

## Reimagining Ageing – through outdoor adventure (adventure attitude & motivation)



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**Outdoor adventures: Attitude,  
motivation & successful aging**

**Author: Joe Tierney BSc, MA, MSc**

## **Introduction**

One of the great societal achievements over many years has been greater longevity among humans. Notwithstanding these advances, there remain challenges in relation to ageing and maintaining good health. In particular, in the area of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and chronic illness. In this, the UNs Decade of healthy ageing 2020 to 2030, there is a call to go from the previous decades' achievements of 'adding years to life to adding life to years' (WHO, 2020).

The research is irrefutable that one of the corner stones of healthy ageing is remaining active in all aspects of life. While physical activity (PA) is a vital part of healthy ageing, self-efficacy and self-determination are also essential ingredients. Research suggests that these can be achieved through autonomy, relatedness and competence leading to feeling connected and being in control of one's life. Ultimately, providing the self-belief and competence to engage in and remain in control of one's life. Engaging in outdoor adventure activities at a level that suits you, with likeminded people is a fun way to embrace active ageing. Getting active outdoors, developing your fitness, knowledge, social engagement, connecting with nature will enhance your quality of life and add life to years.

## **Exercise as we age, the science - why & how**

From a functional perspective, as we age we need to remain physically active to sustain agility, balance and co-ordination. Simply put, the ability to change direction without injury, reduce falls and fear of falls, increase strength to stabilise joints and to perform functional movement in a co-ordinated way. These are the ABCs of functional movement.

The underlying science to effectively achieve these ABCs, supports the notion of frequency intensity, time and type regarding activity (FITT). Consequently, building exercise time into our daily routine makes sense. If I told you that I could sell you a pill to reduce your morbidity and potential for NCDs by 30-40%, you would take it, right? How hard one exercises is also relevant, i.e. Intensity. However, this can depend on experience, level of fitness, current health status, or simply your mood on the day. The old adage of 'start small and build it up', is tried, tested and safe. Whatever it is that you can do, just do it, do it daily and build it up. The principle is simple, progress your ability to exercise based on how you feel at the time and it won't be long before you feel better, stronger and capable of more.

This leads us to the time spent exercising. The current recommended minimum is a 150 to 300 minutes (formerly 150mins) of moderate intensity exercise a week. There is often confusion around this, e.g. 30 minutes five times a week, 10 minutes three times a day, by 5 times a week, etc. The reality is, do it when it suits you. Any activity that promotes movement is good and at any time of the day or week. Also often misunderstood, is the term moderate intensity, which simply means elevating your heart rate by a particular percentage. This is also subjective, dependent on fitness, experience, health status and age relative to maximum heart rate (MHR).

As suggested the figure is based on a percentage of your MHR which is calculated using the formula,  $220$  minus your age. For example, a 65 year old's MHR =  $220 - 65 = 155$  beats per minute (BPM). To calculate intensity, decide what percentage you want to work at as a percentage of your MHR. The CDC recommend to achieve moderate intensity that your heart rate (HR) should be between 64% and 74%. Let's start easy and decide to work out at 64% of our MHR. First we want to reach a HR of  $155 \times 64\% = 99.2$  BPM, rounded down = 99 BPM.

Let's go, warm up, elevate your HR to 99 BPM and sustain it for a period of time which suits you. I emphasise 'which suits', as the ability to sustain moderate intensity is subjective. Exercise should be fun and not something that you dread doing every day. If it is fun, you are more likely to do it. If you make it too difficult you are likely to stop shortly after you start. The simple and more fun way to estimate your intensity is to ask yourself are you slightly out of breath and can you sustain that intensity level and for how long? Other indicators are that the ability to hold a conversation should be challenging or you have sweat on your brow. It is often said that if you can sing a song then you are not training at a moderate intensity. This brings us neatly to another principle of training i.e. type — and again it has to be fun.

### **Adventure activity – a fun way to exercise**

There are many definitions for adventure which often incorporate the natural environment, unknown outcomes, challenge, risk or an adrenaline based physical activity. Rather than bracketing adventure as something for the adrenaline junkie, for the purposes of this paper on active ageing, adventure is defined as: "experiencing physical activity in the outdoors". Adventure is subjective in nature and you may want to engage in hard, soft or micro adventures.

Regardless of your choice of adventure, age should not be a barrier. As suggested in the previous section start slow and progress. Find an activity you like, access it, adopt a positive can-do attitude and enjoy the journey. From research and personal experience this is certainly a journey that will add “life to years” with all the additional health and associated wellbeing benefits.

There is evidence to suggest that the benefits of outdoor PA exceed those regarding the benefits of indoor PA. This is in no way to suggest that indoor physical activity is not good, it is just suggesting that the health indices from outdoor PA are considered to be enhanced. In addition, findings also suggest that people engaging in exercise outdoors tend to do so for longer and at moderate intensity. The other advantage to outdoor adventure activity is its versatility and adaptability with regard to ability. For example, shorten the distance, walk slower, dive shallower, swim or dive in warmer water, hike lowlands or take a walk around the local forest. The equipment can also be used to make outdoor adventure activities more comfortable and accessible. At a basic level walking poles as used in Nordic Walking, various orthopedic strapping and supports, and properly fitted boots, rucksacks, thicker thermal suits, warmer clothing and other equipment all make it more accessible. At a more advanced level, e-bikes, and cycle without age people carriers, the tricycle and other such technological innovations make it possible for those with mobility issues to access outdoor adventure.

