

Understanding the barriers to support older people to be more active

Hello, I'm Steve McFadyen, physical activity lead at Alzheimer's Society. I've been leading on this work for the last few years. Alzheimer's Society is the UK's leading dementia charity. We campaign for change, fund research to find a cure and support people living with dementia today.

I'm going to share some insights from us and from other partners that might give you an idea of some of the challenges people face and the importance of physical activity and movement to older people.

What is dementia?

I'm aware that people don't always understand what dementia is, so here's a short explanation. The word 'dementia' describes a group of symptoms that may include memory loss, difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language, and often changes in mood, perception or behaviour. These changes are usually small to begin with, but for someone with dementia they can quickly begin to influence daily life. There are over 100 different types of dementia with Alzheimer's Disease being the most common and the one most people have heard of.

It's important to know that dementia not a natural part of ageing. Not everyone who is old will have dementia and not everyone with dementia is old.

- It's more common in people the older they are and around 1 in 6 people over the age of 80 have dementia.
- 70 per cent of people in care homes have dementia or severe memory problems.
- Of the 850,000 people living with dementia in the UK today, there are over 42,000 people under 65 with dementia in the UK.

Inactivity and ill health are intrinsically linked. Evidence suggests that people who are inactive are more likely to have a long-term health condition, and people with a long-term condition are much more likely to be inactive. Over a quarter of people in England are living with one or more long-term health condition. Therefore, helping more people with long-term conditions to be active could have a significant impact on the lives of millions of people.

Challenges faced by people living with dementia

Alzheimer's Society work closely with people affected by dementia at every stage of our work. People with dementia may face many psychological and emotional barriers to doing more in their community. But with the right support and guidance people can still do the things they love.

As part of gathering insight developing the dementia friendly sport and physical activity guide in 2018, we worked with people affected by dementia to understand some of their challenges when accessing physical activities. Some of these are psychological barriers that they perceive. One example was an older gentleman who had been recently diagnosed with dementia. He lived in a small village all his life and founded the local archery club, 40 years ago. On receiving the diagnosis, he and his wife stayed home and didn't think they could be part of that archery club anymore so didn't go back. If the archery club had reached out, ask him to continue coming

and offered support or adaptations it would have made a world of difference. He founded the club; it was a huge part of his life and still could be a big part of it.

Worries about other people's reactions:

- people not understanding their difficulties
- fear of not meeting the required standards
- a lack of confidence to find activities and feel comfortable taking part.

Worries about what to expect:

- not knowing who to ask or speak to for additional support
- thinking about how loud it might get
- not knowing or misjudging the ability level of the activity.

Challenges caused by memory problems:

- forgetting where their locker is
- being unsure of or forgetting how to use sports or gym equipment
- confusing information or being unable to find the right words to describe the items they need.
- Problems with mobility, navigating around leisure centres or community sports clubs:
- Signage
- difficulty recognising places
- fear of getting lost.

These challenges are applicable to more people than just people living with dementia. It's why we say if something is dementia-friendly it's just a more accessible and welcoming environment for anyone. Dementia is not just about memory loss – it is a very multi-faceted condition. It can share many characteristics with other conditions, disabilities and impairments. This means that if you are dementia friendly and you get it right for people with dementia, you get it right for everyone.

Insights from people living with dementia since March 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact around the world. A key challenge this raised for everyone, but especially vulnerable people including those affected by dementia, was loss of stimulation, social contact, loneliness and reduced levels of physical activity due to lockdown measures and the postponement of services and activities.

People were advised against taking part in recreational and group activities in the community to protect their own health. People affected by dementia were advised to do more at home but were struggling to find meaningful activities to keep people engaged and active daily as part of their new routine.

Since March, we've worked closely with people affected by dementia to gather extensive and continuous insight, we found that the main challenges people faced were:

- Lack of ideas for how to keep moving at home

- Drop in confidence and motivation to do activities at home
- Health conditions preventing them being more active
- Perceived barriers to moving more.
- Anxieties heightening as lockdown started to ease

That gives you a snapshot of some of the barriers when it comes to physical activity for people living with dementia. But only once we've understood the barriers, we can support people to find ways to keep moving. People are often themselves surprised with what they can do and how much they enjoy it. It's always about focussing on what people can do and finding ways to adapt activities they already enjoy keeping them engaged and moving.

We Are Undefeatable

[We Are Undefeatable](#) is a national campaign to support the 43% of adults in England who live with at least one long-term health condition.

Launched in August 2019, it aims to help those with conditions such as diabetes, cancer, arthritis and Parkinson's to build physical activity into their lives. There's lot of older adults benefitting from the resources, tools and support being made available.

Alzheimer's Society is one of the charities collaborating to lead this campaign with 14 other leading health and social care charities and benefits from our expertise and insight, along with National Lottery funding.

We Are Undefeatable Insight

One in four people in England live with a long-term health condition, and those in this group are twice as likely to be inactive, despite evidence that being active can help manage many conditions and reduce the impact and severity of some symptoms.

Even small amounts of activity can make a significant difference to overall health and wellbeing.

The campaign's importance has also been thrown into light by the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, the resulting lockdown measures put in place and the impact it has had on the activity levels of people with a long-term health condition - more information on which can be found in our [report on coronavirus and activity levels](#).

