

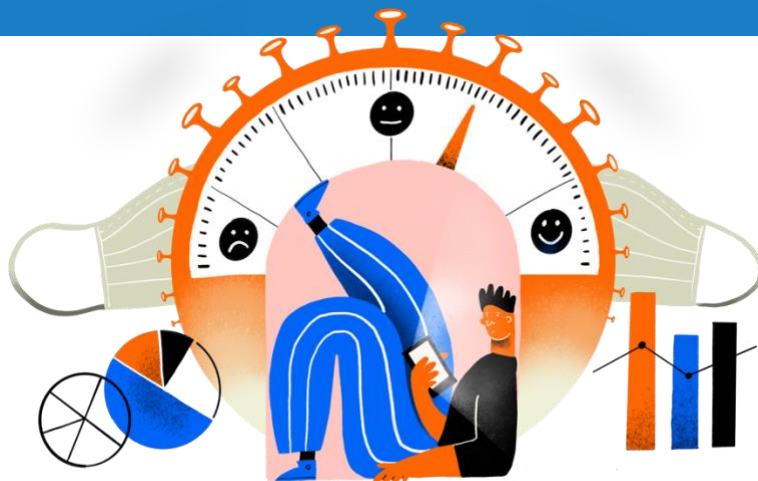
REPORT 22

Movement as an essential element of well-being

The Motivation Barometer

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Reference: Motivation Barometer (February 5, 2021). Movement as an essential element of well-being. Ghent, Belgium.



Due to the beautiful weather during the first lockdown, many individuals went walking, jogging, or biking. In these winter months, however, it is less easy to keep moving. Many people are forced to work from home and do not have to travel to work by bike or on foot. Our favorite gym or sports club remains closed, so the usual exercise routine is dropped. It is therefore not surprising that a larger group of people are less active than they were before the corona measures. But because our well-being in this corona crisis has never been under so much pressure and other leisure activities (e.g. culture, family visits) are on hold, it is more important than ever to keep moving. In this report, we take a closer look at the evolution of our activity level since the summer and its protective role for our well-being. To this end, we analyze the results from the Motivation Barometer as of July 2020 (total number of participants = 86 296, average 49.35 years, 18 - 100 years, 68.1% women¹) and conclude with a series of recommendations on how to keep moving in these difficult circumstances.

Take home message

- A large group of individuals (39%) report moving less than before the corona measures. This group has been growing since the summer and already concerns 48% of the population in the second half of January.
- A lot of young adults (18-35 year olds; 47%) report being less physically active, while most people in middle (36-55 years) or older ages (55+ years) report being about as physically active as they were before the corona crisis.
- Individuals who maintain their activity level or are more active than before the corona measures, report more vitality, life satisfaction and better sleep quality, while experiencing fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms.
- These effects are robust and even persist after controlling for other crucial psychological predictors of our well-being.
- Physical activity provides a stronger well-being boost in individuals with low motivation to follow the measures.
- We formulate concrete recommendations to keep moving.

¹ Results were weighted for the unbalanced sampling of different target groups (age, gender, and education level).

Question 1: How physically active are we and how has our physical activity evolved?

Since the summer of 2020, participants in the Motivation Barometer have been asked the following question:

"How physically active were you during the past week compared to a typical week (before coronavirus measures were taken)? Physical activity, or also called exercise, is more than just sports. In addition to sports, it includes active transport (e.g., walking or biking to the bakery), being active in the household (e.g., mopping, vacuuming, etc.), being active in leisure time (e.g., walking the dog), and the like more."

Participants could choose one of five response categories, where their physical activity could be much lower (score 1), lower (score 2), the same (score 3), higher (score 4) or much higher (score 5) than usual. Participants were divided into three groups based on their answer:

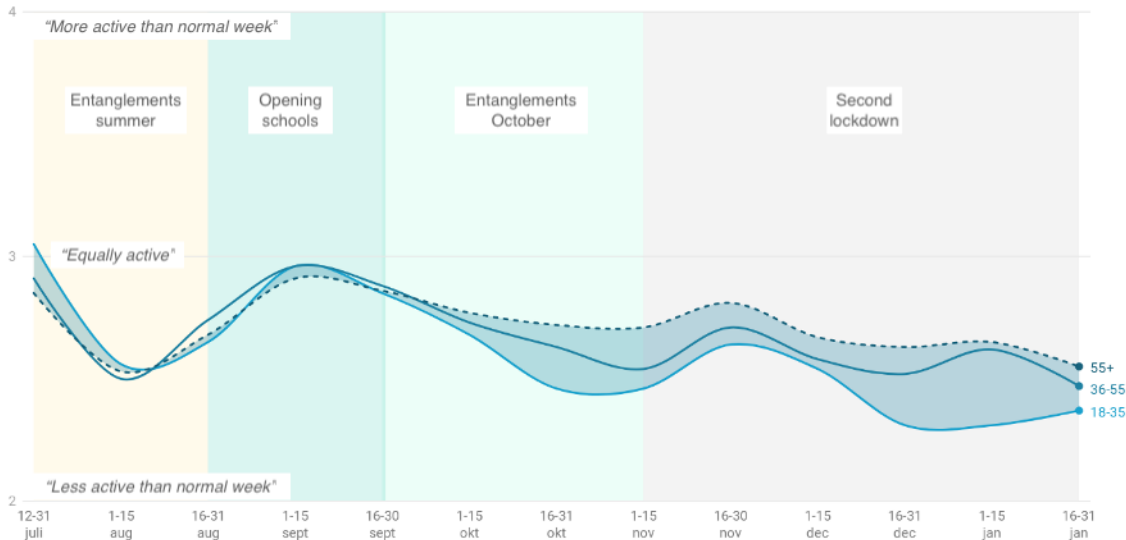
- 'less active' (score 1 or 2)
- 'equally active' (score 3)
- 'more active' (score 4 or 5)

