



# **From Dread to Desire:**

**Reframing Physical Activity to Foster  
Positive Affect and Feelings of Success**

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# Disclosure

Own a sustainable-behavior-change speaking, consulting, and training company and coach individuals in how to maintain self-care behaviors.

Author of *No Sweat: How the Simple Science of Motivation Can Bring You a Lifetime of Fitness* (Amacom, 2015)

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**BACKGROUND**

# Background

- Physical activity (PA) prevents and manages numerous illnesses and fosters well-being.
- Racial minorities are less active than whites.
- Women are less active than men.
- PA communication is a primary strategy to promote PA and greater public health.

# Public Health Communication Frames PA and Strongly Influences

Why we value

Beliefs about



Prevention News  
Exercise Prevents Breast Cancer

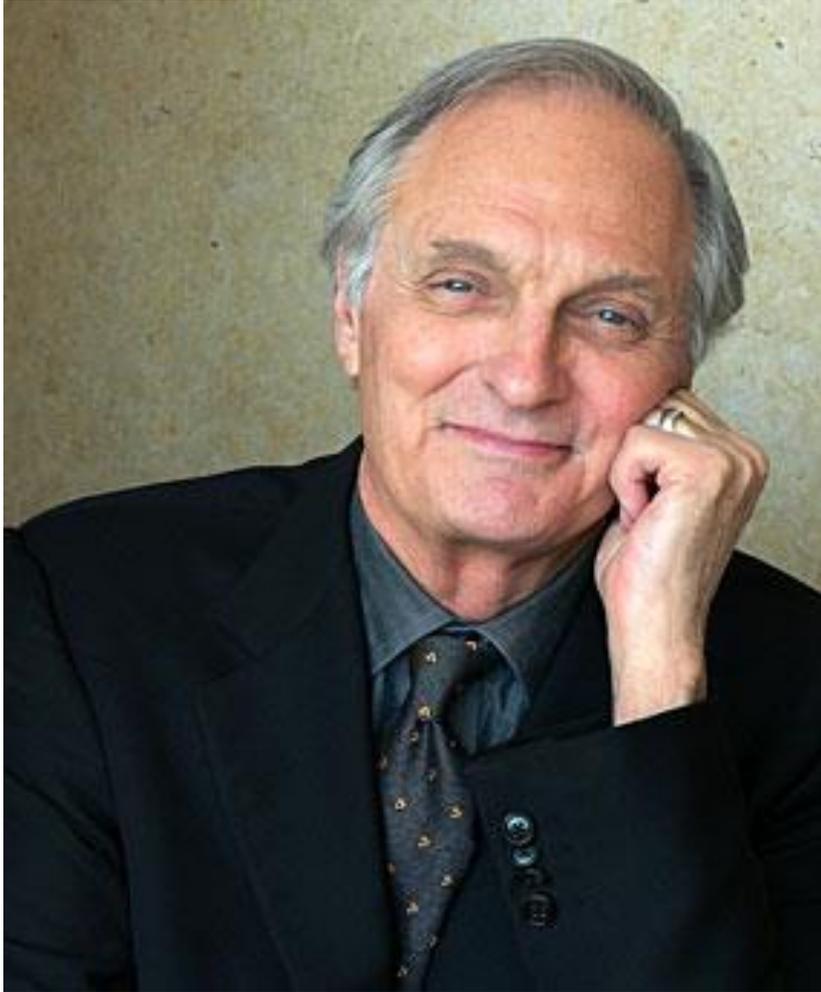
**Walking Lowers Breast Cancer  
Risk By 42%**

A new reason to hit the road  
By K. Aleisha Fetters



# Traditional Approach

- **PA has been promoted based on assumptions:**
  - People value their health
  - This value is sufficient to motivate PA
- In fact, health motives predict less PA than affective motives (e.g., feel good, enjoyment) across the lifespan.
- Important to investigate how to optimally frame and communicate about PA using appropriate frameworks and methods.



