

Empowering the Growing Grey Market

Impact Analysis of the National Physical Activity Leadership (PALs) Training Programme for Older Adults

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Introduction

The latest Irish census data 2002, indicates that there are 787,547 people in Ireland aged 55 and over. This represents 20.14% of the population of the country.

The National Health & Lifestyle Surveys (SLÁN) 1998 and 2002, indicate a decreasing level of physical activity amongst Irish adults, (52% in 1998, 51% in 2002 engaging in some form of activity). The numbers of those reporting no activity at all have increased amongst both men during this period (from 21% to 30%) and women (from 20% to 25%), and there is a marked inverse relationship between educational status and engagement in physical activity, in particular amongst the older adult population. Of those over 55, 34% engaged in some form of mild physical exercise for at least twenty minutes on most days of the week in 1998, compared to 29% in 2003.

Gibney et al. (2002) concluded from a recent Irish study that, physically inactive adults are at an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD), hypertension, diabetes mellitus (Type 2), osteoporosis, various cancers, anxiety and depression. In addition, a sedentary lifestyle contributes to the development of obesity, which has doubled among Irish men since 1990 (Gibney et al. 2002). The significant social, psychological and physical benefits of physical activity for the older adult have been well documented (Nieman et al. 1993, McAuley & Rudolph, 1995, WHO 1997, ACSM, 1998, Brassington & Hicks, 1995). These statistics are of concern from a quality of life perspective for the Irish adult, as well as from a national perspective, in relation to the costs of future health care.

The national programme for sport and physical activity for older people 'Go for Life' has been operational since 1994, and is funded by the Irish Sports Council. The Go For Life mission is to encourage more older people to be more active, more often. The Physical Activity Leader (PALs) programme organised through Go For Life, involves the delivery of an 8 day training course (delivered over 8 weeks), which encompasses the following training modules: Basic Principles, Sit-Fit Activities, Better Balance, Going Strong, Stepping & Strolling, Rolling & Bowling, Pitching & Tossing and PALs Skills. All of the modules incorporate the health benefits associated with physical activity, as well as how to partake and lead in a variety of types of exercise. This self-empowering approach to the course is deemed essential to its implementation and sustainability throughout community groups in Ireland.

Methodology

Two PALs leader training courses, comprising of 17, and 22 participants, were selected to undertake a qualitative assessment of the impact of the course on its participants. Selection of the participants was not influenced by the researcher, but followed the selection criteria historically in use, i.e. whereby the health board in the particular area contacted local active retirement groups, and put up notices in relevant areas, inviting people to apply for a place on the course. Thus, course participants entered onto the course of their own volition.

An analysis of the effectiveness of the Physical Activity Leader (PALs) programme was undertaken, to influence the future delivery of the programme. The tools selected encompassed: utilising the Behaviour Change Model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983) via a questionnaire prior to undertaking the PALs course, and another questionnaire on completion of the course. This was supported by the completion of log books by the course participants, highlighting the amount of physical activity they took leadership of with their groups during the period while taking the course. Follow up phone calls were undertaken at monthly intervals on completion of the course, to establish which participants were maintaining their leadership capacity and whom had lapsed, with a view to establishing what further support mechanisms could be added, to enhance sustainability.

Results and Discussion

The gender breakdown of the course participants was 18% male and 82% female. Given that more Irish males are involved in strenuous physical exercise for at least 20 minutes, three times per week, in the 55+ age group, than Irish females (11% versus 2%, SLÁN, 2002) they appear somewhat reluctant to become involved in a leadership capacity in later life.

The questionnaire incorporated 34 questions designed to assess at what levels each adult was at, prior to commencing the PALs training course and on completion of the course.

The stages involved: **Pre-contemplation** – not intending to take action in the future; **Contemplation** – considering whether change is worth it; **Preparation** – taking action to commence; **Action** – overtly taking action; **Maintenance** – sustaining behaviour; **Relapse** – slipping from changed behaviour. Scores can range from 7 to 70 on each stage subscale.

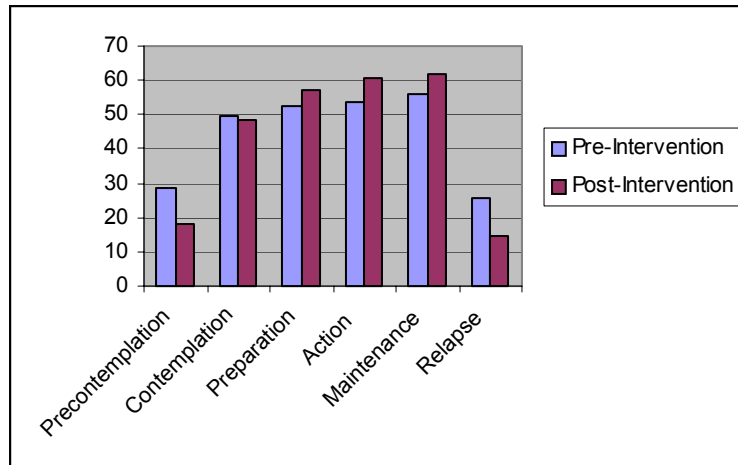


Figure 1. Mean Stages of Change Scores for the Groups (Pre and Post Intervention)

Figure 1 outlines the observed means, where it is evident that following the PALs training course the course participants had moved further in to the Preparation, Action and Maintenance stages, while less participants were at the relapse stage, than had been prior to undertaking the course. Table 2 details the significant change ($p < .05$) in activity and leadership behaviour levels of the participants.

	Pre-contemplation	Contemplation	Preparation	Action	Maintenance	Relapse
Z	-4.310 ^a	-.115 ^a	-2.344 ^b	-3.327 ^b	-2.036 ^b	-3.813 ^a
Asymp.Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.909	.019	.001	.042	.000

Table 2

- Based on positive ranks.
- Based on negative ranks.
- Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

This target population needs to be encouraged to engage in healthy and physically active lifestyles, in order that as well as adding years to life, there is also the addition of life to years.

Involvement in the PALs course empowers individuals, increases self-efficacy, enhances their social and community integration, helps to form new friendships, widens social and cultural networks, while encouraging new role acquisition and intergenerational opportunities.

It was found in Scotland (Dewar, Jones, & O'May, 2004), that barriers to further involvement in physical activity included older people's low expectations of the effectiveness of involvement. It was also recommended in this study that there was a need for 'more capacity building opportunities for both older people and professionals in order to ensure that involvement is successful'. Another articulated support

need of the PALs groups was the desire to top up on their knowledge and experience gained on the course, and to add to their repertoire of skills, through the attendance at periodic re-fresher courses.

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