Figures 1 and 2 show that our level of activity has decreased in recent months. We can see that the group of individuals who say they are less active than usual is steadily growing: from 27% in July to 38% in the second half of October to 48% in the second half of January. Figure 1 indicates that this decline in physical activity is not equally pronounced for all age groups. For example, starting in mid-September, young adults in particular appear to be less physically active than usual and their level of physical activity also declines more rapidly through the months. In terms of education level and gender, small differences were observed, with a slightly less favorable pattern for those with lower education and women.

Several explanations can be given for this reduced activity. First, a seasonal and weather effect plays a role here. In winter months and rainy weather, we are less physically active than in spring or summer when the weather is nicer. Second, there is the impact of the lockdown. We work from home, gyms and fitness centers are closed. We gain time (e.g. time that we would usually spend on the road to our work) but it is not easy to use this time for physical activity. Third, a negative spiral threatens. Because our well-being is increasingly under pressure (see report #21), we have less energy to engage in

moving. At the same time, maintaining our physical activity is crucial to dealing resiliently with difficult circumstances.

Figure 1. Evolution in physical activity during the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium across age groups



Question 2: Do active individuals feel better about themselves?

To answer this question, we examined whether individuals who are more, equally, or less active than usual report different levels of well-being. This appears to be the case. Figure 3 shows that individuals who are less active report less vitality, life satisfaction, and sleep

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of different movement groups during the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium

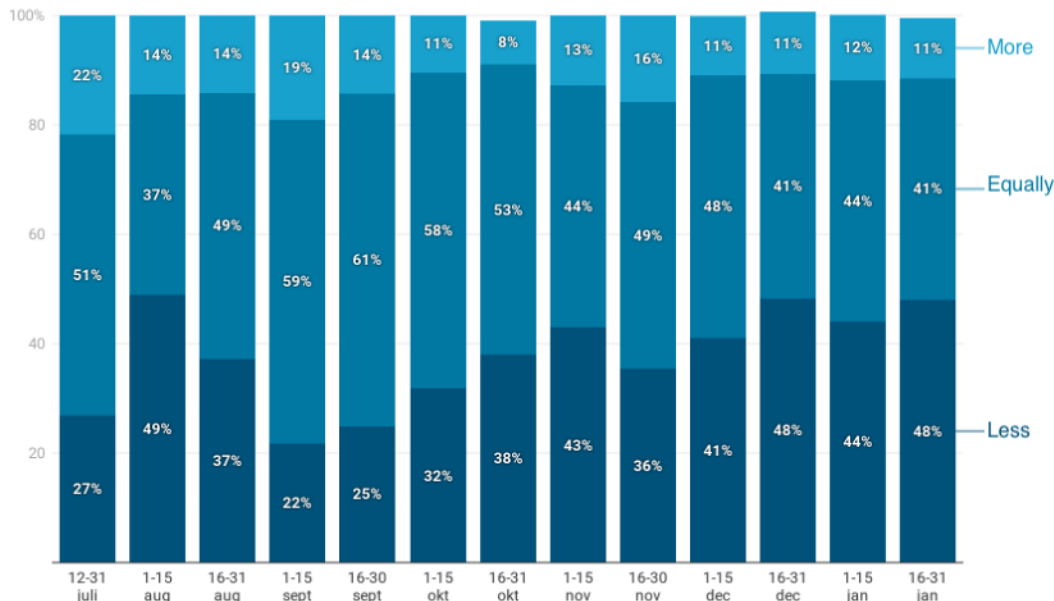
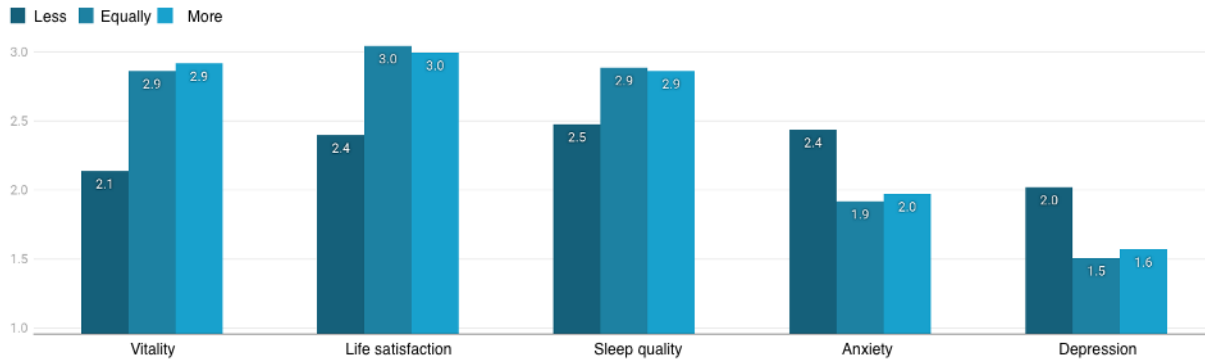


