

‘Not everybody enjoys physical activity’: A qualitative Twitter study of the barriers experienced by autistic adults.

In this study, we used a method that focuses on understanding experiences and perspectives to look at the challenges autistic people face with physical activity. We believe that reality is different for everyone and depends on their experiences and how they see the world. So, we asked autistic adults to share their thoughts on social media from 2019 to 2020. Our analysis found three main points: (1) the importance of having support from others, (2) the need for clear and organized goals in physical activity, and (3) the high perceived cost of engaging in physical activity. These results show how physical, environmental, and mental factors can be barriers, highlight the mental effort needed for physical activity, and stress the importance of social connections in encouraging participation.

The evidence shows that autistic adults face significant challenges in participating in physical activity (PA), which is important for their well-being and quality of life. Many participants talked about constantly thinking about how to save their limited energy, often choosing to focus on other important tasks instead of doing PA. They highlighted the importance of social support, like encouragement from family, friends, or partners, in dealing with environmental issues and addressing gaps in support from professionals. Contrary to common beliefs about autistic people’s social preferences, having a strong support network is crucial for motivation and reducing the effects of unfriendly environments. Although participants recognized the health benefits of PA, they often found the energy needed to be too much. Many experienced tiredness, increased pain, and long recovery times, making PA hard to fit into their daily energy-saving plans. Additionally, the findings emphasize the mental stress of dealing with hard-to-access environments and unexpected social interactions, which adds to the physical effort needed for PA.

People with developmental disabilities need environments that help them save energy and remove mental and physical obstacles. This highlights the need for better training for healthcare and health-related practitioners, based on what autistic people have shared. Policymakers should think about the costs of not having accessible PA programs and create laws that help caregivers support autistic individuals better.

Our research suggests that physical activity (PA) might not always be good for everyone, and we urge experts, trainers, and decision-makers to rethink its role in health. We recommend that trainers learn from autistic people and push for changes to make PA more accessible. In our study, we used new ways to find and survey autistic adults to see how they talk about PA, highlighting that social media can be a good way to reach groups that are often overlooked. We suggest future studies use similar methods but emphasize the need to carefully review the rules and practices of social media sites to ensure participants are safe.

Find out more: Information requests or inquiries can be made by email to the first author, Dr. Andrew M. Colombo-Dougovito (andrew.colombo-dougovito@unt.edu). Use the included ORCID links to see additional publications by Dr. Colombo-Dougovito: (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5671-8826>), Dr. Scott W. T. McNamara (Assistant Professor, University of New Hampshire, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4459-8633>), Dr. Henny

Kupferstein (Independent Researcher, Doogri Institute, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4088-7297>), and Dr. A. Josephine Blagrove (Associate Professor, California State University, Chico, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9322-0787>).