"If we're talking about one of our greatest achievements — science — why wouldn't we do it with our other great strength, communication?"

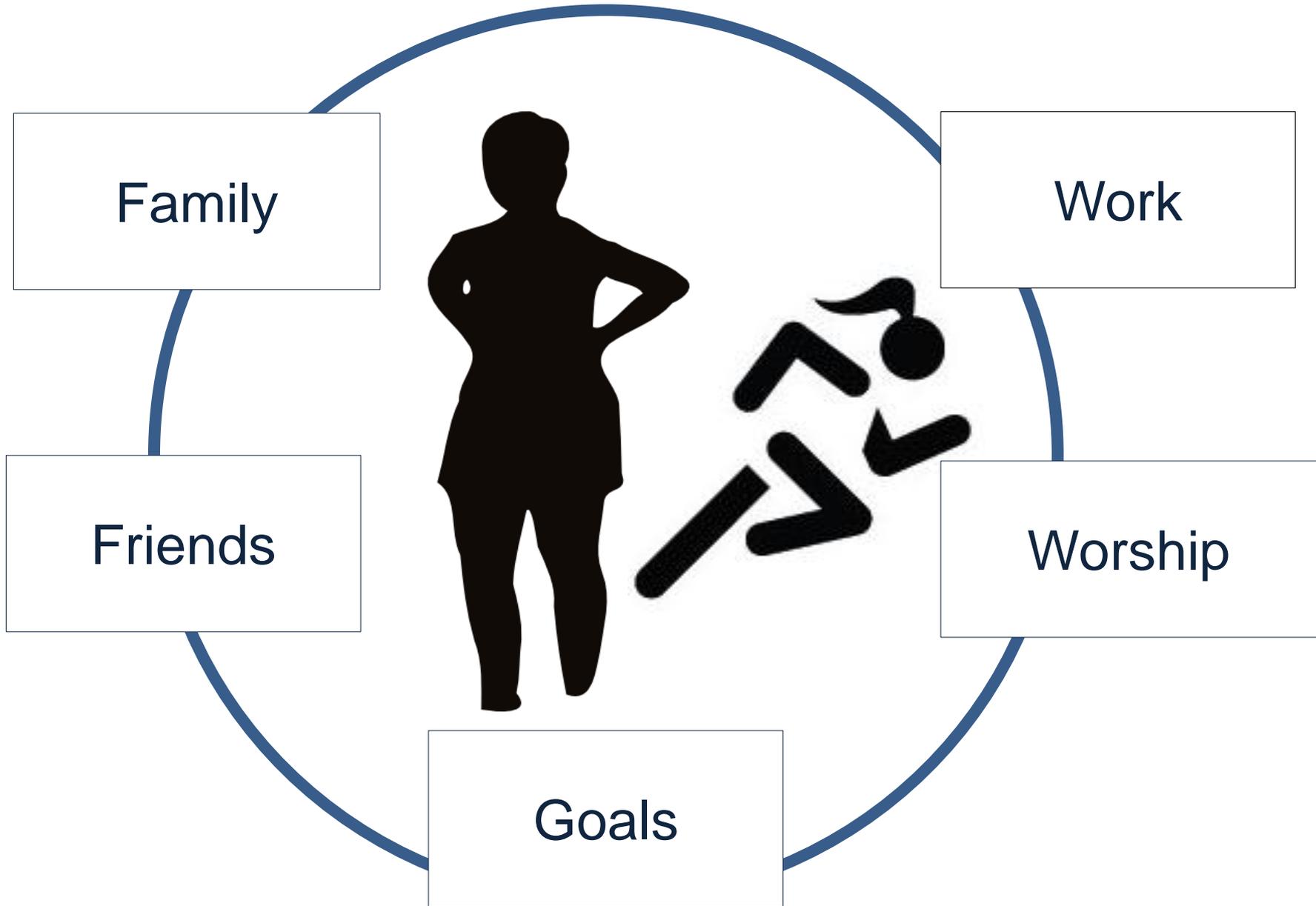
# Rethinking PA Communication

- Frame PA as relevant to and fostering the things that people want to experience and care most about

# Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

- Broad theory of human motivation that addresses:
  - Contexts as supporting or thwarting 3 basic psychological needs
  - Quality of motivation
  - Congruency between a behavior and the things that matter most to people

# How does PA fit within people's greater life values and context?



# Study Aims - Investigate

- Women's beliefs, perceptions, feelings about, and experiences with PA.
- The nature of women's daily goals, values, and priorities.
- How women's PA beliefs and feelings interact with (support/undermine) their daily goals and priorities.