### **The benefits – physical, mental and social**

The benefits suggested from outdoor adventure supported by the science and the literature is increasing. Interestingly, throughout Covid restrictions many people turned to the outdoor for their physical activity. In some way supporting the theory of Biophilia, which hypothesises that human beings are innately connected with nature and the natural environment. It suggests that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. Certainly, my research over the last four years supports the notion of connection, not only with the natural environment, but with oneself and others. Successful and active ageing research support engaging within one’s community in activities that enhance the domains of physical mental and social health. While there are different levels of engagement within the physical, mental and social health spheres, outdoor adventure offers opportunities to be active, mindful and to engage with likeminded people.

Through my research of sea swimmers, scuba divers and hill walkers, I have observed the benefits in all three domains. From the interviews conducted, it is clear that wellbeing is central to the participants. All interviewees discussed the physical, mental and social health benefits and frequently associate these with being in control of one's life and quality of life. Interestingly, the social benefits and engagement with likeminded people takes precedence over the engagement with physical activity. The connection with the natural environment is also a crucial component. All participants speak about where they have been, what they have seen, the beauty and how lucky they are to be part of it. Engaging in physical activity is not the primary motivating factor. However, participants are motivated to remain physically fit to continue as long as possible with their leisure based adventure activity. This would perhaps suggest that facilitators ought to promote fun, leisure, adventure, and socialising rather than physical activity to sustain groups and individuals in active ageing? This approach may be more effective in increasing, sustained participation for this group.

Through adventure activity groups come together and form social networks. Communication increases and different sub groups form. There is always the opportunity for social engagement and to feel part of something. There are opportunities for learning and skill development. However, this depends on the participant's interest in learning new skills. I have observed that there is always somebody willing and capable of leading and assisting new people engaging in the activities. Consequently, the desire to develop and set new goals is intrinsically motivated as there may be a desire to lead or help. Participants can continue their adventure activities at a level with which they are happy. However, the opportunity to further develop is available and often facilitated within the group. If the skills to develop further do not exist within a particular group, the group will know where you can achieve this level of training.

In summary, regardless of your abilities, skills or experience there are outdoor physical activity opportunities available to you. You decide the level at which you engage and your personal challenges and goals. There are opportunities for social engagement, physical activity, mental health support and leadership, you choose how far you want to take it. The evidence is clear and increasing in support of the benefits of outdoor physical activity. Now more than ever, it is crucial that engagement in outdoor physical activity is promoted through facilitation, facilities and fun.

## **Conclusion**

To increase participation and promote active ageing through adventure, facilitators and potential participants have to be open to the possibilities. Adaptation of some activities will be necessary. However, it is important to recognise that this will increase opportunities for participation and consequently, health benefits.

The opportunities for self-determination, self-efficacy and wellbeing exist and can be enhanced through effective leadership. The leadership style must be inclusive and democratic in essence, while recognising and empowering the abilities of individuals within the group. Remember to start small and build on these achievements.

Outdoor physical activity is healthy and even small amounts can yield great results. There is also evidence to suggest that sedentary activities in outdoor environments provide health benefits. Often the biggest barrier is fear on the part of the participants. Facilitators need to dispel these fears, get active, outdoors, more often and demonstrate the abilities of active agers. In this the United Nations Decade of Healthy ageing it is vital to promote and facilitate outdoor physical activity through adventure. Who doesn't enjoy a little adventure in the interest of adding life to years?!

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Joe Tierney – BSc, MA, MSc (PhD researcher at the Technical University of Dublin)

### Useful Links

The following links provide useful reading around a number of the concepts discussed in the presentation:

#### United Nations Decade of Health Ageing

<https://www.who.int/initiatives/decade-of-healthy-ageing>

#### Centre for Disease Control(CDC) - Moderate Intensity Calculations

<https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/measuring/hearttrate.htm>

#### World Health Organisation – Physical activity

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity>

#### Cycling without age

Ireland - <https://cyclingwithoutage.ie/>

Global - <https://cyclingwithoutage.org/wp-signup.php?new=cyclingwithoutage.org>.



**Britannica – Biophilia**

<https://www.britannica.com/science/biophilia-hypothesis>



**Outdoor Adventure/Physical Activity – the health benefits**

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6466442/pdf/ijerph-16-00937.pdf>

**BOSS Report – Benefits of outdoor sports for society**

<https://outdoorsportsbenefits.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BOSS-Stage1-Full-Report.pdf>



BOSS Report 2019



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### **Links to theories**

Selective Optimisation with Compensation (Baltes and Baltes, 1990)

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/selection-optimization-and-compensation>

**Self Determination Theory and Human Motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985)**

<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-self-determination-theory-2795387>

<https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>

**Self-Efficacy - Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change (Bandura, 1977)**

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/self-efficacy.html>