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# Common Experiences and Beliefs among Highly Active Individuals

## Implications for Psychological Satisfaction and Frustration

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### Background

Physical inactivity is one of the top five causes of death world-wide and is considered an epidemic of sedentary tendencies. Self Determination Theory (SDT) provides a well researched framework for understanding motivation in general, and activity motivation specifically. SDT has defined three primary psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT differentiates types of motivation in order to better understand the varied effects on behavior.

While we know that physical activity (PA) is important for health, we are left with the reality that such knowledge, and related informational campaigns exhorting us to be active, have not reversed hypokinetic disease trends at the population level. For this reason, the current study focuses on a narrative approach to elucidate the experiences and beliefs of highly active individuals, with the intent that the "movement stories" revealed through narrative will eventually be used and studied as motivational tools in public health settings.

### Objectives

- 1) Analyze the relationship between current physical activity, type of motivation for exercise [Motives for Physical Activities Measure – Revised (MPAM-R)], and the degree to which psychological needs are met (Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale)
- 2) Identify common experiences and beliefs of highly active, middle-age adults through interview and coding individuals

### Methods

- Participants included were aged 36-55 with a moderate or higher activity level based on the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ)
- Collaboration of mixed methods
  - In-person, semi-structured interviews
  - Validated surveys
- Collected footage of participants' physical activity to include in movement story videos
- Created video stories from the interviews and participants' PA that will be widely shared with the intent to motivate less active individuals toward increased participation in PA.
- Coding: 1) Created operational definitions for each construct to be analyzed, 2) one investigator identified relevant text from interviews and categorized based on construct definitions, 3) other investigators separately reviewed original categorizations, and 4) all investigators met to resolve variations in categorization, with eventual consensus reached for all text assigned to a construct category.

### Results: Statistical Significance

**Interviews:** The most commonly mentioned psychological and motivational factors were **competence**, social relatedness, and interest/enjoyment, in that order. Participant response examples are displayed in the tables in the following section.

**Surveys:** The surveys showed that satisfaction was a common characteristic among highly active individuals in this study across all three domains. Psychological needs were analyzed with the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, which showed **significantly greater satisfaction than frustration for Relatedness and Competence** ( $p = 0.042$ , for both variables). However the same test for Autonomy was not significant ( $p = 0.68$ ). Motivational variables were analyzed with the Friedman Two-way Analysis of Variance, showing significant difference among variables ( $p = 0.001$ ). Post-hoc test was performed with the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. **No significant difference was shown between Interest/Enjoyment and Competence motivation** ( $p = 0.593$ ). There was however a significantly greater Interest/Enjoyment motivation than Appearance ( $p = 0.43$ ), Fitness ( $p = 0.43$ ), and Social motivation ( $p = 0.43$ ). Similarly, Competence motivation was significantly greater than Appearance ( $p = 0.43$ ), Fitness ( $p = 0.43$ ), and Social motivation ( $p = 0.39$ ).

### Results: Participant Responses

#### Basic Psychological Needs

<b>Autonomy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think my personality is intrinsically self-motivated and very unresponsive to external sources of motivation.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I used to run down the mountain biking trails, and jump, and do kind of Parkour stuff before Parkour was a thing.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I have never had a personal trainer, a strength coach. I feel like I have always fulfilled that need for myself.<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Relatedness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I get a lot of energy out of meeting with other people. I think fundamentally people are really tribal animals and want that connection, so I like to facilitate that community.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I enjoy coaching people and trying to teach other people how to use their body and how to be active and how to connect the body and mind, and movement. So I really take a lot of pride in that coaching aspect.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>...mentoring some of the younger guys... it lifts my spirits up. It does more for me, I think, than them. You know? Training them and showing them different things.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sometimes I have to make the decision on whether I should go be active and engage in the things I like to do, or literally the opposite decision is take a nap on occasion. And I know that that on many occasions it is probably better for me, than even going out and being physically active, just from repairing and regenerating.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>The aerial stuff also pushes me out of my comfort zone. So then my theory is that the translation will be when I ski I'll be more comfortable taking chances than typical and not holding back as much.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>I definitely feel like I'm in tune, you know, with my body.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>