Preliminary recommendations for reframing physical activity to better align with women's daily priorities and desired experiences.

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**METHODS**

# Recruitment

- Ethnically diverse women (20 to 50yr)
- Low- and high-active women
- Oversampled low-active participants
  - < 3x/wk or < 120 mins/week
- Eight focus groups (n = 40)

## Demographics

- Mean age = 36.4 yrs (7.5)
- Ethnically diverse
  - African American (30%)
  - Hispanic origin (32.5%)
  - White (37.5%)
- Education
  - 40% completed high school
  - 45% had at least some college

# \*Physical Activity Participation/BMI

Activity Status		
Low Actives (n=29)		
High Actives (n=11)		

## Focus Group Guide

- Women's proximal goals, values, and priorities
  - Operationalized as what leads to daily feelings of happiness and success. (e.g., experiences from and aspects of daily life)
    - *What makes you feel happy?*
- PA beliefs, feelings, and experiences
  - *When you think about being physically active, what is the first thing that comes into your mind?*
- How PA supports and/or undermines the drivers of happiness and success.

## **Coding and Analysis**

- Data were coded by question areas (happiness, success, PA beliefs/feelings)
- Inductive analyses identified emergent themes
  - Iterative process
  - Micro-themes aggregated into higher-order themes.
- Investigated distinctions between low- vs. high- actives.



A FEW KEY  
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

# High-level Summary

- **Happiness** was a result of **experiences**:
  - being with (connecting) and helping others (especially family)
  - Feeling relaxed, free from pressures; doing desired leisure activities
- **Same factors** contributed to happiness for both low- and high-actives.
- Low- and high-active participants described **different feelings/experiences about PA**.
  - Low-active's PA feelings/experiences are in **discord** with **happiness** and success

# PA is Not in Accord with Drivers of Happiness

## PA Competes with Family

- “If I ...go for a run before dinner, *I'm choosing physical activity over my family.*”



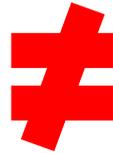
## Connection with Family

- “I have a daughter ...It makes me really *happy when we're able to spend quality time.*”

# PA is Not in Accord with Drivers of Happiness

## Negative Affect/ Not Relaxing

- “It makes me really *resentful...I have such a bad attitude.*”
- “The only space that it'll fit into my schedule...is in the hour...that I allot myself to relax... That's my ‘me time’ and to me Working out is *not relaxing.*”



## Relaxed States

- “After all my kids have gone to school.... I *just have silence for a couple of hours.*”

## **Low-Active Women Had Negative Affective Recall/Forecasting and Did Not Consider PA as a Way to Relax**

- PA is perceived as necessitating high exertion.
- Women are tired and depleted.
- Report “dreading” it.
- This anticipated negative affect should influence decisions to not be active.

# PA is Not in Accord with Drivers of Happiness

## Pressured by PA

- *I really need to discipline myself and lose the weight again.*
- *“It's a lot of pressure for me, with exercise, to commit to that schedule...I can't commit.”*



## Freedom from Pressure

- *Going out to eat. Mom doesn't have to cook. There's no work in the day.*

# Low-Active Women Feel Pressured by PA

- Given limited time for leisure activities, PA that is associated with pressure is an unlikely candidate for women's cherished "off time".



