Exercise Program for Faculty and Staff: Building Collegiality Through Convenience

Commentary

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Stress is inevitable for human beings. Faculty of nursing and other health professions are not immune. Stress results as individuals try to balance their academic professional responsibilities in a competitive culture with personal commitments.[1] Main stressors identified by professors include scientific research and professional development.[2] Individuals who are aiming for tenure have additional stress and anxiety as they pursue this academic hallmark because of expectations to publish, secure funding, and present at research conferences.[1] Once tenured is achieved, stress is still marked due to increased administrative duties, growing pressure to secure grants, and the need to establish oneself as a leading expert in the field.[1, 2] Furthermore, all faculty must respond to the challenges of meeting the needs of diverse students and technological advances, often in the midst of waning resources and support.[2] Stress can manifest in physical symptoms such as neck, lumbar spine, and right shoulder pain[3], as well as cardiovascular problems including increased blood pressure and heart rate, arrhythmias are noted responses to stress[4] and may even contribute to heart attacks.[1]

Due to the high demands of a faculty role, many individuals fail to engage in physical activity. Melnyk et al studied 869 health sciences faculty at Big 10 Universities.[5] It was shown that about one third of the health science faculty met the recommended 150-minutes of physical activity per week. It is concerning that individuals who have professional expertise in health do not practice healthy behaviors. Findings from studies illuminate the need for adaptations to university workplaces to reduce stress and enhance cultures of wellness.[3,5] The purpose of this commentary is to describe the implementation of a workplace exercise program for nursing and health professions faculty and staff at a Midwestern university. The original intention of the program was to entice faculty and staff to exercise through a weight-loss contest. Originally, data collected was body fat percentage and waist circumference, which was tracked by the exercise leader and participant. As the exercise program progressed through the years, faculty and staff enjoyed coming to the exercise sessions and did not need the incentive of being measured. What is reported in this commentary are some incidental findings and suggested outcomes for future studies.

The faculty and staff exercise program was developed with support from the Dean of the College of Nursing and Health Professions, who was interested in utilizing a faculty member's background in exercise and incorporating her expertise into an exercise program for the faculty and staff. Although there is a fitness center on campus for faculty and staff, there is a fee and therefore most college faculty and staff do not use it. By creating an in-house exercise program for college faculty and staff, there were minimal start-up costs. The college provided approximately $250 to purchase some simple equipment, such as yoga mats, medicine balls, resist-a-bands, steps, and dumbbells, to be used

in a classroom within the college. Some of the equipment was purchased as new while other equipment was donated. A creative cost-effective strategy was the use of 32-ounce soup cans as dumbbells. The program was held on Monday and Wednesday evenings from 4-5pm. This time was convenient because most faculty taught on campus during those days of the week. With an average of 6-12 participants per session, the program continued until the COVID pandemic began. Participation was voluntary and inclusive for all faculty and staff within the college.

A typical workout included a warm-up, followed by a mix of resistance exercises with some cardiovascular movements (Table 1). The class finished with a cool-down that included stretching. The exercise program took place in a portable classroom. Participants rotated from station to station when the leader said "time". When indicated, the leader adapted exercises based on a participant's level of fitness. Also, the leader demonstrated new exercises when they were integrated into the rotation. When the leader observed incorrect form by a participant, the leader suggested corrections to prevent injury. During the workouts, music was played from different genres to motivate participants and spur conversations regarding participants' preferences.

When the faculty and staff exercise program was first initiated, a $20 dollar fee was required because there was a weight-loss competition. Participants had their body weight, body fat percentage, and hydration status measured using a Tanita scale. Waist-to-hip circumference measurements were taken using a Gullick spring tape measure. All measurements were taken monthly. The leader recorded all information, which was known only to the participant and leader. The monies were awarded at the end of the workout program to the top 3 participants with the greatest percentage of body fat loss. In subsequent years, the competition was discontinued to be more inclusive of individuals who did not want to weigh in and be measured; therefore, there was no fee. This change resulted in greater participation from faculty and staff. Instead, weekly raffle prizes, such as movie tickets, t-shirts, and gift cards, were given by randomly drawing names. Raffle prizes were personally donated by the lead instructor.

