (METs), while in a sitting, reclining or lying posture which paints a clear picture of how we are at work. Most of us are seated continuously for long durations which is not good for overall health and work productivity. Therefore the concept of active breaks was introduced to overcome this hurdle and create a positive behavioral change. Many active break videos and public audio announcements with exercise scripts have been created in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Sports Medical Association which can be downloaded from the NCD unit official website: <http://www.ncd.health.gov.lk>. They include seated, standing and group exercise videos which can be displayed on the screen and the participants can easily follow the moves along with the background music. If screens are not available an audio recording has been prepared in both Sinhala and Tamil which can be played at the institutions on a speaker or in small groups using a phone.

Listed below are few ways we can individually promote physical activity at workplace settings; parking the vehicle at farthest parking spot, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, instead of sending emails to your colleagues walk to their desks, take the longest route to meet a colleague, keep an alarm to remind you to engage in short activity breaks, rearrange your work station so that you need to stand up and reach for any tools you regularly use and while taking a call stand up and walk in the hallway. This could be achieved through a workplace wellness strategy.

It is vital that the policy makers at any institution support and motivate their staff towards healthy choices as this will improve their work performance, productivity and reduce absenteeism, an overall benefit for both the employer and employees.

Walking buddies and competitions can be held at the workplace, celebrating special days related to fitness and physical activity. This will inspire the institutional workforce to make healthy choices to overcome the resistance of being plastered to a chair

### **An active future generation**

Another setting targeted by the Directorate of NCD is the school setting when considering the increasing trend of obesity within the children of our country. According to the National school health survey 2016 survey one in five children do not engage in physical activity. With the COVID 19 pandemic outdoor play facilities have been crippled to a major extent resulting in most of the children being glued to a phone, television or the computer and today they are facing the ill effects of excessive screen time. Schools provide children with the opportunities of being physically active which includes physical education and playtime therefore we need to advocate to the decision makers the importance of providing children with these opportunities. Parents, teachers, administrators of schools, policy makers in health and education need to be aware of the high rise in sedentary behavior and obesity to promote dynamic strategies and interventions to improve PA levels . The school setting is very important as it plays a pivotal role in promoting a mindset change in physical activity to children of all ages which is imperative to their physical and mental well-being.

How do we unglue these children from televisions and smart phones to make intelligent decisions and choices? It is found that very little children meet the minimum recommendations of physical activity. The Directorate of NCD along with its stakeholders and Ministry of Education have decided to **reintroduce** the morning 10 minutes exercise session and are producing separate customized videos, posters and trainings for the teachers and students. We need to promote more active play/active recess, active commuting to and from school and active physical education lessons and integrate all these components to see a positive behavioural change. We need to make sure we have a competent and skilled workforce who can offer their expertise to children in regard to physical education which can be provided through training, workshops and guidelines. An active environment needs to be inculcated into the school as it has been shown that increased access to play grounds and parks is positively correlated to engagement in physical activity. Children need to engage in a variety of types and intensities of physical activity which is important to develop muscular fitness, bone strength and agility. The school setting is a sphere of influence to make healthy lifestyle choices from school-age to adolescence who will start reaping the benefits in adulthood and decrease the burden of Non-communicable diseases. The development of a multiwoven interventions are vital to change children's physical activity habits.

We need to come out of the thought frame that time taken for physical activity will come at the expense of getting good grades but in fact rather physical activity will promote and favor better academic performance.

### **A community that moves towards battling the Non-Communicable Diseases**

According to the 2015 STEPS Survey one in three adults do not engage in physical activity. The Directorate of Non-Communicable Diseases has identified physical inactivity as an important risk factor that needs to be addressed through behavioural changes. In order to combat this important risk factor for Non-Communicable Diseases, a TOT manual on promotion of physical activity which was created by the Directorate of NCD, Ministry of Health in collaboration with Sri Lanka Sports Medical Association and World Health Organization was formulated along with other stakeholders. The TOT training programmes

are conducted to district focal points who are the Medical Officers of Non-Communicable Diseases (MO NCD) and Healthy Life-Style Center (HLC) Staff in different districts of the country on how they can promote and train the clients of Healthy Life Style centers in exercise sessions. This helps the health care staff to guide the community to choose the correct recommendations and how to promote physical activity within the community including motivational behavioral changes and face the various myths associated with physical activity.

Tailor made programmes and carried out by the Healthy Lifestyle Center staff on specific days in their hospital and clients are advised to participate and enhance their physical activity performance. Community oriented interventions need to be sustained for a period of time as we need to change the knowledge and attitudes of the community till they are receptive to the message. After which we have to gradually increase the physical activity performance of a community in a stepwise approach. Once the clients are trained it's important to emphasize the importance of creating their own personalized exercise programmes which is suitable for their time schedule and how to monitor their progress of change which is imperative for a sustainable exercise programme. Physical activity is also promoted through mother support groups, happy villages, community service officers and various other platforms so we reach all walks of life to create an active and healthy Sri Lanka.

Remember to be a part of this trend to move more as it cultivates healthy lifestyles and saves lives

“The only limitations one has are the ones they place on themselves” Muhammed Ali

