

Boomers building muscle at the gym—without passion

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As the first generation to embrace exercise, baby boomers continue going to the gym, yet more out of necessity than for the challenge and enjoyment of physical activity.

In a study recently published in the *International Journal of Wellbeing*, James Gavin, a professor in Concordia's Department of Applied Human Sciences, investigates our motivations for exercise, from looking good to having fun. He finds that for the [baby boom generation](#), passion is the most important motivator—a fact the [fitness industry](#) should embrace.

He says that once we connect with our passion, [motivation](#) can flow backward to sustain participation in cross-training activities: for instance a person will be keener to put in time on the treadmill if she knows it will help her have more fun skiing in winter.

Gavin's study surveyed 1,885 participants at YMCA facilities across Montreal and examined responses by age-group—breaking answers down by decade, from the teens to 50 and over. Of four major motivation categories, "toned and fit" was the top motivator in all age groups, followed by "stress reduction."

Yet perhaps more unexpectedly for a generation who came of age in the era when exercise became a way of life, the two final categories, "mental toughness" (defined as embracing activity for its adventure and challenge) and "fun and friends" (social motivations), both declined with increasing age.

Gavin says he's surprised by the findings, but less so when he surveys the scene at his local gym. "Exercise is often perceived as a necessary evil. When I go to a gym and look around, I don't see a lot of excitement or laughter—people are putting in their time almost as prisoners on their solitary workout stations. They're working away, and relieved when it's over."

Although gratified by the effects on their health, many who are dedicated to fitness don't experience much joy in pursuing active lifestyles, which Gavin says is cause for concern because eventually this lack of deep motivation may cause boomers to stop making the effort.

"What stunned me was when we think of boomers—healthy ambulatory individuals who are reasonably robust and who theoretically have more time on their hands—one might imagine they would want to continue having fun and experiencing personal challenge and growth in what they're doing," says Gavin. As a contrast, he points to the excitement and spontaneity that young children display in their physical activities.

Gavin says the results of his study propose a challenge for the fitness industry to move away from machine-dominated options toward personally meaningful and socially connected pursuits. He points to activities where passion happens in the sport itself and physical benefits are wonderful secondary outcomes. Team sports and martial arts are clear examples—even though many older adults mistakenly see themselves as "too old" for these activities.

"The marketing needs to be about passion, around finding deep personal meaning in [physical activity](#)," says Gavin. "If you watch people playing tennis or slaloming down a hill, they're not counting calories."

Provided by Concordia University

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