

Featured interview with Dr. Michelle Segar in Publico's Science Section by Ana Gerschenfeld (Publico is considered to be Portugal's "Best" National Newspaper)

"Exercising and Dieting Is Like Having Two Boyfriends at the Same Time."

How does one create a long-term relationship with physical exercise? How does one fit this activity in their already busy life? By *Ana Gerschenfeld*

Michelle Segar, North America's motivation guru, specializes in physical activity. She believes that the reasons why we exercise are wrong because they come out of medical paradigms related to health and weight loss and because of that only motivate us for a short duration. This researcher from the University of Michigan, who is also a business woman and author of a novel method of behavior change, was the featured speaker at a conference in Oeiras last weekend about the promotion of healthy living habits, invited by Pedro Teixeira, professor of the University of Human Motricidade. According to Michelle Segar, building a lasting relationship between people and physical activity means redefining what motivates us to become active. She says that people can become more motivated to stay active by noticing how moving more during the day, even 15 minutes, influences how they feel during the other 23 hours and 45 minutes.

What is the main objective of your research?

I am mainly interested in discovering the specific reasons and motivations which lead people to do sustainable exercise. Also, in my work, I look at the way our culture educates us about being physically active because it determines the attitudes of the entire population.

What is your conclusion?

I have concluded that much is not right. In 75% of cases, people either exercise for health benefits or to lose weight. These reasons are logical in our cultural. However, when we have analyzed the main motivations that promote sustainable exercise, the two reasons cited about lead to worse motivation and lower levels of physical exercise than other reasons that are not promoted within our culture. This is the problem.

Do you think that the low motivation produced by these two reasons is due to the fact that both reasons are in the medical arena?

Yes, but if you had asked me the same questions six years ago, I would not have answered the same. Before a study published in 2008, I believed that health reasons for exercise would be good reasons for people to become more active! However, for the people who are busy and work full time, health is a very abstract reason and purpose for exercise. It's very difficult to give high priority to something abstract, that isn't relevant and compelling to fit into our day-to-day living. In fact, research has been studying physical exercise in a very myopic way. We've been studying the behavior of "exercise" trying to learn how to promote "exercise" in people's lives. But, to promote exercise that can stay (and not fly out of people's lives), we have to study "exercise competing with everything else" in people's lives. We have to put this behavior in the context of all of the other things that we have and want to accomplish in our daily lives.

You have mainly studied middle age women. What most attracts them to the practice of physical exercise?

Contrary to what many of us think, our research shows that exercise as a vehicle to improve women's quality of lives through better well-being and the reduction of stress is a much better way to achieve sustainable exercise. This is the way society should start promoting physical

exercise. When we are less stressed, we like our jobs better, we are more creative, we are not as angry at our partner, and we are more patient with our children. We are happier. But most women never notice these types of benefits from exercise because they are always worried about “this” (she taps her hand on her belly). However, when we teach them to notice the well-being and energy reward from exercise (instead of weight loss) their experience of physical activities totally changes.

Does the method you developed try to teach people to focus on these advantages?

My method begins by focusing on people’s reasons for exercising as the first step to the creation of sustainable motivation and behavior. The process does not end here, though. There is a key second part that helps people learn to make lifestyle behaviors like exercise a priority in their daily lives. While the creation of high quality motivation is very fast through step one, the re-evaluation and re-ranking of people’s priorities is more complex because this aspect is related with the values we’ve been socialized to have and how we’ve been taught to prioritize in our culture and by our families. Where does physical activity fit into our most important priorities? This is harder to change. It is obvious that not everything works for everybody. However, when people start thinking about physical exercise in this new way, as a way to fuel their most important roles and responsibilities, we notice that they start to revalue physical activity as a priority. Why? The minutes spent in daily exercise become an investment in the rest of the day and gives an exponentially higher return than the specific minutes invested.

Have you ever worked with people who did not want to exercise, or who thought that to exercise was the most boring thing in the world, but who ultimately were able to take pleasure from this activity and were able to fit it into their busy lives?

Yes. Before the beginning and at the end of my method, participants fill out a form where, among other things, I ask them to evaluate their physical activity on a scale from 1 to 5 which goes from “chore” to “gift”. At the beginning, most rate exercising between one and two because they see exercise as one more boring obligation. However, by the end of the process, after they’ve changed their reasons for exercising most changing their score to between four and five.

Do they keep active after the process?

The NIH (National Institutes of Health) funded a study which followed up on participants 10 months to 14-months after they participated in a six-week intervention I developed that used this method. The findings showed that from 50 to 75 percent of the women maintained higher levels of physical activity compared to their baseline levels.

There are still people who suggest a minimal daily “dose” of physical exercise, but the “official” recommendation has been becoming more flexible. What is the reason for this change?