Sessions accounted for 25% of faculty and staff within the college. The convenience of location, time, and lack of fees were factors that enhanced participation by faculty and staff. In addition to the benefit of exercise, participants were engaged in a fun and collegial manner. While there was groaning and complaining amongst participants, there was also a sense of support and encouragement. Perspectives from the exercise program leader and a participant is offered to provide further exploration about the program. These reflections offer insight regarding goals, motivation, and satisfaction with the exercise program.

Leader Perception

The faculty member that led the exercise sessions was qualified to serve as the exercise leader because their credentials included a degree in Exercise Science as well as a certification from American Council of Exercise. Exercise is typically not at the top of people's to-do lists. There are many other tasks that come to mind that need to get done first before setting time aside to exercise. The reason I became a personal trainer was not just because of my own interest in exercising but to be that motivation to others. One of the most common excuses heard from clients was a lack of time for not exercising. By the time they drive to the facility, do exercise, and then travel home, it could be upwards of 2 hours out of their day.

The goal was to make the faculty/staff exercise program as convenient as possible. A portable classroom was utilized because the desks were moveable to provide a good size space to spread out the exercise equipment. An ulterior motive was to provide an opportunity for faculty and staff to interact with people they might not otherwise see. Often, faculty are on different schedules because of the times of their classes so, you might not see a particular faculty member until the next committee meeting. The exercise sessions provided an environment where faculty and staff could discuss non-academic issues while having some laughs. There were times though academic issues were discussed because it might affect various faculty, which happened to be all exercising on that day. Faculty and staff knew after their workday that they could walk next door to their make-shift gym twice a week for 1 hour and participate in some cardiovascular and strength exercises while doing it with a smile (most of the time it was groans) and of course laughs, before heading home to their responsibilities.

The exercise program continued for about 2.5 years, unfortunately ceasing when COVID-19 restrictions were implemented at the university. One of the driving forces behind continuing to train the faculty and staff on a volunteer basis was the enjoyment received helping others feel better about themselves. The equipment was not the fanciest equipment, but participants realized what they could do with a simple resist-a-band or set of handheld dumbbells in a small space which for them translated to what they could do in the comforts of their home. There were no records

broken on the scale regarding weight loss, but this might have been the only physical activity some participants would get in a day, week, or even a month. The faculty workout program could provide a jump-start for some who needed to get back into their physical activity routines. There is no evidence that there were any reductions in the stress levels of participants as it was not measured; however, anecdotally some participants said they slept better because their mind would relax at night.

Participant 1 Perception

Having joined numerous health clubs, YMCAs, and park district classes, I would quit going after a few times of attending. When this exercise opportunity began, it offered another opportunity to begin exercising again. What could be more convenient than right after work, in the next building, and just for about 1 hour twice a week? Twenty dollars was far cheaper than any other investments made in previous exercise classes.

Feeling a bit awkward the first time, the leader and my colleagues were very helpful showing me how the different rotations worked. By the second class, it was easy to follow the pattern of the exercises and feel more comfortable. The exercises were challenging, but not to the point of overdoing it. For example, I have a bad knee and used the step on the lowest height. Over the semester physical improvement was indicated by repeating reps faster and with heavier weights. Another benefit was feeling energized, not draggy, when leaving work. However, it was the comradery with my colleagues that kept me coming back. Participating in the exercise program allowed me to get to know my colleagues on a more personal level. Banter and laughter made exercising fun. For the first time in my life, I enjoyed an exercise class thanks to our comradery.

