



Cultural approaches to promoting physical activity for older adults

Whether or not the projected 20,000,000 older Americans of color age actively depends on creating access through culturally appropriate physical activity programs

by Chaya Gordon, M.P.H.

Which groups of people in the United States get enough physical activity to reap the benefits of exercise? Statistics tell us part of the story: European Americans exercise the most (38% are sedentary), and African Americans and Latinos the least (52% and 54% are sedentary, respectively). American

Indian/Alaska Natives and Asian Pacific Americans fall in the middle, with 46% and 42%, respectively. Older women of color and people with low levels of education and income are the least physically active.¹

Research shows that exercise plays a critical role in retaining physical function throughout the aging process and positively affects mental, cognitive and psychosocial functions. Among its benefits, regular physical activity can help manage or prevent chronic health conditions. Given the particularly high rate of chronic disease among older people of color,² and the accompanying losses of functionality and independence, the differences in physical activity rates among racial/ethnic groups should cause great concern.

Why are some cultural groups more physically active than others? And what can we do about this disparity? These questions have no easy answers. But we can start by looking at the concept of culture and how it relates to the barriers to active aging that confront culturally diverse older adults.

The influence of culture

Everyone has a cultural identity and cultural values. Culture refers to the learned, created and shared experiences that characterize a people's worldview. Language, clothing, music, food, art, rituals, religion, ideas, feelings and behavior all contribute to cultural identity. The complexity of culture includes the interplay of its components.

Race and ethnicity shape culture, as do socioeconomic status, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, geographic region, geographic setting (urban/suburban/rural), and other factors. Any cultural group displays great diversity based on influencing factors and combinations of these influences.

Although they share core cultural features, the members of a group may each have somewhat different experiences.

External forces also influence culture. Catastrophic events, such as war, can result in profound changes to cultural practices, as can *acculturation*. Through the process of acculturation, members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group. For instance, immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for 30 years might prefer hamburgers and contemporary American clothing to traditional food and clothing from their countries of origin. Less acculturated immigrants might prefer the more traditional.

Cultural stereotyping assumes that individuals share the cultural characteristics associated with their cultural groups (e.g. "all Italians love pasta"), rather than recognizing people as individuals who may or may not have certain traits. Stereotyping relies on a superficial knowledge of the culture. For example, a belief that all Italian dinners center around pasta shows unfamiliarity with the northern Italian diet, in which rice is the chief carbohydrate.

In any community, the factors that determine physical activity participation show up within the cultural environment. Since every cultural group is unique and multidimensional, a standard, one-size-fits-all approach will fail to make a physical activity program culturally inclusive. Another strategy not destined to succeed? Taking an exercise program designed for one cultural group (e.g. suburban, middle-class, European American older men) and transplanting it to another community (e.g. urban, low-income, Latino older men).

To create appropriate physical activity programs for a cultural group, you must first understand the cultural

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characteristics of and barriers faced by a specific community. Working with older people from this community, you can craft cultural approaches that integrate your program with the specific cultural environment.

Creating a culturally appropriate program

In 2003, the American Society on Aging, a membership association that serves professionals in the aging field, organized a daylong forum on increasing physical activity participation by older adults of color. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the largest philanthropy in the U.S. devoted to health and healthcare, the

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event brought together a culturally representative group of academic and public health physical activity researchers, community physical activity practitioners, and people who work in aging organizations. These attendees discussed the challenges and opportunities for developing innovative and effective interventions for culturally diverse older men and women. The model described below grew out of the discussions of this National Roundtable on Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults of Color Age 50 and Older.

Step one: learn the history of the community. Have past experiences shaped the community's response to programs or studies? A physical activity program in an African American community in a northern suburb may seem to have nothing to do with the U.S. government's 1930–1972 Tuskegee Syphilis Study³ in Alabama. But this study's legacy is a widespread distrust in the community that affects participation in any programs, even nongovernmental ones. Every cultural group has events in its past that have profoundly affected it. Your job is to learn about these events and their effects.

