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The Impact of Physical Activity Motivators (PAMS) on the Physical Activity and Leisure Scheme (PALS)

Executive summary

Aims and background information

The PAM Scheme runs along side the PAL Scheme and gives people who have completed the PALS the opportunity to volunteer to become a PAM and help individuals who are being referred to the programme. The PAMS meet and greet the participants and aim to make them feel welcome. The PAMS can share their experiences with the participants and this will hopefully put them at ease and give them the confidence to attend the sessions. An evaluation of the PAM Scheme was made using the TTM (Trans-theoretical Model) as the National Quality Assurance Framework (NQAF) suggests that using a theory base is more effective for exercise referral programmes (NQAF, 2001).

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- What is the benefit of the PAMS from the perspective of the mentors?
- What is the benefit of the PAMS from the perspective of the participants on the referral scheme?
- What influence do the PAMS have on the PALS?

Methods

Data was collected through various qualitative techniques to gather information about the PAM scheme. Throughout this project the researcher looked at what stage of the TTM, the volunteers and participants are at. The processes of change which assist the participants in progressing through the stages of change were also studied. This was achieved by looking at factors which may affect physical activity (PA) levels, such as decisional balance (DB) (whether participants believe that the benefits of taking part outweigh the costs) and self efficacy (SE) (whether participants believe they are capable of taking part at the levels required to gain benefits). This was addressed in relation to what effect the mentors have on the participants of the scheme and their journey through the stages.

Data collection

The methods that were used are as follows:

- Observation
- Focus Group (5 PAMS)
- Questionnaire (20 participants on the PALS)

The researcher chose to go and observe the PAMS during their training sessions. This was for several reasons, such as to gain back ground information on the scheme itself and also to hear about the PAMS personal experiences etc.

A focus group was held with the PAMS to discuss how they felt about the scheme, its effectiveness and the impact they feel it has on the PALS. This was from their PAM perspective, but the PAMS also drew on their own experiences of being a PAL and how they felt about the PAMS that they were in contact with, if any.

The PAMS were asked during the focus group to select some of the PALS participants that they 'buddy' up with and ask them to fill in the questionnaires. Pilot studies were carried out on the questionnaire using the staff at the council who were working on the scheme and also the questionnaire was discussed during the focus group.

Results

This section is split into 3 main areas of discussion, using data collected from each of the methods the researcher will aim to answer the research questions by bringing relevant information from each method together.

What is the benefit of the PAM Scheme from the perspective of the mentors?

Key Finding 1: PAMS feel they benefited from PALS and want to give something back to the scheme and help others to gain the benefits.

When discussing the PAM Scheme with the mentors it became apparent that there were several factors which kept arising both in the focus group and during the observation. One of these factors was to 'help others'

The benefit to me is satisfaction in helping people, to see an improvement as they progress through the class

It has been suggested that another aspect of volunteering could be the individual feeling that they have a moral obligation to volunteer and help others maybe because of the help that they have received or because they feel that is what is expected of them.

I've had a right lot out of PALS Scheme, it was the best thing that happened to me and so I want to put something back

This was due to the help they have received during their time as a PAL which had made them feel obliged to put something back into the scheme. Some of the PAMS found that they could not believe how much of a difference the scheme has made to their life. This was because the majority of the PAMS were not physically active other than going to work etc. previous to the PALS.

It's kept me going I would have gone crazy. I used to live to work, I was a workaholic and if someone was to say to me now turn the clock back four and a half years and have this stroke again or go back to your old life I would choose the stroke again because I have seen such a difference in people

This quote supports previous research undertaken by Dugdill et al, who suggests that people who have a life changing experience such as heart attack or a stroke are more likely to increase and maintain their PA levels (Dugdill et al, 2005).

Also in support of the life changing experience, not only do the PAMS increase their PA levels but due to the many benefits that they have experienced they are adamant that they will not stop exercising regularly (Stewart et al, 1997).

I will still be coming down here when I am 95 because it's hard to stop now!

Key finding 2: PAMS found acting as a mentor provides 'time-out' from their normal daily routine and an opportunity to forget about their own problems

One particular person found that PAMs has helped them due to the fact that they can help others. This again supports work undertaken by Warburton & Terry, who suggests that volunteering in this instance helps the individual feel that they are contributing to the wellbeing of community by being a friendly face, someone to talk to etc again giving the volunteer a sense of purpose, feeling needed (Warburton & Terry, 2000).

PAMS gives me something to live for! I know it might sound selfish but I live for going to the PALS and helping people.

Another PAM immediately followed on with:

When you're chatting to people and just for that 3 quarters of an hour it takes your mind off your problems

Key finding 3: PAMS feel a sense of commitment to the participants and this motivates them to maintain active in the scheme.

In relation to the TTM it could be argued that as suggested by Gorley & Bruce different processes need to be used in different stages to maintain motivation

(Gorley & Bruce, 2000). The PAMS are in the maintenance stage, so it could be argued already experience high levels of self efficacy (SE) due to feelings of mastery. They are also unlikely to experience any more pros to exercise in relation to decisional balance (DB). Therefore processes to avoid boredom etc. are needed and volunteering may be just the thing to keep their motivation levels up.

I must admit on some Monday mornings I have thought that if I wasn't a PAM I don't know if id bother going in this morning, you know when there is a gale blowing and its really cold, but because you know you've got a commitment to other people you do go.

What is the benefit of the PAM Scheme from the perspective of the participants (PALS) on the exercise referral scheme?

