

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING HEALTH BEHAVIOR IN OLDER ADULTS

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Behavior change is an inherent aspect of routine geriatric care. However, most research and clinical programs emphasize how to initiate behavior change with less emphasis placed on skills and strategies to maintain behaviors over time, including after an intervention has concluded. This presentation will provide an introduction to the symposium, including a review of prior work and our rationale for studying the critical yet overlooked construct of maintenance in older adults. Several key considerations in our work include the impact of multiple chronic conditions, declines in cognitive and functional capacity over time, changes in environmental context and/or social support, and sustainability of community and population-level programs and services.

DEFINING THE CONSTRUCT OF HEALTH BEHAVIOR MAINTENANCE

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Prior research on health behavior maintenance has proposed several key constructs that distinguish this concept from initiation. Initiation is thought to depend upon action self-efficacy, goal setting, and outcome expectations. Maintenance, on the other hand, depends upon self-regulation, relapse prevention, recovery self-efficacy, and satisfaction with original outcome expectations. Although much prior research has focused on cognitive components of maintenance, there has been little attention to how higher-order cognitive processing and decision-making may be challenging for some older adults. This presentation will discuss a proposed conceptual model of health behavior maintenance, specifically as this construct applies to older adults. Special consideration will be given to how both normative and non-normative age-related changes (e.g., physical, cognitive, psychosocial) impact maintenance and how such changes might influence older adults' goals and outcome expectations. Finally, individual-level maintenance will be discussed within a larger context of program sustainability at community and population levels.

MULTI-LEVEL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT HEALTH BEHAVIOR MAINTENANCE

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Although behavior change is largely thought to occur on the individual level, maintenance of health behaviors also depends upon factors at the community and population levels.

As discussed in earlier presentations, health behaviors can be influenced by social support, environmental context, and population-level policies. For example, maintaining a physical activity regimen is made easier when an older adult has access to a safe environment, support of family and friends, and/or ongoing access to a program that is continuously offered, or sustained, at a local community center. This presentation will focus on the importance of discussing sustainability when considering long-term maintenance of health behaviors. Specifically, this presentation will use examples from the evidence-based Fit & Strong! program, now being offered in 32 states, to explore sustainability of programs at the participant and community level and will provide an overview of barriers and facilitators faced by community organizations.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, EDUCATION, AND PRACTICE

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Throughout this symposium, we have advocated for increased attention to how the chronicity and complexity of older adults' health might impact their ability to maintain health behaviors over time. This final presentation will explore some implications of this chronicity and complexity on research study designs, formal education and professional training, and routine clinical practice. For example, existing research designs and funding mechanisms such as tightly controlled randomized controlled trials within a five-year grant may not permit researchers to study behaviors over an extended period of time and to do so within the real-world environments and social contexts in which older adults live. In contrast, integrating principles of community-engaged and participatory research, adaptive designs, pragmatic trials, and implementation science may encourage researchers to design for widespread dissemination. This session will close with recommendations to enhance educational initiatives and professional development to promote cross-disciplinary teams.

SESSION 7585 (SYMPOSIUM)

WHY AGE AND AGING RESEARCH MATTERS—FOR EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS

Chair: Marie Bernard

The National Institute on Aging (NIA) at the National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services, supports biomedical and behavioral research with a life-span focus. There is attention to understanding basic processes of aging, improving prevention and treatment of diseases and conditions common in later years, improving the health of older persons, as well as a focus on Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. The NIA also supports the training and career development of scientists focusing on aging research and the development of research resources. The symposium, meant for junior faculty and emerging scholars, will provide an update on the latest research