Conclusion

Offering a faculty and staff exercise program that is convenient, inexpensive, preplanned, and fun is the key to motivating participation. Many would think it is the tangible results on the scale that is a true determination of a successful exercise program, but it is the intangible things, such as increasing confidence and comradery, that make this exercise program sustainable and leaves participants with a taste of wanting more. Future research could include measuring outcomes of stress, wellbeing, and motivation; however, measurements of these outcomes may be confounded by the program coinciding with the academic calendar because the end of a semester is typically more stressful than the beginning. Measuring collegiality as an outcome offers a unique opportunity typically not associated with exercise. Furthermore, using a model, such as Tuckman's team building theory or a behavior change theory, may provide context for designing such a study. By designing a study to quantify some of the outcomes suggested in this commentary, a better understanding of using group exercise as a mode to build collegiality may enhance work environments.

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None

Table 1. Example Workout Program.

EXERCISES	**GROUP WARM-UP** (participants in circle; approx. 10 mins) 1st set = 15 reps 2nd set = 12 reps	**CARDIOVASCULAR & STRENGTH TRAINING EXERCISES** (4-5 rotations per class; 5 minutes per muscle group)	**GROUP COOL-DOWN** (approx. 5 mins)	**NOTES**
ARM CIRCLES	✓			Arms extended out to side; parallel with floor
BICEP CURLS	✓			Participants may use soup cans as resistance

	GROUP WARM-UP	**CARDIOVASCULAR &**		

EXERCISES	(participants in circle; approx. 10 mins) 1st set = 15 reps 2nd set = 12 reps	**STRENGTH TRAINING EXERCISES** (4-5 rotations per class; 5 minutes per muscle group)	**GROUP COOL-DOWN** (approx. 5 mins)	**NOTES**
TRICEP KICKBACKS	✓			Standing; elbow hinged at waist; extend arm straight back until tricep is flexed
SHOULDER PRESSES	✓			Standing; palms parallel to shoulder height; press upward until only a slight bend in elbow remains
STEP-UPS ON A REEBOK STEP		✓		Participants choose 1 or 2 risers; alternate left and right foot as a timed station
ARM CURLS WITH A RESIST-A-BAND		✓		Choose one band: Green (lightest); Red (medium); or Blue (heaviest)
CHEST PRESS ON A REEBOK STEP		✓		Lying with back flat on step; press dumbbells upward until slight bend in elbow remains
ABDOMINAL CURLS WITH A WEIGHTED MEDICINE BALL		✓		Lying with back flat on floor; hold ball above your chest; bringing knees up; until they contact with the ball
BENT OVER ROW WITH DUMBBELLS		✓		Standing with knees slightly bent; back parallel to floor; arms extended; bring dumbbell up to side of body
PLANKS ON A YOGA MAT		✓		Body parallel to floor; Stabilized by being on toes and elbows; keeping back as flat as possible
SHOULDER PRESSES WITH DUMBBELLS		✓		See above listed exercise in warm-up
BALANCE EXERCISES		✓		Bosu ball – stand with both feet for balance Resist-a-ball – Abdominal crunches
ROW USING RESIST-A-BANDS		✓		Seated upright on the floor; legs extended in front of them; band is placed around feet; bringing band handles into torso
	GROUP WARM-UP	**CARDIOVASCULAR &**	**GROUP COOL-**	

EXERCISES	(participants in circle; approx. 10 mins) 1st set = 15 reps 2nd set = 12 reps	**STRENGTH TRAINING EXERCISES** (4-5 rotations per class; 5 minutes per muscle group)	**DOWN** (approx. 5 mins)	**NOTES**
STRETCH ARMS AND TRICEPS			✓	Bring arm fully extended across body; grab gently above the elbow and hold
STRETCH LOWER BODY			✓	Modified lunge
STRETCH HIPS AND ADDUCTORS (BUTTERFLY STRETCH)			✓	Place inner soles of feet together while seated; gently press down on inner thigh
OBLIQUE STRETCH			✓	Walk hand down one side of body; repeat on other side Conduct deep breaths for relaxation

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