

# LOCKDOWN RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION



# LOCKDOWN RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

## Background

In every aspect, the Coronavirus lockdown and self-isolation situation has been a major disruptor to people's lives and evidence has shown that women are especially impacted. It has resulted in a re-setting of priorities and what is valued, as well as the increased realisation of the importance of social contact. Many of these changes will forge new meaning for the future.

In addition, with only one opportunity for outdoor exercise a day, people had to rethink the way in which they kept active. This has generated a surge of online offerings and evidence of real creativity. What we can learn from this, particularly in terms of what people find motivating or not is how to sustain interest in exercise and physical activity for the future. The unique circumstance of lockdown provides insight for future approaches.

## Aims & Methodology

Women in Sport looked to understand the impact on women across the life-stages and undertook a deep dive into 22 women's lives during lockdown through online interviewing, then following several women for a month via Facebook posts. Additionally, we ran a representative survey of 100 women (18-64 years) in the UK and considered our in-depth understanding alongside these more quantitative findings from various larger external surveys during lockdown for context and scale.

22 x depth interviews (18 x video/4 x phone) with women aged 18-70+

### YOUNG W/OUT KIDS

Age 18-34  
Mix of Live with parents, house share (peers/other), Live with partner

N=6

### FAMILY

Kids age 0-18, living at home  
Split single and married/cohabiting

N=8

### EMPTYNESTER

Age 55 - 69/Kids age 18+  
Split living alone and with partner

N=4

### LATER LIFE

Age 70+  
Split living alone and with partner  
All active prior to lockdown

N=4

Per lifestage, half **active** and half **inactive** prior to lockdown (all elders active)  
**Inactive** to have increased activity  
**Active** to have decreased or changed activity

**Mix of:**  
Key worker  
Working at home  
Furloughed  
Retired

National sample including urban, suburban and rural  
Mix of ethnicity and SEG

Core

To tell the story for women and understand how this has impacted their lives and activity levels, this report will consider the findings within four broad areas. It will provide some thoughts on how this insight could help us respond effectively to the new normal and ensure that women are able to return to pre-lockdown activity levels as quickly as possible.

### 1. SNAPSHOT OF WOMEN'S LIVES DURING LOCKDOWN:

Key tensions and impacts.

### 2. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ON SPORT AND EXERCISE:

A snapshot of the wider impact on status, perceptions and motivations to participate in sport and exercise.

### 3. RETURNING TO THE NEW NORMAL:

How exercise in a world that may not return 'to normal' can be successfully managed and what we need to anticipate for women.

### 4. LEVERAGING THE VALUE OF SPORT:

Discovery, realisation and changes to the broader value of exercise during lockdown and opportunities we can tap into.

# 1 SNAPSHOT OF WOMEN'S LIVES DURING LOCKDOWN

**Beyond immediate medical implications of the virus which have disproportionately affected men, the impact of COVID-19 has been felt harder by women in many areas of life.**

Anxiety levels for women were shown to have increased much more significantly than for men with multiple studies throughout lockdown pointing to this fact. A study by the Fawcett Society and IPSOS Mori in mid-April found that six out of 10 women said they were finding it hard to stay positive day-to-day, compared with just under half of men. We also observed an amplification in gender stereotypes with the responsibility for childcare and managing the household landing disproportionately on women's shoulders. Women in Sport's research indicated that two life-stages were particularly impacted by the changes brought about by the pandemic and lockdown. The biggest impact we observed was for women with children and older women - those over 70 years old.

**Mums were struggling to juggle home school, jobs, cooking and cleaning, and were more likely to do these tasks than their male partners [all those we interviewed were in heterosexual relationships].** An Institute for Fiscal Studies report found this is a widespread reality for mothers in the UK. Mothers working at home during the lockdown were 50% more likely to be interrupted than fathers, even if the mother earned more than the father. The starkest gender divide was amongst mothers earning £20,000 or less. We know that childcare is a barrier that keeps women from taking part in sport and exercise generally, and with family support systems not accessible due to shielding or social distancing, and school return dates and processes still unclear, women will have even less time to prioritise their own activities, such as exercise.

**The other group highlighted in our research was older women, in their 70s and 80s, who were concerned that their lack of activity during lockdown would have significant, irreversible impacts on their long-term health.** We already know that although women live longer, they have a shorter 'healthy' life expectancy than men. They told us that exercise helped them maintain both their physical and cognitive capabilities and were worried that this prolonged period without exercise would result in a decline.