We can better align PA messages  
with women's goals, priorities  
and desired affective states

# Teach Low-Active Women to Expect Positive Affect from PA

1. Affective forecasting shapes choice and behavior.
2. Immediate rewards from PA (e.g., “feeling good”) seem more motivating than ones that take time (e.g., “better health”).
3. Low active individuals anticipate less positive affect from exercise than active ones.

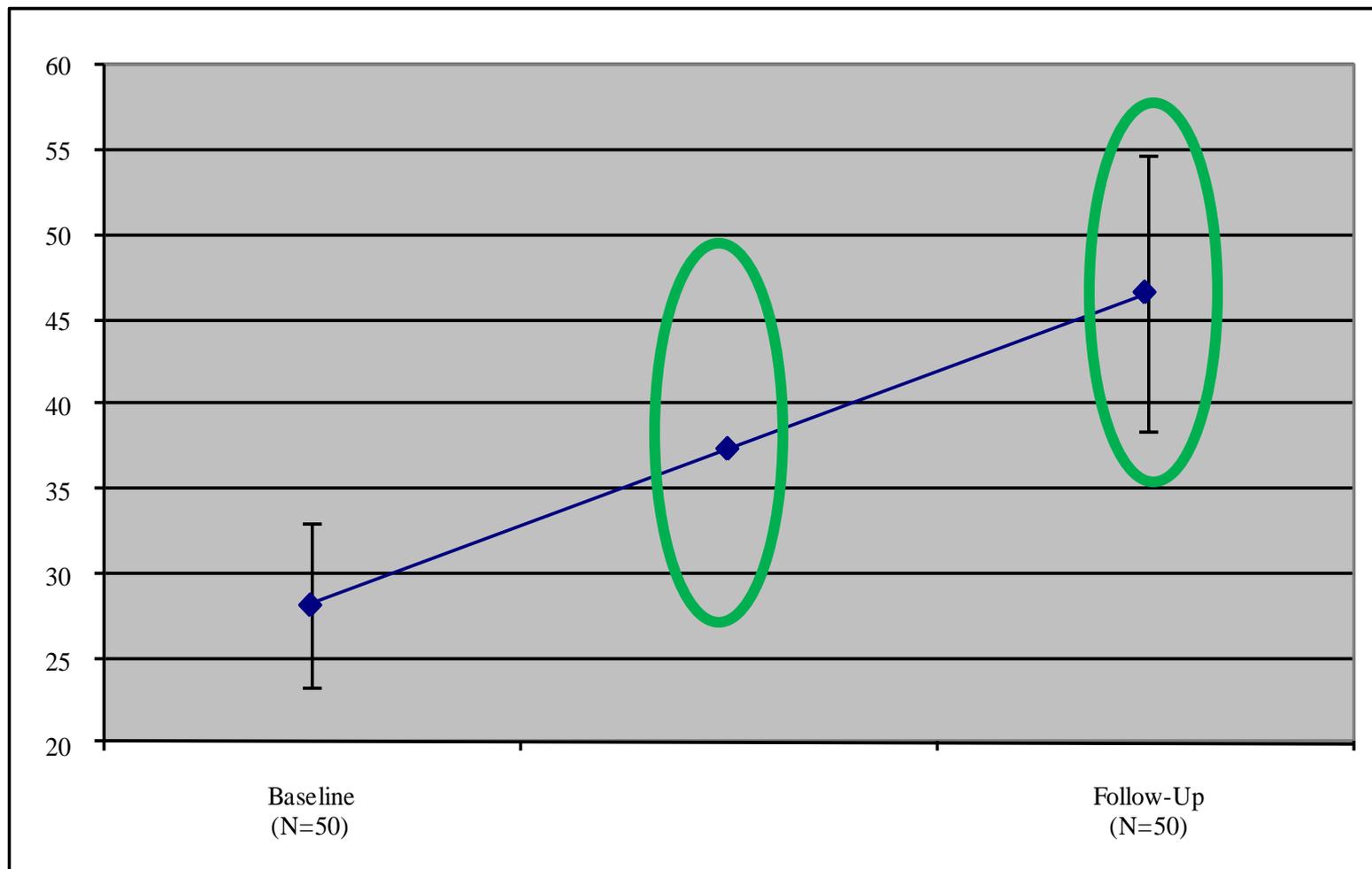
# Moving from Dread to Desire

1. Creating positive expectancies about PA enhances post-exercise affect.
2. Giving women permission to make PA pleasurable fosters autonomy toward PA and intrinsic motivation.
3. Framing PA as a vehicle that lets women succeed at meaningful priorities (e.g., as mother) will foster internalization and should boost it as a priority.
