

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - ADAM MARKS (Katie Elliott & Adam Marks)

My guest on today's show is Adam Marks, Director of Healthy Living at the Roxbury YMCA in Boston. Adam also runs his own personal training business specialising in one-to-one and group fitness instruction for people of all ages and health backgrounds.

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Adam Marks - thank you for joining me today, all the way from Boston.

Absolutely. It's a pleasure to be here.

I'd love to find out a little bit more about the work that you do.

Sure. So I am the Health and Wellness Director at a YMCA in Boston. Also I have my hand in other community projects, different sports and recreation and health and wellness initiatives and activities, and in my spare time I run a kids running series, which comes about in the Spring and Fall. I also am the co-ordinator of my son's school Wellness Committee. So every day is a little bit different and there's a lot going on.

Fantastic. So have you been into sport and physical activity since you were a kid?

Yeah, definitely. I've been, well first of all, a huge sports fan just in general growing up. But yeah, I grew up playing many sports: football, baseball, basketball. And in high school I played football and lacrosse. And college - I wasn't a very good athlete, but I did like all sorts of intramural type sports. So, yeah, it's always been a big part of my life.

I come from a very different background, in that I didn't really do any sports when I was a kid - it just wasn't really part of the culture for me growing up. And it's something that I've fallen in love with as an adult, but really quite belatedly. So something that really interests me is how people who've come to it late can find confidence and can find activities that work for them - because if you haven't done that stuff as a child, perhaps it's harder to know where to start. And I'm guessing that some of the people that you work with are probably in that position? Have you got any advice for people who are wanting to become more physically active?

Yeah, first and foremost you have to find something that you like. It sounds simple and it sounds kind of obvious, but a lot of people will get, you know, you get sort of

dragged to a class or a routine or a workout or something that you just don't really like and it's hard to keep up something that you're not interested in. So the first thing I would say is to find whatever it is that you enjoy doing - if you enjoy walking, if you enjoy jogging, if you enjoy swimming, if you enjoy dancing, if you enjoy actually competing (you know, playing football or soccer or basketball or something like that) - find something that you like. Because that's something that's going to keep you going. If you continue to do something that isn't fun and exciting or something that you don't like, it's probably not going to last.

So a willingness to experiment a bit and not expect to find your thing immediately, to just go out and try a few different things before deciding that exercise isn't for you?

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Also finding a partner, finding a friend, someone that you can do something with. Something that motivates you, something that you can do in tandem and also a partner to help keep you on track. It could be a group of people, it could be a friend or a family member or a spouse or someone like that. But you know, it's important to have support, especially if it's something that you know that you need to do but don't necessarily want to do. I myself have an email chain going with five of my old friends and we send a handful of emails each day, giving everyone updates on what we did that day. Whether it was walking or playing tennis or you know, what our workout was. Or we might've just had a bad day, like we got stuck in our chair or we just felt lazy or we didn't eat very well. First and foremost, it's a great way to stay connected to a group of friends that I have. It's also just really good to give someone some support, give them a pat on the back, give them a, "Hey, great job. I can't believe you did that". Or you know, someone having a bad day you'll be like, "Alright, you know, no worries. You know, you'll get it back tomorrow" and that type of thing. So having that group support or that direct support is really important for a lot of people. And that's something that I try to do as well, even though this is my job. It's always good to have friends and family supporting you.

That's a really lovely idea. I hadn't thought about that before, but it's like an accountability circle, or something where you're all supporting each other and keeping an eye on how you're all getting on. That's a really nice idea, thank you for that. So when you work with clients who maybe haven't done much exercise before, maybe they're getting into it for the first time, and I know that a lot of people find it difficult to actually go out and do something. So maybe they're a bit worried about going to a gym because they think that people like them don't go to the gym or maybe they're a bit worried about, you know, whether they're wearing the right clothing, whether they've got the right shoes, all of those little things can be a bit of a barrier to participation. Have you learned anything from working with a whole

variety of clients about how to help people feel okay about getting involved in exercise?

Yeah, well the first thing, the first thing that I've always told everyone, and they don't necessarily believe me because you know a lot of the things that you said are very real for a lot of people - feeling self conscious, lacking confidence, feeling like people are judging them or watching them - first and foremost is that everyone in the gym is really just focused on themselves. You know, they might have some thoughts going on in their heads, but you have this idea that's there's sort of a gossipy corner of people pointing fingers at everyone in the gym and, you know, whispering campaigns and that sort of thing - and honestly it really doesn't happen. The vast majority of people when they come into the gym, they want to do their thing. They want to work out and they want to leave. Honestly, like they're into their own thing. They want to do what they want to do. Obviously you're going to get people that are working out in pairs or there's going to be friends kind of hanging out and doing their thing and there's going to be chitchat and such. But one of the things I also say to people is, you know, the personal trainers and the wellness staff are very, very willing and able and anxious, to be honest, to help you get over those fears. And that's why we have personal trainers and that's why we have coaches, to help each individual get over those fears. And one of the things we try to do is to break down those barriers and to make ourselves as approachable and open and relaxed as we possibly can be. And you know, for a lot of people it just takes time. But what I've always told all of my clients, no matter who they are, what their background is, where they come from, I say, "You know, just show up and I'll take care of the rest and don't worry about anything else - just show up and we'll take care of it". And you know, a lot of people over time, as you get into your routine, you know, you just don't notice it anymore. You put on your headphones and you go to work.

