Understanding motivators and barriers for physical activities among people living with cancer

What motivates people with cancer to get active?

Background
People with cancer are living longer following diagnosis than they did 40 years ago. Today, a cancer diagnosis increasingly means living with the illness.

Being active can help to overcome fatigue, anxiety and depression, as well as improve physical function and quality of life. In some cases, being physically active has been shown to reduce cancer’s progression, mortality and recurrence. To enable people with cancer to feel the benefits of physical activity we must fully understand the barriers they face and what may motivate them to become more active. This research aimed to answer these questions.

Method
The research consisted of three stages:

Phase one
- Review of 55 articles

Phase two
- 20 in-depth interviews, 10 including family and friends
- 26 mobile ethnographies
- in-the-moment motivations
- 21 online discussions:
  - self-reflection and discussion

Phase three
- Survey to 1011 people living with cancer

Findings
Defining ‘physical activity’
The qualitative research phase found many respondents associated ‘physical activity’ with more formal exercise and sport such as running and going to the gym. Once prompted to think about physical activity in the context of cancer, respondents’ definition shifted to include non-formalised and lower intensity activities part of their everyday lives. These included climbing stairs, carrying out household chores, gardening, walking pets and playing with their children or grandchildren. Often these activities were not thought of as ‘physical activity’.

Individual drivers
Individual level drivers were highly influential on behaviour. They were also a predictor of whether or not a person was physically active during and after their cancer diagnosis and treatment. Individual drivers relate to people’s emotional states including their level of confidence, response to cancer, mental wellbeing and self-identity about being physically active.

Many respondents reported low confidence in their ability to engage in physical activity, their physical safety and their ability to be in public. A positive response to their cancer can mean people are determined to fight the disease and make changes. This may include adopting a healthier lifestyle including becoming more active.

Social network
Having a strong social network, and support from family and friends, were strong drivers of physical activity. Close family and friends tended to be encouraging of activity, as they saw it as beneficial and part of their loved one’s ‘getting back to normal’. Having someone to do an activity with was also a strong driver.

Our survey showed 61% of people living with and beyond cancer said that having a friend or family member to be active with would be beneficial.

The influence of the physical environment on physical activity behaviour in people living with and beyond cancer.

The physical environment and proximity of certain facilities can widen (if available) or narrow possibilities (if lacking). Another driver of physical activity is having access to appropriate facilities. Social stigma again plays a role, with people feeling uncomfortable in public places.

Social stigma
Social stigma including fear of judgement from others, and concerns about lack of control, with the social network in place. In this case they are likely to find ways to become active and overcome any physical symptoms or limitations in their physical environment. Another person may be unmotivated, unconfident and experiencing anxiety or depression, and not have a social network. Even with few physical symptoms and plenty of opportunities across their physical environment, they are unlikely to become active.

Conclusions
There are various drivers of physical activity behaviour in people living with and beyond cancer. An individual may be motivated, confident and focused on positive achievements and regaining control, with the social network in place. In this case they are likely to find ways to become active and overcome any physical symptoms or limitations in their physical environment. Another person may be unmotivated, unconfident and experiencing anxiety or depression, and not have a social network. Even with few physical symptoms and plenty of opportunities across their physical environment, they are unlikely to become active.

People living with and beyond cancer need to know that it is safe to become and stay active, at a level that is right for them. They should listen to their body, starting slowly, building gradually and planning around treatment cycles and physical limitations. These messages need to come from trusted healthcare professionals. The timing of the message is deemed less important than the person who delivers it. Messages should be delivered sensitively with useful examples and information.

References
1. Source: Macmillan/YouGov online survey of 1,211 adults aged 18 and over with a previous cancer diagnosis. Fieldwork conducted between 15 and 17 December 2015. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the living with cancer population.

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