Our research shows that:

- 69% of people living with long-term health conditions would like to be more active
- 66% say it would help manage or improve their condition, with improved mood and wellbeing seen as the biggest benefit (52%).
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of people with a long-term health condition feared that physical activity would make their health issues worse and two in five (44%) would like more help and advice on how to be more active.
- A quarter of people with a long-term health condition reported being afraid to leave the house as lockdown restrictions eased and that they wouldn't return to return to communal sport and leisure centres until there's a vaccine, or coronavirus is no longer a threat in the UK.

The survey of more than 1,000 adults also revealed that people with long-standing health concerns feel they face some unique barriers:

- Over a third of people (36%) cited lack of energy as the main barrier to increasing physical activity; two in five (40%) reported that pain caused by their health condition prevented them from increasing the amount of physical activity they do.
- Over a quarter (28%) of people with a long-term health condition reported that the unpredictable nature of their condition made it hard to commit to a routine.

People generally do want to do more but they might need more support to get started. It's important to reach out to organisations supporting older adults to start that conversation. Don't assume people don't want to do it or can't do it.

A National Covid resilience programme [report](#)

I've talked through some the insights from ourselves and the We Are Undefeatable campaign but there's some other great reports and reviews out there to give you an understanding of the current climate for older adults. A recent report from November 2020 looking at improving the health and wellbeing of older people during the pandemic was produced by Centre for Ageing Better and the Physiological Society is worth looking at.

After some polling with over 2000 over 50s, there were some key insights:

- When asked to compare their activity levels when the first lockdown ended to how they were pre-pandemic, 36% said their physical activity levels were lower. In over 75s, 42% said they were less active

Of those who have done less physical activity:

- 43% said they no longer have a reason/ have less of a reason to go outside and be physically active
- 29% have less motivation to exercise
- 32% are worried about catching Covid

Impact of Covid-19 on older people's physical health – slides from Age UK

Age UK conducted a recent survey looking at the impact of Covid-19 on older people's physical health. Of the older people Age UK spoke to who told us their sex, 278 were female and 78 were male. There were also 120 people who told us they were responding on behalf of an older female and 44 on behalf of an older male.

- Online survey promoted through Age UK networks (August 2020)
 - 569 responses (incl. 369 older people & 200 family/ informal carers)
 - 78% of respondents aged 65+ and 56% aged over 70
 - 70% of family respondents answering on behalf of someone 80+
 - 66% reported at least one long term condition
 - 22% had been advised to shield

Representative online poll older people (Kantar. Aug – Sept 2020)

- All respondents aged 60+ with nearly half over the age of 70
- 40% reported at least one long term condition

14% had been advised by the NHS they were 'extremely clinically vulnerable'

Some people have seen improvements in their physical health

- Some older people have used lockdown as an opportunity to improve their diet and do more exercise.
- This has improved their fitness and led to some people losing weight
- Reduced pollution in the air has also improved some older people's breathing

But many have seen their physical health decline...

We asked older people the extent to which they agree with a series of statements about how their health has changed since the start of the pandemic.

- 1 in 3 people agree they now have less energy
- 1 in 5 feel less steady on their feet
- 1 in 4 agree they can't walk as far as before
- 1 in 5 say they are less independent

Reduced ability to exercise and access community support

- Older people have not had access to the clubs, activities, and community support groups which help to keep them fit and well.
- This has been particularly challenging for older people with long-term conditions, many of whom have struggled to manage their health

Impact on mobility, balance, strength, and falls

- Older people have seen a decline in their strength, balance, and mobility.
- They are now finding it harder to walk and are more reliant on aids, such as walking sticks, than before.
- They are also finding every day activities around the house harder to complete and some are falling.
- Reductions in mobility are having a knock-on effect on older people's weight, mood, energy, and confidence.

Anxiety, loss of confidence, lack of motivation and energy

Anxiety and loss of confidence

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- Lack of motivation and energy
- Over a third of older people also agreed that they are feeling less motivated to do the things which they used to enjoy
- Older people have lost pleasure in life and don't have the motivation or energy to do the things they used to enjoy
- They are struggling to get out of bed and dressed. They have also stopped taking care of themselves, for example by not washing or eating.

We asked older people how their confidence in doing common activities had changed since the start of lockdown

- Two in five people feel less confident going to the shops
- Two in three are less confident using public transport
- One in four are less confident spending time with family
- One in five feel less confident going for short walks outside and one in five are less confident leaving the house by themselves
- Nearly half feel less confident going to a hospital appointment
- Two-fifths feel less confident going to a GP surgery

Those with health conditions or who have been shielding are significantly more likely to have lost confidence.

There's a lot of recent insight out there showing the challenges older people are facing now to keep active. I think we often underestimate the barriers older people face to get to the point of being active.

We know how important it is to find ways to support people to keep active, before March there were a lot of older people out there with dementia and other long-term health conditions that were finding ways to be active. It was so important to people not just in terms of their physical health, but also their general wellbeing with the social aspect of activities being such a key part of it. We need to find ways to support people to continue to do things now and find ways to bring people back into the community when it's safe to do so.

What can you do today?

- Don't underestimate the impact you can have!
- Make connections with organisations that support older adults
- Use insight
- Signpost people to resources and information

Loneliness and social isolation are things that have recently been amplified in older adults. I've personally heard so many stories where an activity group for 30 minutes

a week can be a lifeline for older people. It's something for people to look forward to, motivates them and keeps them engaged with the community and others around them.

Small things can make a big difference to older people living with dementia and other long-term health conditions so I hope this gives you ideas about how you can go and support people.

Useful links:

www.alzheimers.org.uk/sport

www.alzheimers.org.uk/active

[Visit the We Are Undefeatable pages for resources and information](#)

[Age UK advice for keeping well this winter](#)