To get started, consider questions such as the following: *Is everyone from the same country/region? How long have these older adults lived in the U.S.? How old were they when they arrived in this country? Did they come as immigrants, refugees, slaves or forced laborers? Do they speak the same dialect? Do they have documented or undocumented immigration status?* (If undocumented, they may fear participating in a program or filling out forms.) *Are these individuals poor, low income, or middle income? What level of literacy and formal education do they have?* These are just a few of the things to consider. You will want to brainstorm other questions for your specific situation.

Step two: engage with older adults in the community. You will succeed more if you connect with the community to build trust, capacity and sustainability over time as a vital part of your program. Engagement starts at the planning stage and continues throughout all phases. If your program is already in motion, *start now.* Recognize that older individuals are experts on their cultures and lives; you are not. Even if you share ethnicity or other critical cultural features with a group, you still need to learn from these men and women about their specific experiences.

Be creative about finding ways to engage with aging adults in a particular community. For instance, talk with a variety of older people, not just the *community leaders* or those who want to talk to you. Acknowledge and explore your cultural stereotypes, then try to set them aside so you are open to learning.

Some ways to connect with a community's aging population include the following:

1. Pay local older individuals as program staff or consultants.
2. Talk with local older people formally in interviews or focus groups.
3. Talk with local aging adults informally.
4. Get to know the whole community as much as you can, including its resources, services and facilities. Visit meetings of different groups in the community. Consider joining one or more groups.
5. Visit facilities and programs for older adults in the community. Find out what's succeeded and failed, and why.

You may be unable to pursue all these methods. But try to avoid the common mistake of rushing the start-up of your

program. Devise an ongoing mechanism for participant input throughout the program—informal talks with individuals or small groups, for example. Many older adults lack literacy skills in their first or second language, so written surveys may not work well. Written surveys also do not foster dialogue. Make sure you engage in an exchange of ideas. The more you build a relationship with a specific community and listen to its older adults' concerns and ideas, the better your program will be.

Step three: learn about key cultural factors and barriers. Many communities of color share central cultural values, such as ancestral ties, duty to family, and respect for elders. How these characteristics express themselves may vary from community to community, even among similar cultural groups. Some groups may consider certain cultural traits vital. Learn as much as you can about the community's cultural characteristics, focusing on what is important and present in its specific environment. A few examples of key cultural factors follow:

- American Indians may approach health through traditional ceremonies.
- Latinos may value celebration and fiesta.
- African Americans may value faith-based community institutions.
- Asian Pacific Americans may feel strongly connected to ancestors and family responsibility.

Do any of these generalizations resonate with the community with which you work? If yes, how? If no, what local examples can you explore?

Barriers that prevent or limit access to exercise also exist in a cultural context. Everyone experiences barriers that make it difficult to be physically active, but

each cultural environment presents particular barriers that older adults must overcome to participate. Identifying these barriers is crucial to enable these individuals to start or maintain activity.

Barriers take many forms and often interconnect. Some obstacles are easier to identify, such as lack of transportation. Others prove more challenging to recognize, such as feeling unwelcome at a facility because you come from a different ethnic group, social class or religion than most participants. Barriers fall into several main categories:

- Environmental—transportation, land use patterns, lack of facilities, climate;
- Social and interpersonal—gender, race and age bias, lack of role models and leadership, group norms that don't support exercise;
- Intrapersonal—lack of exercise self-efficacy, fears, previous bad experience with exercise;
- Physical—pain, limited mobility due to chronic conditions, medication side effects;
- Language—materials or translation not available in a language or dialect;
- Financial—lack of money to pay for facilities, programs or equipment; and
- Legal—undocumented individuals may feel unsafe participating in programs.

Learning about a group's cultural characteristics includes discovering its principal barriers to physical activity. Here are a few examples:

- American Indians may deal with limited transportation and geographic isolation.
- Latinos may perceive physical activity as a luxury, and pay little attention to personal agendas.



- African Americans may face mistrust towards physical activity programs; older adults may feel reluctant to participate.
- Asian Pacific Americans may lack time due to caregiving and family responsibilities.

As with the cultural characteristics, these barriers are generalizations. Working with a community to identify relevant

characteristics and barriers is an important step in making physical activity programs culturally appropriate.