So if somebody wants to get into exercising but maybe they don't fancy going to the gym, maybe that doesn't really suit their personality, but they still want to make it into a routine part of their life so that they're experiencing all of those benefits that we know about that come from regular exercise: regularly getting out of breath, regularly making our hearts work that little bit harder. Have you got any advice for people in terms of how to make exercise part of one's lifestyle rather than something you make a big effort to do maybe once a week, but how to kind of build it in to how you see yourself and how you're living your life on a daily basis?

You know, one of the things I've done in some of my positions is workplace wellness or deskercise programs, where you're making exercise, without really even knowing it, a part of your day. It could be a scheduled midday walk with friends. It could be standing up from your chair and going through a laundry list of about 10 stretches.

It could be setting an alarm every 45 minutes to remind yourself, "Okay, I'm going to stand up and I'm going to do 10 squats or 10 push ups and I'm going sit back down". Because all of those little bits, the walking and the stretching and you know, little bits of exercise, they all add up over the course of the day. So how do we, how do we get people in the workplace to add things to their day to make it more active? So there's little tricks, there's little tools, but also it's also trying to get people into a routine. That's the biggest thing. I mean you're really talking about routines and habits. You know, how do we create better habits? How do we create better routines? But also again, like I was saying before, having that support from your friends, from your colleagues, a text message from somebody, "Hey, did you go on your walk today? Hey, did you make the class today? Hey, do you want to come join me - my friends and I are going to go play basketball?" You know, all of those things. And also again, just finding something that you enjoy. Finding something that makes you happy. It could be going on a walk and listening to a podcast or it could be a combination of like a walk-jog type exercise. So it's really finding out what works for you, what works for your lifestyle. Do you have kids? Do you like being active with them? Do they like being active? Do you have other family members that do certain things? So, it's very individualised. it's very personalised - but with each lifestyle there are ways to go about that. There's just kind of little tricks. But it's a work in progress for everybody.

And it's different for every person, I think, isn't it? So for example, I spend a lot of time at the moment sitting down, editing audio for for these podcasts and I've realised that I really need to not be sitting down quite so much. So I will set a timer and I'll work for 25 minutes or half an hour and then I'll get up and, exactly like you say, I will do some jumping jacks or some push ups or whatever it might be. It really doesn't matter actually, but it's only for a very short amount of time. It's really just to kind of get myself warmed up and feeling back in my body again, 'cause I think we know that sitting for long periods of time brings with it quite a lot of health risks?

Yeah. The biggest thing that - obviously exercise in every way, shape or form is fantastic, you know, working up a sweat, getting your heart rate up - but you know, really, the biggest obstacle for most people isn't necessarily exercise per se, it's just general activity. You know, how much am I moving around? What's my work day like? Am I sitting in a chair for the vast majority of the day or am I getting up and moving around? And, you know, there's little tricks... Can you take the stairs versus taking an elevator? Instead of sending an email to somebody, can you walk to their desk and have a conversation? You know, instead of ordering lunch, can you go walk and get it? So yeah, it's a challenge for a lot of people.

The thing I've been learning is that there's a real danger in all-or-nothing thinking. I used to imagine that you either run or you don't run. I didn't realise that if you went

for a walk and then you ran a little bit and then you walked a little bit, that was great. And there's no law that says, you know, you have to run all the way if you go for a run. If you just get out and move and walk a bit and if you feel like running a bit, maybe you do that and maybe you get a little bit out of breath and just experience what that feels like. There aren't hard and fast rules about what exercise has to look like and actually thinking that it should be a certain way or that it should be hard or that we should do it for half an hour at a time or any of those things, can really get in the way of us feeling able to do it. So I've been learning to just do tiny bits of exercise because actually those tiny bits really add up.