4. Positive affect is a resources for completing tasks and persistence.
5. Intervention research using these strategies show increased PA that is sustained.

# PA Intervention Reframing PA for Pleasure

Follow-up period = 10 months for 75% of participants

Total Physical Activity: Intensity Weighted (GLTEQ)



# Increased Intrinsic Motivation for PA Among Strongest Predictor of Long-term Participation (and Wt. Loss)

## **Exercise Autonomous Motivation Predicts 3-yr Weight Loss in Women**

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# Power of Framing

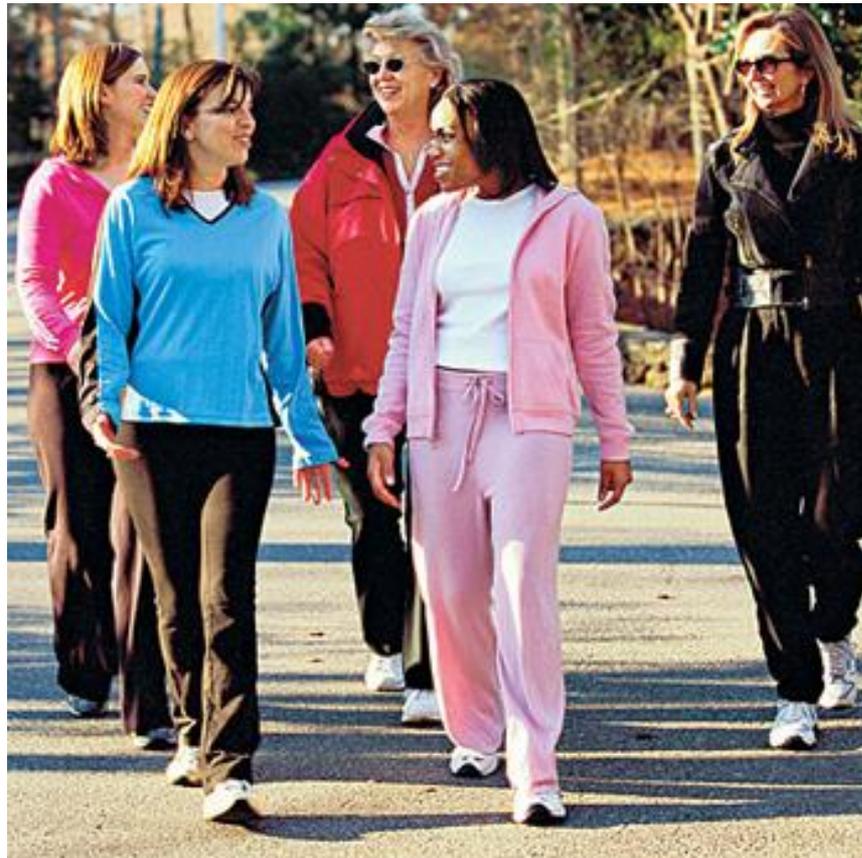


# **Build a New Communication Context: *Aligning PA with Low-Active Women's Goals, Priorities, and Desires***



# REFRAME PA As a

Vehicle for positive affective experiences;  
especially relaxation and deactivation (*low intensity?*)