Figure 3. Wealth differences as a function of degree of motion.

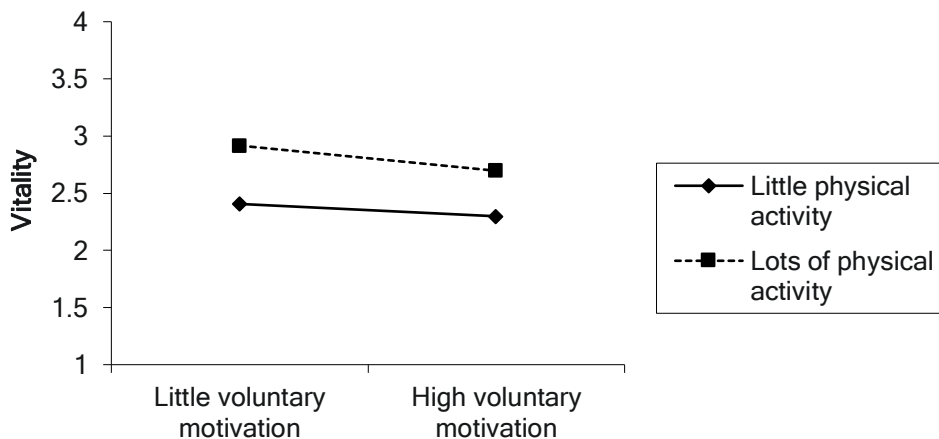


quality, while they report feeling more anxious and depressed. What is particularly striking is that being less active is associated with less well-being in all areas relative to maintained or increased physical activity. Individuals who exercise as much as they did before the corona measures feel at least as good about themselves as those who are more active.

These benefits of physical activity are very robust. They appear for a variety of outcomes and they persist after other important psychological predictors of mental health were included in the model. Physical activity had a uniquely positive role in predicting mental health on top of the degree to which participants worried, and felt autonomous, competent, and related to others. These are all crucial psychological needs, the satisfaction of which is essential to our well-being.

In a final step, we examined whether physical activity could exert an additional protective role for individuals with low motivation. This appears to be the case. Individuals who are less motivated to follow the measures benefit more from physical activity in terms of well-being. Physical activity thus has a more protective role for them against the disadvantages of their poor motivation (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Correlation between motivation and well-being as a function of degree of exercise.



Recommendations

Thus, according to the results of the Motivation Barometer, the importance of staying in motion, despite corona measures, emerges very strongly. Those who keep moving or exercise report more vitality, life satisfaction and better sleep quality, and experience fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms. It is important, therefore, to look at how we can keep moving, despite the measures. Practicing our beloved team sport may not be possible for a while and the routine of cycling to work, school or the train station may have disappeared, but daily exercise is still perfectly possible.

- Here it is recommended to make a plan for yourself. By planning and agreeing to, for example, take a lunch or evening walk with your neighbor, a friend or your partner 3 times a week and also agreeing to replace this with, for example, an online workout in the event of rain, you are much more likely to keep moving. Building in a routine and agreeing to exercise with others, either live or online, helps. It's much easier to stick with it if you can exercise with a neighbor, friend, or partner.
- Outdoor exercise (e.g. bike ride, walk to the bakery, fitometer in the park, workout on your balcony) is most advisable, but exercising at home is still much better than being inactive. You don't need any fitness equipment for this: bottles of water work perfectly as dumbbells, you can do push-ups, dance or jump rope. By the way, you can find a lot of nice workouts tailored to different ages online.
- Maybe the lockdown is also an opportunity to try something new like Yoga or to play with your kids in the garden or park again. Above all, try to find something you enjoy yourself.

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