Yeah, exactly. All of those little bits throughout the day, like even if you're simply just getting up and walking across your office or walking up a flight of steps, all of those little bits add up. So it's really important and it's also very hard to convince people of that, like you were saying - the all or nothing thing like, "Oh, I gotta get my 45 minutes of cardio in today" or, "I need to go lift weights for a half hour". And also as trainers, there's ways where we teach people, it's not about time, it's about efficiency. It's not about spending 45 minutes or an hour or two hours, it's, "How can I make the most of this 20 minutes that I have?" or "How can I make the most of this 15 minutes or this 10 minutes or these five minutes?" I know myself, I get busy and you know, sometimes I just get bored and I don't really want to spend an hour in the gym, I want to spend 20 minutes. So how do I make the most of these 20 minutes? So that's, you know, as trainers it's our job to help people with that.

I read some research recently that said that there's this idea that we have to spend a certain amount of time every week doing quite vigorous exercise. There are kind of guidelines - is it 150 minutes? It's something like that that they recommend that we do every week.

Yeah, yeah.

But there was some fairly recent research that came out that said they'd looked into it and it didn't actually matter how long the amount of exercise was, as long as the total ended up being about right. So I think a lot of people imagine that they need to do however many minutes of vigorous exercise a week and they think it needs to be in quite long chunks for it to work. Like it has to be half an hour for it to count. But actually like you say, the science backs up the idea that even if it is only 30 seconds here and a minute there and five minutes there, if it adds up to the right amount, it's just as good for you in terms of the longterm health benefits.

That's correct. So if I were talking to somebody who, let's say, is very sedentary and they're sitting in their chair from eight to six every day and all of a sudden they get up and they do a half hour of vigorous exercise - that's fantastic. Although I would

much rather have them, like you were saying, break up some of those eight to six hours that you're just sitting, sitting, sitting - and you know, can you get five minutes here, can you get 10 minutes here? As opposed to just going into that all or nothing thing. But yeah, the research is pretty clear. Every little bit adds up. Every little motion, every little piece of activity, every step that you take really does add up. The more active you are, the more activity that you get, the better it's going to be for you overall. And if you can combine that with, you know, a fair amount of strenuous exercise per week, where you're getting your heart rate up as well - you know, that's the perfect combination. All those little bits add up, just like you were saying.

Well, you clearly know what you're talking about - it's good to hear it coming from you. That's great. Very encouraging.

Each week I like to invite our guest to come up with a *Little Challenge* for the listeners at home. So a *Little Challenge* is something that pretty much anybody could do in 10 minutes or less - something that's not too physically demanding, it doesn't need specialised equipment, pretty much anybody could do it and if they did it on a regular basis, it's something that would bring benefit in some way to their life. So, yeah, I'm wondering what would your *Little Challenge* would look like?

If I'm in a crazy hurry and, let's say, I have no access to equipment, just me and my body weight and I have like a little space, and I might only have that amount of time... One of my favourite activities to do is to pinpoint, it could be 10 different exercises - could be something really, really simple like push ups, sit ups, body weight squats, holding a plank position, leg lifts, something like that. Anything really simple. Your simple bodyweight exercises. Set a timer - 10 minutes - and then every minute on the minute you switch exercises. You just go from one into the other. And in that minute the goal is to try to do as many repetitions as you can of whatever exercise it is that you're doing. If you need to rest, you go ahead and rest. If you can push through, you go ahead and push through. And you just do the best you can. And there's lots of different ways to sort of manipulate it. If you don't want to do 10 exercises, maybe you want to extend it and do one exercise for two minutes and another for two minutes and, you know, getting up to that 10 minutes. Or if you have a million exercises that you want to do, maybe switch every 30 seconds but you know, set that timer, have an outline of things that you want to do or maybe you just want to go for broke and you want to do jumping jacks for 10 minutes straight. There's lots of different combinations but all you need is just your body weight. You need a little bit of space and a timer and you're good to go.

That actually sounds like a lot of fun. I think I'm going to try that. Something that would be really great to know - are there places online where people can find simple

bodyweight exercises that they could be doing at home? Because actually, if someone hasn't been doing a lot of those kinds of exercises, they may be a bit concerned about whether they're doing them wrong and they may not have many ideas of what they can try. Is that something you can help me with?

Absolutely. There's tons of different resources. One of my favourite programs that I refer to all the time that I just love - it's called 'Lift Weights Faster'. It's by a trainer named Jen Sinkler. She has a series of programs that she has designed over the course of years and you can even piece together the ones that you like, but I love that program. It's been sort of my go-to over the years.

Fantastic. It's great to have a personal recommendation. Well, Adam, if people would like to find you online and find out more about what you do, how can they find you?

Sure. Well, the YMCA has a main website, it's www.ymcaboston.org. I also have a personal website, www.admtraining.com, so I'm happy to offer feedback to anybody and I'm happy to connect with anybody who is looking for any help.

Thank you so much for your time today. It's been great to talk with you.

Thank you very much. I appreciate you having me on.