Many of these women have had to shield because of their age or underlying health conditions. They have also been frightened by the media narrative around the risk for older people and some are reticent to go out. Furthermore, they usually exercised with others and were motivated by the social element. Women on their own are particularly vulnerable.

**As much as nobody wants the lockdown, people are also recognising the positives.** It has been a significant time of reappraisal for many and a reset of what is important to them. Many are hopeful that society will change for the better and life will be able to go at a slower pace, and there will be more time to focus on what is important in terms of human relationships and family, but unsure how this will work once the pace of life picks up again.

“I was never meant to be a mum that stays home 24/7. I liked the kids going off and having a break.”

- FAMILY

“I don't feel as though I am living at all, I'm just existing. I feel I'm just killing time.”

- LATER LIFE

“It's quite difficult every day to think, this is it, this is your life, seeing no one unless you go out for your walk.”

- LATER LIFE

“I will miss this time, as much as I want things to go back to normal.”

- FAMILY

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SPORT & EXERCISE

## 2.1. Newly elevated status of physical activity as a daily essential for life

The government communicated a powerful yet simple message throughout the coronavirus pandemic which has landed with the public. With sport and exercise being named as one of the five legitimate reasons to go out of the house during lockdown, it has been elevated to one of the essentials of life, reframed and given regular status as an important 'once a day' activity.

This messaging has had an impact on the perceived value of sport and exercise, particularly to women who previously did not prioritise being active. It has clearly also helped some form a new habit, which could be sustained for the future. In our survey of 100 women, 4 out of 10 said that physical exercise had become more of a priority in their lives during lockdown and 6 out of 10 said that they would put more effort into being fit and active after lockdown.

This elevated status for exercise has signalled sport and exercise as essential for all, but has particular resonance for women and girls, who are significantly less active than men from a young age. Although the gap has been narrowing in recent years, there is still a way to go, as limited opportunities, low expectations and gender stereotypes persist, and continue to act as barriers to taking part in sport and exercise. We want to continue closing the gap.

**It is crucial we look to capitalise on this significant re-evaluation and the perception of sport and exercise as a daily essential for life. Also, to identify ways women can continue to prioritise sport and exercise once the usual pace of life returns.**

## 2.2. Strong links forged with exercise and the outdoors, freedom, wellbeing and mental health

**"At my age it's very important to be as mobile as you can. It enhances your mood and lifts your spirit."**

- LATER LIFE

Taking daily exercise has provided the opportunity to go outdoors, enjoy the fresh air and have time away from others and, importantly, has helped underline the mental health and wellbeing benefits of being active and connecting with nature. New habits have been established and we heard from many that the daily walk had become a regular part of the structure of their day. Both cycling and walking for leisure have increased during lockdown, with women talking about the 'feel good' factor derived from these and rediscovering the pleasure of taking exercise outdoors.

Whilst relevant to all, these benefits have been particularly important for women during lockdown, as we have seen anxiety levels increase, especially amongst mothers. Mothers have taken on the majority of the additional responsibilities resulting from lockdown: home-schooling and supporting the emotional health of their family, often alongside work. For older women, exercise has provided both structure and mental health benefits in the form of stress relief for them.

**There is a big difference between rational knowledge of the mental health benefits of exercise and experiencing them first-hand as so many more people have during lockdown. This, along with the links forged with outdoor exercise and nature, provides a strong foundation for motivation and new initiatives post-lockdown, particularly for women who did not prioritise physical activity previously.**

**"It's part of the everyday thing I do every day now."**

- LATER LIFE

**In our survey of 100 women:**

**46%** said taking physical exercise has become more of a priority in their life.

**61%** said they will put more effort into being fit and active after the lockdown is over.

Source: Lockdown research  
- Fastuna (Nat. Rep. women age 18-64 years)

**"Going on a nice long walk does make you feel good. It's a good stress reliever."**

- YOUNG W/OUT KIDS

**"[Exercise] helps me feel better if I'm feeling bad, it clears me out a bit mentally."**

- YOUNG W/OUT KIDS

**45%** said they were struggling to keep their spirits up and feel positive.

Source: Lockdown research -  
Fastuna (women age 18-64 years)

### 2.3. Heightened awareness of the fun of families getting active together

As new habits have been established and integrated into everyday life, we have also seen an increase in families finding ways of getting active together.