The main reason prescriptions for exercise are becoming less rigid is because rigid approaches do not work. The “gold standard” recommendations are too high for most people and are not sustainable. The health authorities committed a huge tactical mistake by promoting an ideal. We have been telling people: (In a deep voice) “Everyone must do 30 minutes of moderate to intense exercise five days a week. However, when we teach children how to play the piano, we do not start with Mozart. The message should be more user-friendly: “Get up, move more and note how you feel!” We need to teach a continuum of physical activity and ask people to start at the part that is realistic for them to do on most days, even if it’s just 3 minutes a day. Also, another

reason for the change in the recommendation are the newer studies which that extent to which spending the whole day sitting is bad for one's health. To make people get up from their chairs, even if for just a little bit, is now being thought of as indispensable.

Are studies like yours influencing the message?

I have been interviewed by groups like the American College of Medical Sports about how to rebrand exercise to the public – they are the group responsible in the USA for a campaign called “Exercise is Medicine”. In fact, they are repositioning themselves and rebranding the aspect of the Exercise is Medicine campaign directed to the public – because to the clinicians, the promoting exercise as medicine can be adequate (as long as we teach clinicians to talk about reasons to exercise other than medicine with their patients...), but this message is not good for the general public, who do not even maintain their medication, much simpler behavior than exercise! Fear is not an effective motivator, and I really think that the messages are going to start changing.

Are the motivations to exercise the same for men and women?

Our new findings on this have not yet been published, but I can say that we have noticed that the responses to certain messages about health, weight loss and well-being are not the same among men and women. I am not sure if this happens because our messages are not written as well for men or if because there are real differences, and men simply prefer different reasons to exercise compared to men. In traditional marketing, women and men are treated differently. Maybe we'll need to follow suit with exercise as well. We still have much more to study about how to best market exercise to men and women to determine this though.

What do you think about dieting?

I have not worked much in this area, but I also think that we commit a big mistake by utilizing a medical paradigm focused on weight loss. We have been telling people that they must start a physical activity and diet at the same time. If our objective is sustainable behaviors for the whole life, why do we ask people to do so much at the same time? To exercise and to diet is like having two boyfriends at the same time. (It's hard to keep up for eternity.) In fact, physical activity is not as efficient for weight loss as dietary changes. So, we have been giving the wrong information to the public about this question. It is probable that not even medical professionals know that true relative contributions of physical exercise and alimentation to weight loss. Just think how fast we swallow a 600 calorie cup cake. Gulp! And that it is! However, to burn 600 calories...not even an hour of exercise is enough. I think that the exercise/weight loss association is a real problem.

Is the message about weight loss also changing?

Yes. Industry is always ahead of public health because they spend a lot of money in market research. A very interesting thing is that even the companies which sell weight loss products are changing the reasons they are marketing to the public as to why they should lose weight. They are stopping to promote losing weight per se and starting to promote the joy of life, happiness and freedom as the reasons to lose weight. I think that these are the real “hooks” we should all be focusing on when promoting exercise and healthy diets. In the USA, there is a Special K commercial that instead of numbers on the scale, it shows words such as these above – why? Because these are the things that we are truly care about.

Is it a motivator to include specific physical activities in our day-to-day which we cannot avoid, such as leave the car at home, for example?

I find this strategy extremely important. In principle, external reasons do not alter behavior in a sustainable way, but when there is not another option they can be compelling...I can say that this is the reason why I continue to walk instead of driving to work. I live about 2.5 km away from work and I used to walk to work. However, now I have a 4 year old child and my time has become more precious. Nonetheless, I have not abandoned my walks. I park my car a little closer to my work, but far enough away where parking is still free, and I walk the rest of the way. If I parked a little closer, I would get a parking ticket for leaving my car there all day, and if I parked really close to work, I would have to pay \$8 daily, which I am not willing to do. This kind of solution has two advantages: I can save money, and I can fit in physical exercise in my daily life at the same time.

How about the gyms? Do you like them?

I think that gyms are more of a male model of physical exercise. In general, women take care of the house, family and work, they juggle more than men. Leaving all of these things to go to a gym and exercise is hard. But men can say: "Dear, I will come back at seven. I am going to play basketball with the guys". I am not saying that gyms are not good, I go to the YMCA, which I like a lot, and I think that they play an important role. We need to teach people how to use both gyms and their life contexts as integrative ways to be consistently active.

Are there gyms for women? Are they different?

The gyms for women (like Curves in the USA) are structured to promote socializing among women, and are more welcoming to women who are not skinny and in good shape. Starting gyms like Curves was a very intelligent idea to help exercise be a time women can be social, and capitalize on the fact that women are very social creatures.

*This translation was conducted by a native Portuguese speaker from Brazil who speaks English as a second language and then edited by Michelle Segar for the meaning of content due to language differences.