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It's Time for Recess: Just Keep on Moving

By **JANE E. BRODY**

We all know by now that we should be getting 30 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous [physical activity](#) on most days. Yet for all the proselytizing, wheedling and cajoling, only about 5 percent of the population has bought into the program.

“Being sedentary is the norm in America,” writes Dr. Toni Yancey, a professor of health services at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#). Thanks to the plethora of labor-saving devices and motorized vehicles, we now “spend most of our waking time sitting, reclining or lying down.”

“Even activities that we still do regularly demand less exertion,” Dr. Yancey continued. “And the less people have to do, the more quickly they get tired when they exert themselves just a little bit, which of course discourages them from exercising.”

Clearly, a new approach is needed. And Dr. Yancey is offering one that has already shown great promise to counteract what she calls “sedentary behavior disorder.”

She calls it “Instant Recess” — the title of her new book ([University of California Press](#)), in which she demonstrates the value of two 10-minute breaks of enjoyable communal activity as part of people’s everyday lives. The sessions can be instituted wherever people gather: day care centers, schools, workplaces, conferences, places of worship, senior centers and the like.

At 6-foot-2, Dr. Yancey was a college basketball star, and she remains a staunch believer in the value of lifelong physical activity. She says the secret to motivating more Americans to make regular physical exercise a part of their lives is to incorporate enjoyable bouts of activity into their everyday behavior.

Take a Break and Exercise

As an alternative to a structured exercise break, she suggests “gathering groups of people to take a brisk walk around the grounds for 10 minutes twice a day.” Getting people to exercise in groups is easier because “everyone’s doing it,” and these brief exercise sessions deliver the most benefit to those who need it most.

Dr. Yancey has a wealth of experience at motivating highly sedentary people to move more. She describes instant recess as “a point of entry, a calling card for national physical activity” — a way to stimulate health-promoting activity, especially among those whose lives and value systems have not caught up with the top-down [prescriptions](#) for regular physical exercise.

“These short bouts of activity can spill over to the rest of a person’s life,” she said in an interview. “Once people feel more fit and better about themselves, they are more likely to engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity during their leisure time.”

She calls the recess model “the aerobics of the 21st century — an updated exercise prescription for an increasingly over scheduled, ethnically diverse, multicultural, media-and-information-technology-driven global modern society.”

“People want to be healthier, fitter and thinner,” she writes. “But the cost is just more than most are willing to pay, and the rewards are too far in the future.”

By making instant recess the default option, she said, no one has to decide to exercise or carve out a special time to do it, and some of the rewards are immediate — among them camaraderie, social interaction with friends and co-workers, stress relief, muscle relaxation, increased energy, improved mood and better concentration.

So at sites around the country, students, employees and older people, among others, are taking dancelike exercise breaks to music that have been shown to enhance achievement, productivity, self-esteem and well-being.

As Dr. Yancey puts it, “What’s good for the waistline is good for the bottom line.” Companies including L. L. Bean and Replacements Ltd. have found that the kinds of breaks Dr. Yancey is promoting can increase output and decrease injuries and workers’ compensation claims. L. L. Bean employees who take part in three five-minute stretch breaks each workday have given back to the company “a 100 percent return on its investment — 30 minutes of productivity in terms of what comes off the assembly line,” Dr. Yancey reported. And within three years, she said, “work-related injuries dropped from 14 a year to essentially none.”

After the introduction of 10-minute exercise breaks at Replacements Ltd., which sells replacement pieces for sets of china and silverware, fewer employees lost time from work because of problems like [carpal tunnel syndrome](#) and [low back pain](#). [Dr. Yancey is now involved in a study of recess breaks at 70 work sites in Los Angeles County.](#)

Motivating the Young

Likewise, she said, 10-minute exercise breaks during the school day could do more to forward the goals of [No Child Left Behind](#) than double that amount of time spent trying to stuff math and English into students' heads. She cited a federally financed study by the [University of Kansas](#) conducted at 24 low-income public schools.

[The study](#), which included a matched control group, found that 10-minute activity breaks, usually done to music, led to improved scores in math, spelling and composition among the participants. The students also increased their activity levels outside school, on weekdays and weekends, and gained less weight than those in the schools who did not institute fitness breaks.

This study is especially telling because in schools around the country, physical education classes and outdoor recess have fallen prey to the demands to improve test scores.

“Getting kids to sit shoulder to shoulder for six hours a day is not going to do it,” Dr. Yancey said. “Even in schools that still have 30-minute periods of physical education or recess, many children get only about five minutes of moderate to vigorous activity. Most just stand around texting or talking with their friends.”

But studies by Dr. Yancey and colleagues at U.C.L.A. showed, for example, that athlete-led exercise breaks in school, even via DVDs or CDs, could motivate otherwise sedentary youngsters to get moving and improve their fitness levels.

In a [charter school](#) in Phoenix, instant recess was tested among low-income minority students from kindergarten through sixth grade. They loved the 10-minute sessions, according to researchers, saying things like “It gave me energy throughout the day,” “It was way better than sitting down in class all the time” and “I think other schools should do it so they can become more active.”

This is the first of two columns about health-promoting physical activity.