Social distancing and the need to connect only with household members, has encouraged more family activities across genders and generations. This active fun time together may not have naturally taken place pre-lockdown.

For some people this has opened their eyes to what can be done together across age groups. It has provided mutual support within families to be healthier and facilitated opportunities to talk to and support each other. Mothers of teenage daughters said that lockdown had enabled them to spend valuable time together and that this had made them rethink how to continue connecting with their daughters post-lockdown. Our previous work with teenage girls pointed us in this direction as they were looking for a less judgemental space to exercise.

**Encouraging family members to support one another to be active and to be active together is a rich area to build on post-lockdown. Accessible initiatives which cater for a wide range of abilities and are fun across age groups may prove successful.**

### 2.4. Homeworking has enabled exercise to be more easily built into the working day

**“It’s easier to keep fit more now because I’ve got more time. That’s nice, to have that choice.”**

- YOUNG W/OUT KIDS

Working life changed significantly for many during lockdown. Many workers who had been furloughed (placed on the government’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) found a slower pace of life provided space to focus on themselves and the family. For those working at home, the reduction in commuting time and often more flexibility in their days opened up both time and opportunity to get active. We heard that time to exercise was much more easily integrated into the working day as a reason to take a break or get out in the fresh air and very much enjoyed.

We also heard that being able to wear sports clothes whilst working, made for a much easier transition from desk to activity during the day. Also, the accessibility of simple activities such as walking, running, cycling and online classes which did not require specific timetabling and could be done individually, worked particularly well.

Prior to lockdown, if exercise was restricted to a before or after work activity, tiredness and lack of time would often prevent women from taking part. However, for women with childcare responsibilities, being in a separate workspace also provided important child-free time which was harder to find in lockdown.

“We’ve been given an opportunity to do things differently.”

- FAMILY

“I would use work as an excuse before for not exercising.”

- FAMILY



I wasn't doing any of those activities before lockdown and haven't taken them up, however I have got into the routine of taking a daily walk which I intend to continue post-lockdown as I feel much better for it.

Like · Reply · 3w

that's interesting. You think you'll build that into your day going forwards? Would you still walk in your own or with friends?

Like · Reply · 3w

I certainly hope so, though this may become more challenging when I am no longer working from home and have to factor in my commute (which can be up to an hour each way). Also more challenging in the winter when it will be dark after work. My partner and I go walking together and we would hope to continue with this.

As a result of the pandemic working patterns in many sectors are likely to alter substantially with an increase in the proportion of time people work from home. Employers are also likely to focus on ways to maintain the mental and physical health of their workforce, not just to protect against the virus but to build underlying resilience.

Firms may gain competitive advantage by changing their expectations and encouraging exercise to be built in as a daily habit within the working day.

## 2.5. Increased recognition that everyday activities contribute to overall fitness levels

**“I try to walk up the stairs instead of taking the lift...it’s prompted me to do it. Made me think. You are consciously thinking about doing a little bit more.”**

- LATER LIFE

For many, being confined to the home during lockdown has led to significantly less incidental movement in day-to-day life. There was a sudden stop to most shopping, going to work, walking kids to school and being out and about generally. For many women this unconscious but regular activity contributes significantly to achieving the recommended 150 minutes/week of desired exercise.

We observed that women became much more aware of missing this type of day-to-day activity during lockdown and its impact on their fitness levels. Some, as a result, took conscious steps to build in more vigorous movement into everyday tasks such as gardening, cleaning and walking, choosing to walk upstairs rather than take lifts and escalators.

The fear and difficulty in taking public transport during lockdown also encouraged women to choose walking and cycling as alternatives for shorter journeys and this resulted in some recognising that this was in fact a credible alternative for them.

**This increased awareness amongst women of the significant contribution of everyday activity to their overall fitness and health can prime initiatives post lockdown. This will aid those organisations looking to encourage more movement and activity in everyday life, through active travel and making time to walk rather than drive. It will be important to evaluate whether our infrastructure is fit for purpose in this respect, and whether it effectively supports the less confident to take this step.**

“Whereas before I’d hop on the bus, now I am walking everywhere.”

- EMPTYNESTER



# RETURNING TO THE NEW NORMAL

## The Challenges and Opportunities

### 3.1. Falling women's activity levels during lockdown may prove hard to reverse

Women in Sport is concerned that the lockdown could potentially have a long-term impact on women's activity levels, with steady gains over the past two years potentially being reversed. Worryingly, although activity levels for all have declined during lockdown, women's activity levels have declined at a much faster rate than men's and we see the gender gap widening once more.

According to Sport England data collected on a weekly basis across April and May 2020, women's average activity levels declined during lockdown; at its worst, the gap between men and women was 10%, with only 28% of women (compared to 38% of men) meeting weekly activity guidelines of 150 minutes per week.

Our in-depth interviews and our survey both told us that women themselves were clearly worried about being able to re-establish their previous levels of physical activity post lockdown, with 39% of women concerned that losing their fitness would have a long-term impact, and a quarter of women feeling it would be really hard to get back into the habit of sport and exercise again. This was particularly true of mothers because of limitations on time and support and older women because of their age and the difficulty in regaining fitness once lost.

**Given there is a resurgence in the desire of women to become more physically active, it is important to address any new barriers arising from the lockdown. As a starting point we must understand why regaining previous activity levels is a concern for women.**

### 3.2. Effort to re-establish fitness and ability to re-establish time to take part could impact return to participation

For some women, their ability to carve out the time for regular physical activity was lost during lockdown and it could be hard to regain, given the effort required to establish it in the first place. This is especially true for mothers; whose traditional childcare options of grandparents and school were both impacted by Covid-19 restrictions. The uncertain nature of the pandemic and associated risk of ongoing school closures combined with the need to protect older generations from the disease, makes it likely that some mothers will be reluctant to make a renewed effort to carve out time and prioritise their own needs for many months yet. Furthermore, there appeared to be an amplification of gender stereotypical behaviour in traditional families.

Many women have taken on disproportionate responsibility for childcare, home-schooling and family, often alongside working. Women dealing with an unequal burden of extra tasks are left very little time to prioritise themselves and their own wellbeing.

Another real concern for women is how to regain the fitness lost and re-ignite the motivation and commitment required to build back to previous levels, which can feel daunting. This is particularly true for older women where the time out from physical activity can leave them feeling they may have lost their fitness for good, and their increased isolation and terrifying newsreels are likely to have lowered their mood and reduced their supplies of positive energy.

**"I'd be very sluggish and less inclined to do exercise if I didn't keep it up. My legs would ache and it would be very detrimental to me."**

- LATER LIFE

**39%** of women surveyed were concerned that losing their fitness would have a long-term impact.

Source: Lockdown research  
- Fastuna (Nat. Rep. women age 18-64 years)

**"It took me ages to get to the routine I have. I have now been out of that for a month and worry about being able to rebuild it."**

- FAMILY

**32%** of women couldn't prioritise exercise during lockdown as they had too much to do for others.

Source: Lockdown research  
- Fastuna (Nat. Rep. women age 18-64 years)

**It is essential we raise the profile of the value to mothers and to society of putting themselves higher up the pecking order at home. We need to support women to help them to prioritise time for themselves so exercise can be an important daily component of their lives. This is especially important in light of their increased burden of responsibility as an upsurge in traditional gender roles combines with a reduction in childcare options for the foreseeable future.**

**Society owes women in later life a great debt. They have lived their younger lives in an era of even greater gender inequality and deserve real support in the coming months and years as they battle to restore themselves to better physical health and wellbeing. We need to be creative in finding ways forward informed by the needs of women of this life stage.**

### **3.3. Returning to usual activities could be limited by both fear and lack of availability**

In general, women have suffered higher anxiety about the impact of Covid-19 and this has been particularly prevalent amongst women in later life, who have needed to shield because of their own vulnerability or that of their elderly partners who are mostly older men and at high risk from the disease. The direct risks from the virus are even more pronounced amongst women of colour and their relatives.

The most popular activities for women pre-lockdown were exercise and fitness classes, swimming, and gym-based classes. We know from Sport England Active Lives Survey that 20% of women attended exercise classes pre-lockdown and that women account for around eight in ten participants in such classes. These types of activities are also affordable and available in urban areas.

As primarily indoor activities, these have been the slowest to re-open post lockdown and as they start to re-open social distancing restrictions may limit capacity. Even where facilities re-open, many women are likely to be anxious about returning. This combination of circumstances creates yet another barrier to women returning to fitness quickly.

**Popular and affordable activities, such as exercise classes, gym sessions and swimming must be made available safely as soon as possible. This is particularly important in less affluent urban areas where options to get active are limited and leisure centre activities are important to the community. With increased urgency to build the underlying health and resilience of the nation, we need to ensure women are not disadvantaged and that affordable options, such as these, are available.**

### **3.4 A decline in self-confidence and increase in self-consciousness could act as barriers**

The less diverse and, for some, more stressful lifestyle of lockdown has led to an increase in food and alcohol consumption and less healthy living generally which will contribute to declining fitness levels and require increased effort to regain. Almost six out of ten women thought they were eating more than normal and three out of ten drinking more than usual. We know from previous insight work that weight gain and low fitness can lead to a decrease in self-confidence, body-image perceptions and self-esteem, all recognised barriers for women to avoid taking exercise which can become a downward spiral. At the same time, risks related to obesity, poor health and contracting the virus have been highlighted, with a new degree of comprehension and fear linked to this. Awareness of the importance of maintaining underlying good health as protection against serious illness and complications has never been so evident. This could provide the motivation and urgency to put effort into regaining fitness.

**For those women who have lost the exercise habit, we should consider how to actively help them to kick-start their fitness, providing both opportunity and support to overcome barriers. Heightened awareness of the risks of poor health and obesity may not be enough, and additional triggers may be needed.**

**58%** of women were eating more than usual.

**30%** of women were drinking more alcohol than usual.

# 4 LEVERAGING THE VALUE OF SPORT

## Reshaping sport and exercise for women in the future

### 4.1. What we have learnt from seeing women deprived of their usual choice of sport and exercise

During lockdown we have seen that the exercise journey is a very personal one. Contact with others face-to-face has been limited so decisions have been internally driven. This has provided further insights into what motivates women to take exercise and want to continue to do so.

During lockdown we have observed that several important influences have been lost, particularly a) making women feel included and valued through personalised contact, recognition and lines of communication (\*Belonging); b) The reward of socialising and bonding through participation with others (\*Togetherness) and c) Helping heighten personal progress and bringing out the external rewards of taking part (\*Internalise) has a detrimental impact behaviour over time. (\* Women in Sport Spheres of Influence model).

We found that women previously engaged with regular physical activity miss their usual activities and have struggled to replicate these in lockdown. Many of those who were active before lockdown and took part regularly in organised sport or activities were clearly less satisfied with their limited lockdown activity. The new options available could not truly replace what they had before, not least in terms of exercise intensity, social connection and having fun. This deprivation from their usual activity helped these women to understand their underlying motivations, and what had prompted and sustained participation for them.

### 4.2. Intensity and movement are different. Both are important but not interchangeable

**“I’m probably doing as much activity over the course of a day but it’s the impact levels. I don’t get the impact as from my aerobics.”**

- LATER LIFE

The younger women particularly, were more focused on the physical workout and being unable to achieve the same intensity as the activity they did previously. Walking was considered good for mental health but not really seen as a workout that increased your heart rate. This was particularly true of those taking part in vigorous exercise pre-lockdown, such as gym work, exercise classes or sports where progression, was central to the experience. A significantly restricted choice in what they could do, made taking part less enjoyable and motivation harder to sustain. They simply could not achieve the same buzz with more gentle activities, such as walking, as their usual activity.

Online exercise classes were novel at first but proved harder to maintain long-term for many, as they were easy to stop, less rewarding to do, and involved no feedback from the trainer or connection with others in the class. Ultimately, for some it began to feel like something you forced yourself to do because it was good for you, rather than something to enjoy. Live classes proved a little more involving than pre-recorded videos, but even then, focus levels were hard to maintain for many over time.

**There is room to recognise and talk to the different intensity levels that activities can bring from walking for leisure to the higher impact achieved through organised exercise classes and sports participation. All play a role in maintaining fitness. A fusion of online exercise being a format option for local classes could address some of the issues anonymity brings to motivation and feedback.**

“I haven’t been able to find something that I really want to do.”

- FAMILY

“You can’t get the same feeling as you do in the gym. I can’t do what I’m used to doing so I think what’s the point if I can’t do it right.”

- FAMILY

### 4.3. Taking part with others is an important underpinning motivation and sustains participation ‘Togetherness’

Taking part in sport or exercise with others and the social reward it delivers, emerged as very important for many women across the age groups and this was severely missed during lockdown.

A sense of togetherness and sociability served as a motivation to join an activity in the first place, as well as a reason to keep attending. For older women in particular, the social aspect was crucial. Meeting up for walks with a group of friends was central to the experience and very different to walking on your own during lockdown. Without friends to talk to, walking was significantly less enjoyable.

Older women also felt more vulnerable and much less confident about walking in open spaces and so tended to stick to the streets, which was less relaxing and less rewarding than more natural space.

**“I’m trying to go out for a walk every day, but I find it really hard to motivate myself to go on my own because, we’ve got a lot of open spaces where I live and I daren’t go on my own.”**

- LATER LIFE

**The social reward of participating together with others and the reduced isolation provides an important external motivator, which could be leveraged post lockdown, especially to encourage taking up an activity for those previously inactive.**

### 4.4. Self-challenge and a feeling of personal progress is valuable in sustaining participation particularly for individual activities ‘Progression’ & ‘Internalise’

There were some interesting success stories particularly when exercise provided an element of self-challenge, such as ‘Couch to 5K’, where achievable goals were set and progress evident. Also having an end goal to work towards helped maintain motivation, regular participation and purpose, particularly as an individual activity. We recognise this as an important influence identified in the Women in Sport’s Sphere of Influence Model, particularly at entry level for women who are looking to kick-start a new activity which requires effort and commitment.



**Georgia Maurice** *Li Pinz* I've nearly completed couch to 5k - something I never thought I'd achieve before! My sister and I are also playing

**Barney Marshall** *Li Pinz* - It's a really gentle process using interval training, rest breaks and increased times throughout the 9 weeks. I strongly dislike running (and still do) but am able to run for a longer amount of time and with greater ease since doing this. I... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 4w · Edited

**Georgia Maurice** *Li Pinz* I would say to trust the programme! There were definitely moments when before the run I'd think "I can't run for 8 mins" but the programme is designed by professionals who know how to get you running! And you 100% can do it - it's a mind over matter situation!!

Like · Reply · 4w



**“It’s the social part of it. I look forward to going as I’ve got some really good friends from it now.”**

- LATER LIFE

**“I did walk a lot. I am in three different walking groups and Monday to Friday I was never in the house all day – then a coffee morning and then out to lunch. I do miss it!”**

- LATER LIFE

**Building in progression and realistic goals to indicate personal achievement together with praise and recognition, particularly in entry level programmes, can help sustain motivation.**

#### 4.5. Opportunity to reactivate the feel-good factor amongst women who were previously less active.

Less active women have experienced the benefits of taking regular exercise and felt more productive and positive.

Importantly this has raised its value and importance to them personally, first-hand as they start to feel better both physically and psychologically. The simplicity of taking exercise through walking, running and cycling has also helped make exercise easier to take up, providing a kick-start to fitness. However, several raise the concern of being able to continue post lockdown as previous barriers of being tired and lacking time will return with the faster pace of life. New habits have been established and integrated into everyday lives, which could quickly disappear if not nurtured and supported. This presents an important opportunity to build on the foundations established during lockdown but will rely on reactivating the feel-good factor before this is forgotten and providing easy to access opportunities to get active within the time they have.

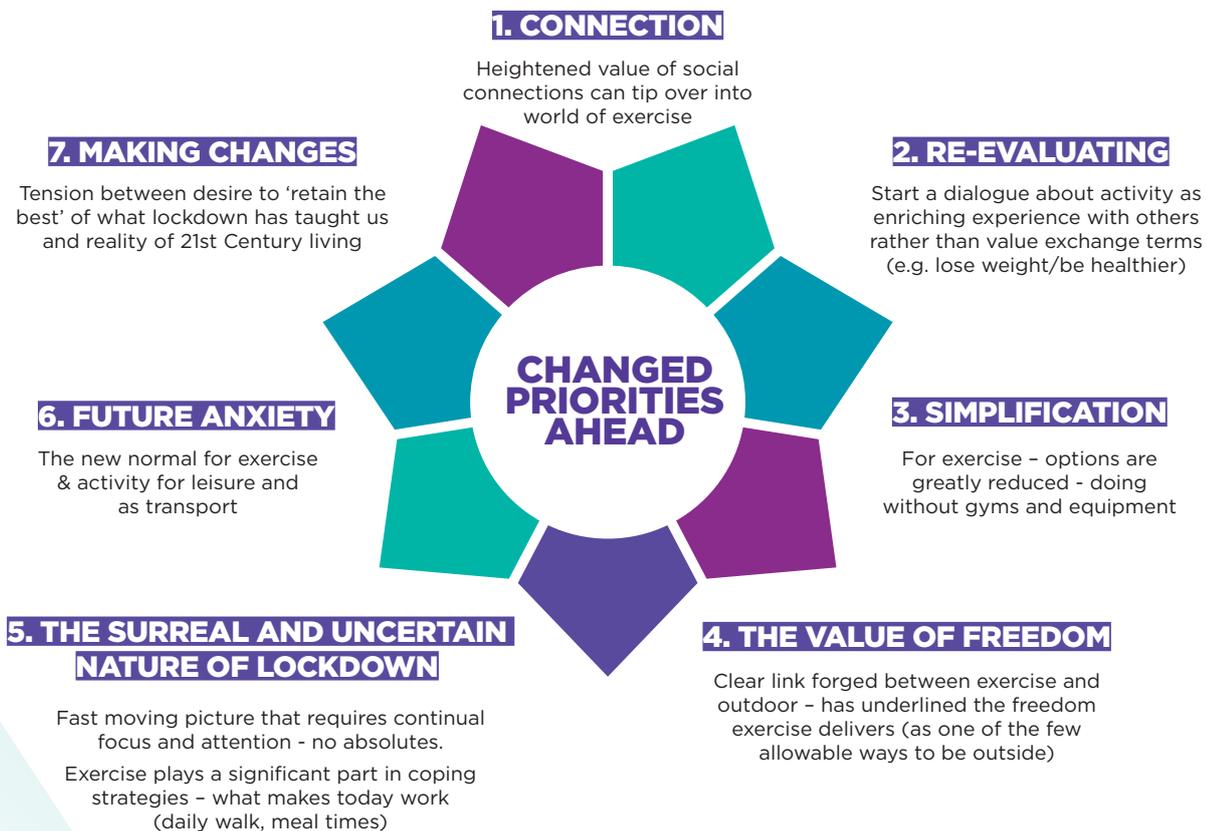
**There is a window of opportunity to capitalise on this good intention to continue exercising post lockdown, whilst the ‘feel good’ factor is still fresh in women’s minds having felt the benefits first-hand.**

“I would like to be more active but the only way I could do it would be to cut back on my hours at work.”

- FAMILY

#### 4.6. Shift in values with long-term resonance for sport and exercise

At a deeper level we observed several shifts and changes in what women valued in life and how they wanted to operate in the future post Covid-19. This provides a new context in which to encourage sport and exercise. New appreciation for freedoms, nature and social connection and importance of health create a potentially motivating landscape and becomes about a more accessible entry point with which we frame engagement with sport and exercise for women.



## 1) CONNECTION:

There is a heightened value being placed on social connections. Deprivation of face-to-face contact brings the importance of relationships into sharp focus and brings recognition of how much contact with friends and family matters. It has also led to women forging closer connections with the immediate community, often through Whatsapp groups, to provide support networks for each other during the pandemic. Clapping for Carers on Thursday evenings also brought neighbours closer. Lockdown policy has put people's lives and health above the economy for a period and has emphasised that human connections, not 'stuff' are important above all else.

**Implication for physical activity: Sport and exercise has significant value for many as a way to connect and socialise with others. The bringing together of communities through social media and the value given to supporting others could provide an interesting link for locally based activity initiatives.**

## 2) RE-EVALUATING:

**"I'd like to reduce my hours when we go back. I don't want to sacrifice the time with my kids in the same way."**

- FAMILY

There has been significant re-evaluation and rethinking of priorities and values. Some women are experiencing a slower pace of life and gaining a different perspective. There has been time to build new dimensions to relationships with family members. As the importance of connection increases, pursuit of material goods feels less motivating. This challenges over-consumption and waste and increases the value of experience and time spent together.

**Implication for physical activity: A natural time of reappraisal supports women to make significant on-going changes to their lives at home and at work and an opportunity for physical activity to become more central and potentially more family based. Also, this provides the opportunity to start a dialogue about activity as an enriching experience with others rather than value exchange terms e.g. to lose weight.**

## 3) SIMPLIFICATION:

An enforced slow down and increase in available time for many has taken us to a 'simpler time' where households eat together, talk to each other more and connect with our communities. For younger women new simplicity was all about removal of expectation of pace, removal of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and developing new habits. For older people it was a return to how life used to be, against a backdrop of enabling technology and revisiting lost rituals.

**Implication for physical activity: Exercise options have been greatly reduced and this has proved particularly successful with the previously less-active women, enabling them easily to make very simple choices and get active through walking, cycling and running. Making it simpler could be a good mechanism for the future.**

## 4) THE VALUE OF FREEDOM:

Being deprived of free movement and choice has created a new appreciation and understanding of the value of the liberty and that we have largely taken this for granted. The ability to be spontaneous is hugely missed and outdoors and nature have been appreciated like never before. Women are enthusiastic about returning to what they were able to do - where I want - when I want and with whom I want.

**Implications for physical activity: Clear link forged between exercise and outdoor - has underlined the freedom exercise and potentially spontaneous it delivers. This provides a strong emotional driver for doing outdoor activities and sports.**

**FF**  
I'll value seeing friends and family more. I think everybody took that for granted, and that whole thing of cancelling plans. I don't think I'll be doing that for a while!"

- YOUNG W/OUT KIDS

## 5) THE SURREAL AND UNCERTAIN NATURE OF LOCKDOWN:

The pandemic situation is truly incredible, and no one has any frame of reference for the current reality or any vision of the future with 'unprecedented' the most commonly heard word! It is a fast-moving picture that requires continual focus and attention with no absolutes.

Not knowing when or how lockdown will end and what the new normal will be is stressful and draining.

**Implications for physical activity:** Exercise has played a significant part as a coping strategy in an unsettling time, with the day often structured around the 'daily walk'. It is hard to 'look forward' as we don't know how the new normal will look. Important to have contingency plans for a potential second spike and a further lockdown. We need to be able to react quickly and learn from this in keeping women exercising and adapting to change.

## 6) FUTURE ANXIETY:

**"It's in the back of your mind. What if someone I know gets it, what if this goes on for months and months, what will be the impact on financial situation, jobs?"**

- YOUNG W/OUT KIDS

People want lockdown to end but are anxious about re-entering society and what might happen. High level of concern about second spike

- ▶ Personal safety risks (especially physically vulnerable and elders)
- ▶ Children returning to schools (Mums)
- ▶ Infection risk
- ▶ Separation anxiety
- ▶ Public transport petri dish

**Implications for physical activity:** Exercise is a great antidote to anxiety providing stress relief and mental health benefits. The increased awareness of fitness and health as being central to improving resilience could have traction. Also, the desire to avoid crowded places could make active travel much more appealing.

## 7) MAKING CHANGES:

**"I still want time for myself after this. I think things will go back to normal but with a better understanding of each other."**

- FAMILY

There is a challenge in retaining the positives of lockdown when the wheels start turning again and recognition that certain things will change for good and may never be the same again.

**Implications for physical activity:** There is a tension between the desire to 'retain the best' of what lockdown has taught us and the reality of 21st century living. This may have a lasting impact on how sport and activities are perceived and how they evolve. This different mindset provides a window of opportunity for changing existing habits permanently.

# WHAT NEXT?

**As we come out of lockdown the future is uncertain. Returning to the 'way it was' may never happen and there will inevitably be periods of increased risk and anxiety.**

However, there is also a clear window of opportunity to tap into the elevated importance and changed mindset around exercise and physical activity and use this to kick-start a step change in activity levels, no longer accepting the gender gap which leaves women less active than men throughout their lives.

As we learn from the experiences for women during lockdown, as a society, we must:

- ▶ Be committed to raising activity levels for all, regardless of gender, circumstance or life-stage and actively support women to prioritise time to keep fit and healthy, recognising this as a fundamental need for life.
- ▶ Be better equipped to manage access to physical activity during times of restrictions, particularly considering the wider needs for women in different life-stages, social circumstances and situations so they are not disadvantaged.
- ▶ Be pro-active in providing easy to access activities which work for women as circumstances improve, ensuring that opportunities and alternatives are widely available and that women feel safe to return.

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