# REFRAME PA As a

As a leisure activity;  
a way to escape daily pressures

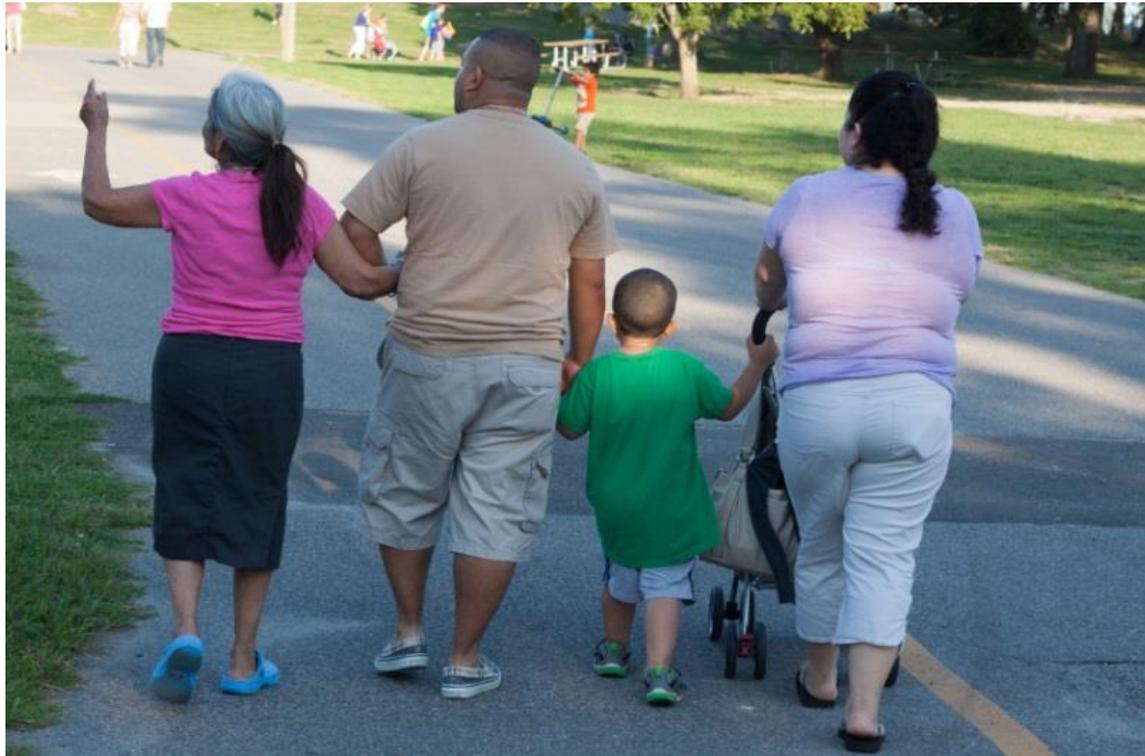


*Escape your “to do” list. Have fun walking with a friend.*



# REFRAME PA As an

Activity for the family; for connection but also  
success as a mother  
*(positive affect and meaning)*



*Physical activity is a fun way to spend time as a family.  
My kids feel as happy as I do.*