#### Motivation

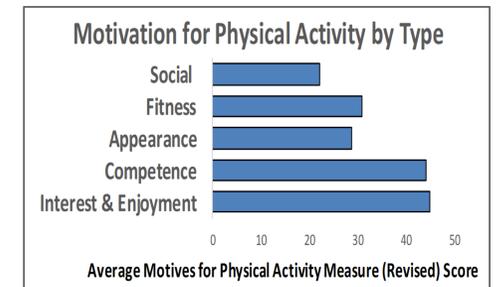
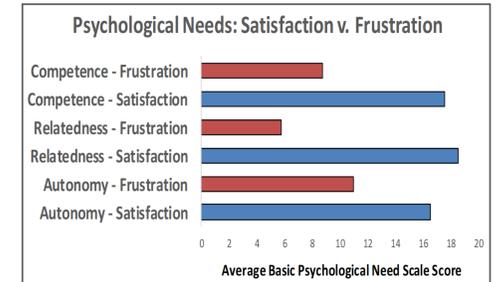
<b>Interest &amp; Enjoyment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What you are going for is that sense of flow and sense of joy...I get these moments of real exhilaration and real joy.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>Yeah, training is fun.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>The importance of winning I think fell far behind the importance of the engagement and activity and the journey of the activity.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>It (skiing) goes by too quickly...I am always exhausted afterwards...But always really excited and happy afterwards.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>The fire's lit under you, you know, it becomes, it does become an addiction.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are many things -- and frequently in a situation where the things that I'm doing are not things that other people can do.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I think that I can go out and ride a mountain bike with anybody. I can go ski with anybody. I can go climb with anybody.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>Going in the powder and pushing myself and doing things that -- look up at the top of the mountain and think, oh, I would love to be able to ski that chute.<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Appearance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think that our current model of exercise is basically shaming people about the way their body looks as a way to motivate them to do things that they find drudgerous and boring and just utterly uninteresting...<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I care about my appearance, and I want to look good, and I want to have a lean and fit body, and I want to project a certain image physically. It is just low on my totem pole of motivations.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I'm aware of my body, but it's really odd, as a woman, I mean some people I'm with I feel like huge and clunky. And then when I'm at work (firefighter) I feel frail and tiny. So yes, that body image thing is just back and forth.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Fitness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As I get older I know I need to stay in better shape than I was probably when I was hired, because I'm breaking down.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>There are times when I know that I need to do this, and I need to push through and do this just simply because I'm middle aged and 44 and those things are becoming more important to maintain who I am and what I want to be.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>I have had to adjust my goals for exercise for stamina and strength...physical therapy made me really work hard, and my physical therapist said you can't be a weekend warrior anymore. If you are going to do this, you have got to work out consistently.<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I almost always show up for my training sessions if other people are involved. I think that consistency -- we are what we habitually do. And consistency builds community.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>And it is definitely a lot more fun when I'm skiing with somebody because I'll push myself harder when I'm skiing with another person than when I ski alone.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>...to see those faces every day when you come. You might be feeling a little down or don't feel like doing it today, but when you see those faces -- and you encourage each other.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>

#### Satisfaction & Frustration

<b>Psychological Satisfaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fundamentally I don't think it is about how good you are, and I don't think it is about how often you win.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I like the bad parts too, or the not so -- I'll go and train, say, Jujitsu and I may have a frustrating day. It might be difficult and I might get smashed down, but it is intriguing or fascinating for me. It is like something to study and research and I'll find myself going over and feeling very positively engaged by what I can learn from that.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>There are days I know where just going for a walk around the neighborhood is enough, and it helps my head instead of just sitting on the couch.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>So I have done a lot of -- I'll just say backcountry adventure travel. And it is almost meditative...it makes me feel renewed and destressed, and energized.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>It makes you feel good. It really does.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Psychological Frustration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I felt really trapped in my head and like I had lost connection with my body<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I think we are at the point where technology is actually taking away from people's happiness...Social media manipulates our desire for social approval. Video games manipulate our desire for thrill. They take that away from physicality. And then now they compete with that. Instead of spending time with people you love and care about, you are on social media. Instead of running and jumping and climbing in real life, your character is doing it in a playing sense on the screen...and all of that is incredibly contrary to the health of the body, and the health of the human being with a body mind integrity.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>I may be a little more edgy, you know, that day when I don't go to the gym<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>

\*Superscript numbers correspond to a specific participant

### Results: Tables



Refer to Results section for statistical analysis of these variables.

### Discussion

#### Psychological Satisfaction and Frustration

The surveys showed that participants experienced greater satisfaction than frustration across the three domains of basic psychological needs, although there was no significant difference between the satisfaction & frustration in the autonomy domain. However, the interviews reflected frequent mention of autonomy in relation to physical activity. All five participants reported experiences of free & unstructured play as a child, demonstrating a long history of autonomous physical activity since a young age. It is possible that autonomy has been such an integrated part of their growth and experience that they may have overlooked the impact and prevalence of this freedom to choose when interpreting the survey questions.

#### Motivation

Through participants' stories, it was noted that there was an underlying need for competence (mastery of a skill) as a motivator, in addition to autonomy (control), that led to achieving psychological satisfaction in the participants' lives.

Competence was commonly represented in the participant's ability to self monitor & regulate physical activity intensity. Most participants explained some variation of listening to their bodies, and were able to recognize when they needed to increase or decrease their activity levels in order to avoid injury or setbacks.

Participants who mentioned specific examples of a coach or mentor role highlighted the fact that they got satisfaction from being able to connect with others and work towards a common goal and level of competency. This suggests the prioritization of social relatedness as motivation for physical activity based on interviews, despite its low ranking based on the MPAM-R.

Statements prioritizing fitness and appearance as motivators for physical activity were the least frequently mentioned during interviews. This suggests a greater amount of intrinsic motivation as compared to extrinsic motivation.

Lastly, a common characteristic among participants was their identification of having multiple social roles unrelated to their relationship with physical activity. Most expressed an ability to turn to other hobbies if they were unable to do their physical activity of choice. Another factor of this could be that since these participants have all been physically injured at some point in the past, they are likely better at coping with setbacks, injuries, or even more serious debilitating conditions.