Key Finding 4: PALS found the PAMS particularly important at their initial involvement with the scheme and that they helped create a friendly atmosphere.

From previous research such as that of Wormald & Ingle, 2004 it could be suggested that one of the most crucial times which PAMS are required is when the participants attend the scheme for the first time and are still finding more disadvantages than advantages to exercise, have low levels of SE and are still in the contemplation stage of the TTM. Basler suggests that social support has been found to be a crucial factor in assisting the participants through to the action stage of the TTM (Basler, 2007). The following statements would support this previous research:

When your referred to something like this because you are ill coming down to the studio and going through that door for the time it takes a bit of doing and you know there is someone there to say its ok and talk to you and it helps you

This was mirrored by the majority of the PALS participants, some of which went on to say that the PAMS not only assisted on this initial meeting but also contributed to the increase in PA.

The very first session I came to as a PAL there were three PAMS and they were all brilliant! You didn't feel stupid going because they came and made themselves known and were friendly. So it was great because you didn't feel self conscious and it was a friendly atmosphere so you come again and gradually you do more to your limits having somebody there showing you what to do its great.

This again supports work undertaken by Wormald & Ingle who suggest that having somebody there to give advice, offer support and supervision throughout the session makes the participant feel as though they are getting a personalised service, which not only puts them at ease but increases their confidence (Wormald & Ingle, 2004).

Obviously it's a lot better to be able to talk to somebody one to one when your doing your exercises and I said I cant do this I am out of breath, I've got a problem with my lungs and she said well if you cant do it then just sit down and try to do it sat down. So that's the way we went.

The PALS participants reported a number of barriers when undertaking PA prior to commencing the PALS and also the motivations which have helped them maintain their PA levels. (Please see table which displays the categorised results of barriers and motivations)

Table 1 Motivation & Barriers of exercise for the PALS

Barriers	Motivation
Injury & Illness (Health)	Health, Weight & Fitness
Lack of confidence	The PAL & PAM Schemes themselves and the staff
Lack of time due to work and family commitments	Social life/companionship
Pain during exercise and fear of	Reduction in pain

From the above table it is clear to see that lack of confidence was a huge factor. This supports previous research undertaken by Wormald & Ingle, (2004) who suggests that for those attending the PALS for the first time often feel very nervous about having to exercise. This could be due to the lack of confidence that they have in being able to complete the exercises or to even keep up with the others in the group (Wormald & Ingle, 2004). This maybe due to a low level in confidence to carry out the exercises which also reflects a low level in SE (Basler, 2007). Also the participant is likely to be able to identify far more disadvantages of exercise than benefits and therefore maybe at risk of regression (Gorley & Bruce, 2000).

Key finding 5: PAMS are able to empathise with participants as they have been through similar experiences

Another reason that the PALS participants can identify themselves with a PAM is because the PAMS themselves have been through similar experiences to them.

I thought he would make a good PAM as anybody that came along having had a stroke he could empathise with them because he has been there and he knows what it's all about.

This was followed on by

I don't say that I can cure them because I can't, but I know where he is coming from because I know what its like not to be able to lift my arm.

This is why it is of benefit to have somebody there to support them such as a PAM. This is because both previous research and also the data collected throughout this study suggest that the participants' confidence increases along with SE and the pros of DB.

Key finding 6: PAMS help increase the self-efficacy of the participants by providing individual advice and guidance

They explain things to you giving confidence to do the exercise.

They watch us on the equipment, which gave me the incentive to work on keeping myself active.

They gave me the confidence to persevere it is someone to talk to and to encourage you to try new things.

The majority of the PALS sample reported an increase in confidence due to having a PAM there to support them and observe them on the equipment. This also had positive effect on their motivation again due to the personalised service they received in terms of being shown how to use equipment and also monitored until they felt confident enough to be able to carry out their exercises on their own (Wormald & Ingle, 2004).

I was introduced to them when I first started going to the PALS they assist you and give you the motivation to carry out things you may have thought you could never do.

What influence if any do the PAMs have on the PALS?

Key finding 7: PAMS motivate and encourages participants to continue participating and increase their physical activity levels

Some very moving statements such as the following have been made by the PALS participants.

As I am a shy person knowing a PAM keeps me attending.

This is quite powerful because it would suggest if a PAM was not available on the exercise programme that this particular individual would not have carried on attending. Therefore this displays how important a PAM can be. All of the responses given by the PALS participants were very positive, but some went further and expressed how the PAM made them feel personally.

A Pam is a person who motivates and gives you enthusiastic responses to your requests. My PAM is she's like a breath of fresh air!!!

All of the PALS participants that returned their questionnaire answered yes to the following question:

Do you feel that having a PAM at your exercise session has helped to motivate and increase your PA levels in the long term?

This is very positive and could suggest that having PAMS available to offer the participants guidance and support is paramount.

Conclusions

This study into the experiences of Physical Activity Motivators (PAMS) and the participants of the Kirklees exercise referral programme Physical Activity and Leisure (PALS) found the following:

- PAMS find the experience of being a mentor rewarding and enjoyable.
- The PAMS felt they were able to contribute to the local community, to help others but also that it increased the quality of their lives
- PALS participants felt the PAMS contributed to their continued enjoyment of the scheme by providing personalised encouragement
- In particular they found PAMS useful at the beginning in increasing their confidence and motivation to take part

The PAMS scheme enriches the experience of both the PALS participants and the PAMS themselves and further expansion of the scheme is warranted.

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