

CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Self-organizing peer coach groups to increase daily physical activity in community dwelling older adults

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Introduction

Many older adults do not reach the recommended level of physical activity, despite many professional-delivered physical activity interventions. Here we study the implementation of a novel physical activity intervention for older adults that is self-sustainable (no financial support) and self-organizing (participants act as organizers) due to peer coaching.

Method

We implemented three groups and evaluated process and effect using participatory observations, questionnaires, six-minute walk tests and body composition measures from October 2016 to September 2018. The intervention was implemented by staff without experience in physical activity interventions.

Results

Facilitators were a motivated initiator and a non-professional atmosphere for participants to take ownership. Barriers were the absence of motivated participants to take ownership and insufficient participants to ensure the presence of participants at every exercise session. The groups exercised outside five days a week and were self-organizing after 114, 216 and 263 days. The initial investments were 170€ for sport equipment and 81–187 h. The groups reached 118 members and a retention of 86.4% in two years. The groups continue to exist at the time of writing and are self-sustainable. Quality of life increased 0.4 on a ten-point scale (95%CI 0.1–0.7; $p = 0.02$) and six-minute walk test results improved with 33 m (95%CI 18–48; $p < 0.01$) annually.

Discussion

This study shows a feasible implementation strategy to initiate peer groups as a daily physical activity intervention for community dwelling older adults. The peer coach groups became completely self-organizing after the initial researcher-led period and at the time of writing continued to exist and grow. It also showed that peer coaching was a safe method of physical activity promotion. From a practical perspective, as there are no fixed expenses for paid professionals or costly sporting accommodations required, it is sustainable. Moreover, because the intervention is not dependent on scarce and costly professionals and can be set up anywhere in the public space, it is potentially scalable. Because participants are the owner of the intervention every peer coach group is unique. This study showed that when a group does take ownership, it is resilient and can exist for a long period without any supervision.

van de Vijver: Self-organizing peer coach groups to increase daily physical activity in community dwelling older adults.

Conclusion

Self-organizing peer coach groups for physical activity are feasible, have positive effects on health and require only a small investment at the start. It is a sustainable and potentially scalable intervention that could be a promising method to help many older adults age healthier.

Lessons learned

Peer coaching is a novel method that is effective in long-term physical activity promotion. Participants must be empowered to take ownership.

Limitations

This study has been performed in the cultural background of West-Europe, but similar initiatives can be seen in South-America and Asia. However, depending on cultural etiquette, changes need to be made to the implementation strategy.

Suggestions for future research

Future research should focus on developing train-the-trainer models to implement peer coach physical activity groups on a larger scale. Additionally, research could focus on the application of peer coaching for different health promotion interventions, e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous.