



Moving the world: Why physical activity is at the heart of Self-Care 2030

Details



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Bio

David Skinner is President of the International Self-care Foundation (ISF).

Collaborators

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Further reading

Skinner, D, Ntoumanis, N, and El-Osta, A, (2025) Self-Care 2030: Transforming health through physical activity. Insights Report, Volume 3.



Moving the world

Why physical activity is at the heart of Self-Care 2030

- Physical inactivity is a leading cause of preventable death globally.
- Healthcare systems are struggling with the burden of sedentary lifestyles.
- The Self-Care 2030: Physical Activity Insights Report makes the case for urgent action.
- It identifies key barriers, offers behavioural insights and outlines sustainable interventions.
- Physical activity is not optional; it is foundational to future health and an indispensable pillar of self-care.

We live in an era of contradiction. Wearable technologies track our every step, fitness apps nudge us to move, and countless campaigns tout the benefits of exercise. Yet, physical inactivity is one of the most pressing global health concerns. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that nearly one in three adults and four in five adolescents do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity. As the effects accumulate in the form of chronic disease, mental distress, and soaring healthcare costs, the tension between what we know and how we behave becomes harder to ignore.

Into this space steps the International Self-Care Foundation (ISF), a charitable organisation dedicated to promoting self-care as a global health strategy. Its latest publication, *Self-Care 2030: Transforming Health Through Physical Activity*, is the third in its seven-part Insights Report series. Drawing on the latest behavioural science, public health data, and policy analysis, the report argues that physical activity is not simply beneficial; it is essential to public health. It must be understood not as a lifestyle choice but as a foundation for wellbeing.

Professor Nikos Ntoumanis, Co-Director of the Danish Centre for Motivation and Behaviour Science and co-author of the report, emphasises that 'reframing physical activity as a natural component of daily living rather than another obligation' opens new, more inclusive pathways to participation. Dr Austen El-Osta, Director of the Self-Care Academic Research

Unit (SCARU), underlines the urgency: 'Physical activity is not an optional extra. It is a vital act of self-care and a public health imperative for a healthier, more resilient world.'

A global culture of sedentary living

The evidence supporting the benefits of physical activity is overwhelming. Regular movement promotes cardiovascular health, strengthens muscles and bones, improves metabolic function, and extends life expectancy. Just as significantly, it enhances mood, sharpens focus, and reduces the risk of depression and anxiety. Physical activity protects cognitive function, supports quality sleep, and helps regulate stress. It

can improve educational outcomes and preserve independence in older age. These benefits are well known. The challenge, then, lies elsewhere.

Despite awareness, a global culture of sedentary living persists. People sit more, move less, and often struggle to convert intention into action. According to the latest ISF report, this is not a failure of knowledge but rather a failure of opportunity and support. Using the COM-B model of behaviour change, the report explores the interplay between capability, opportunity, and motivation. Too many people, it argues, lack the time, safe environments, or encouragement to be active. Cultural norms, long working hours, urban design, and inadequate infrastructure all contribute to the problem. In this way, physical inactivity is less an individual failing than a systemic one.

This framing is vital as it shifts the narrative from blame to empowerment. The report highlights practical interventions that can support sustained physical activity. These range from local infrastructure changes and school-based programmes to using fitness apps, social support networks, and workplace movement initiatives. Behaviour change techniques such as goal setting and habit stacking are shown to be particularly effective. Notably, short bursts of 'activity throughout the day' – so-called micro-exercise or 'exercise snacks' – offer

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Movement must become part of how we live, not just something we do.

significant benefits, especially for those with time or mobility constraints.

These interventions are more effective when grounded in context. For example, the report highlights policies that support walkable neighbourhoods, provide subsidies for community fitness programmes, and encourage workplace wellness initiatives. In education, it recommends that schools prioritise physical literacy over competitive sports, embedding movement into everyday classroom activities. The report also cites successful examples of social prescribing, where clinicians encourage physical activity as part of treatment for chronic diseases or mental health conditions. In each case, the emphasis is on real-world relevance and fostering long-term habits.

Embedding movement

ISF is particularly interested in embedding movement across the life course. In children, it supports physical development, social skills, and academic performance. In adults, it improves resilience, reduces stress, and

friendly. Schools will blend learning and movement. Workplaces will encourage active breaks. Meanwhile, technology will assume a larger role. AI-driven fitness plans, virtual reality workouts, and biometric feedback systems promise to personalise activity, enhance motivation, and reduce barriers. However, the report also warns against a widening digital divide. Equity, it emphasises, must remain central.

Bridging the divide

Technology alone cannot bridge the digital divide unless it is accessible and relevant. The report warns that without safeguards, digital tools may reinforce inequalities by favouring already active or affluent users. Instead, it calls for inclusive design and targeted outreach, particularly for individuals in low-income, rural, or disabled communities. It is not merely a matter of innovation but of intention.

David Skinner, ISF President frames the issue plainly: 'To create a healthier, more resilient world, movement must become part of how

Like previous volumes in the Self-Care 2030 series, the report adopts a future-focused perspective.

lowers the risk of chronic conditions. In older people, it preserves mobility, prevents frailty, and enhances mental health. These stages are not isolated; they are cumulative. Habits formed early tend to persist. Gaps in activity, meanwhile, can have long-term effects.

Like previous volumes in the Self-Care 2030 series, the report adopts a future-focused perspective. It envisions a world where physical activity is seamlessly integrated into everyday life. Cities will be pedestrian

we live, not just something we do.' This is the report's most compelling argument, that physical activity, far from being an adjunct to health, is its foundation. That movement is not a task to be scheduled, but a rhythm to be restored. And that in the face of mounting health crises, building a culture of activity is no longer an option; it is a necessity.

The tools exist. The evidence is clear. What remains is the will to act. If the world is to move forward, it must start by moving more.

Personal response

Why is physical inactivity still rising despite clear awareness of the risks?

Awareness isn't the issue — opportunity is. Many people want to be active but face real-world barriers: unsafe streets, lack of time, cultural norms, or simply nowhere to go. It's not a personal failure — it's a systemic one. We need to shift from blaming individuals to fixing environments.

How can behavioural science help change the way people engage with movement?

Behavioural science shows us how habits form. Instead of pushing big lifestyle overhauls, we should encourage small, consistent actions — like walking meetings or daily 'exercise snacks'. Making movement feel normal, not like a chore, is key to building sustainable, inclusive routines.

What role can governments and communities play in creating supportive environments?

Governments and communities shape the world we move through. When they invest in safe parks, walkable streets, or workplace wellness programmes, they remove friction. Policy, design and local leadership can either block or enable movement. The goal is to make activity the easy choice.

How can new technologies support, rather than exclude, participation?

Digital tools can motivate & personalise support — but they must be accessible. Right now, too many platforms assume users are already active or tech-savvy. We need inclusive design that meets people where they are, especially in underserved or low-income communities.

What would a fully movement-integrated society look like by 2030?

It would be a society where movement is woven into everyday routines. Schools would embed activity into learning, cities would prioritise people over cars, & employers would support active breaks. It's not about gym memberships — it's about designing life around human health.



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