Step four: relate your program to the key cultural factors and barriers of the community. Link your program and its components to the cultural environment by grounding them in the group's rituals, philosophies, practices and language. Explore each major cultural characteristic and barrier with the older adults in the community, determining its importance, evaluating the likelihood it can be built on (for characteristics) or overcome (for barriers), and devising ways to act on it.

Examples:

American Indian communities

Plan physical activities related to the community's approach to health through ceremony. For instance, add a group walk following a ceremony. Brainstorm with older adults and others to overcome transportation and geographic isolation barriers. One answer, for example, could involve tribal youth who drive providing transportation for aging participants.

Latino communities

Tie into the Latino love of fiesta by planning activities such as dancing as part of the celebration. Dancing naturally corresponds to the fiesta's musical aspects, and this group places importance on gathering for fiesta. It can take a long time to change group norms such as perceiving physical activity as a luxury and paying little attention to personal agenda. Connecting with the community's music and celebration is one way to start.

African American communities

Base a physical activity program in the church. Tie the program's educational

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component into faith-based values, such as being strong in body and spirit to better serve.⁴ Together with older individuals and others, discuss how to overcome the barrier of mistrust towards the program. Enlist several aging participants to act as champions and peer educators to promote your program and demonstrate its benefits.

Asian Pacific American communities

Plan intergenerational exercise activities that older men and women can share with their families, such as walking. Programs that link physical activity with the family may overcome barriers by allowing family members to participate together while fulfilling social roles and responsibilities.

By associating your program with a group's music, dance and visual arts, you help relate the program and its components to the cultural environment. Examples include the following:

- Utilize the community's music—but ask participants what music they like.
- Design program materials using colors, styles, themes and other graphic elements identified with the specific culture and appropriate for those with low literacy.
- Use the community's language or dialect in all program aspects, as it is “the lowest common denominator of cultural sensitivity.”⁵

Brainstorm with aging adults in the community to come up with other ways to link the program to the culture's arts. Test your materials and program components with a small, age-appropriate group to get feedback. Be prepared to make changes.

Step five: look for strengths and resources in the community. Every cultural group has resources and assets. By using a strengths-based rather than a needs-based approach, your program can contribute to building community capacity and empowerment.⁶ Here are some ways you can maximize resources and sustain the program:

- Identify and use the community's resources and assets, whether tangible or intangible, to design, implement, support and sustain the program.
- Realize that you can build on cultural characteristics to develop physical activity programming, e.g. collectivity, love of fiesta.
- Look to older adults in the community to be champions or peer leaders.
- Recognize opportunities to associate physical activity for older adults with other local issues, i.e. transportation, park and recreation use, safety issues.
- Coordinate physical activity programs with existing community programs and resources, i.e. senior centers, health centers, tribal or local government programs.
- Integrate your program into existing community resources to provide ongoing support, e.g. sponsorship by local businesses or clubs.
- Bring physical activity into the community through existing community resources, e.g. churches.
- Recognize that the more older adults in the community participate in physical activity, the more other positive changes will develop, i.e. increased social cohesion and participation in other community programs.

The above list includes just some ways you can recognize and maximize a group's assets. Work with aging

individuals in the community to determine what might be possible for your program.

There is no recipe for promoting physical activity for culturally diverse older adults. The model described above involves using your creativity to tailor a culturally specific approach to increase the participation in your program.

Access: the key to health promotion

Today, the aging U.S. population is becoming more culturally diverse. Estimates suggest that by 2050 more than one-third of adults ages 65 or older will come from these diverse backgrounds.⁷ Physical activity programs can influence the health, longevity and functionality of the current and future generations of older adults, so it is vital that we create access to these programs culturally, socially, linguistically, financially and environmentally.

Health promotion is often portrayed as a matter of individual responsibility and personal choice. But access to culturally appropriate programs and facilities must exist for the projected 20,000,000 older adults of color to embrace personal responsibility and enjoy good health promotion choices. Whether or not *all* older adults have the opportunity to age actively is a critical issue of our time. ☞

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writing a module for providers of physical activity for older adults as part of ASA's *Live Well, Live Long* health promotion website (www.asaging.org/cdc). She also authored "Exercise for Life! A Physical Activity Guide for Older Adults," which will debut in February on the *Live Well, Live Long* site. Gordon can be reached at CGordon@asaging.org.

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Resources

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