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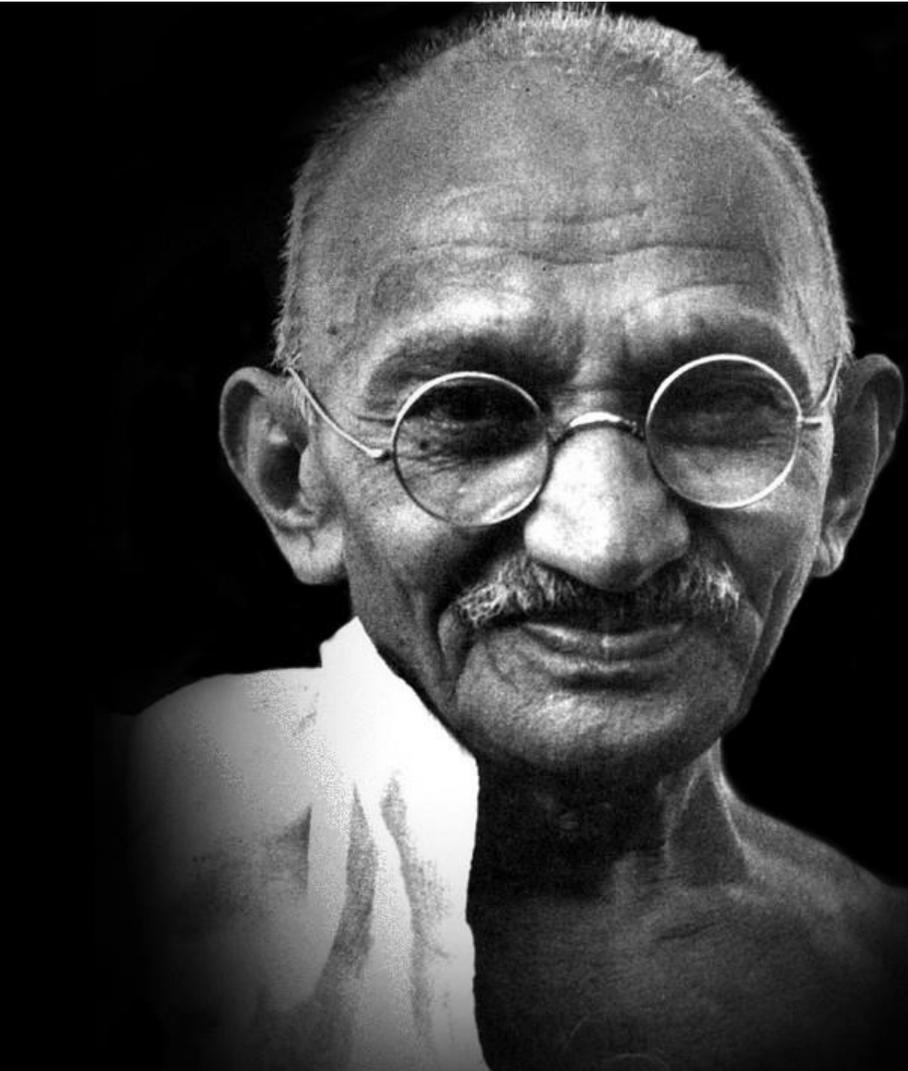
# Strengths and Limitations

## Limitations

- Small sample size
- Three times as many low-actives as high-actives

## Strengths

- Ethnically diverse sample of women
- Novel and timely research question and methods



Action expresses  
priorities

- Mohandas Gandhi



**SHARP**

SPORT, HEALTH & ACTIVITY  
RESEARCH & POLICY CENTER  
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Q & A

Want the paper when published?

Email me: [fitness@umich.edu](mailto:fitness@umich.edu)

# PA Communications Can Be Designed to Support SDT's 3 Psychological Needs



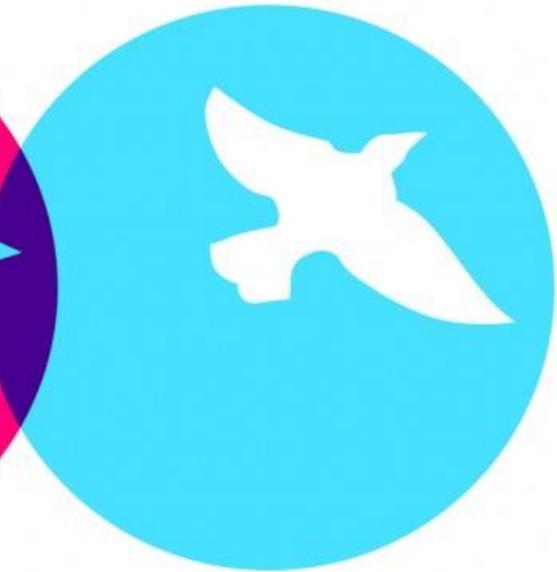
## **Relatedness**

Frame PA as a way to connect



## **Competence**

Encourage shorter bouts and lower intensity



## **Autonomy**

Encourage choice and positive affective experiences