

Ethnographic Stories

May 2022

Introduction

The project

The aim of this project was to explore the impact of Covid-19 on activity, and people's relationship to it. We also explored people's everyday behaviours around activity.

The Research

We conducted five ethnographies with participants across England. Ethnographers spent a day with each participant and their household capturing everything on film to immerse us into their worlds and the context of their lives.

Films

We produced films from the footage captured during fieldwork to showcase the themes that emerged in analysis.



Our approach to understanding physical activity

We explored people's relationship with physical activity, health and wellbeing from every angle.

We went into this research with an open definition of physical activity and its links to health and wellbeing. It was important for us to consider that different aspects of a person's life: physical, mental, social, financial and environmental may have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

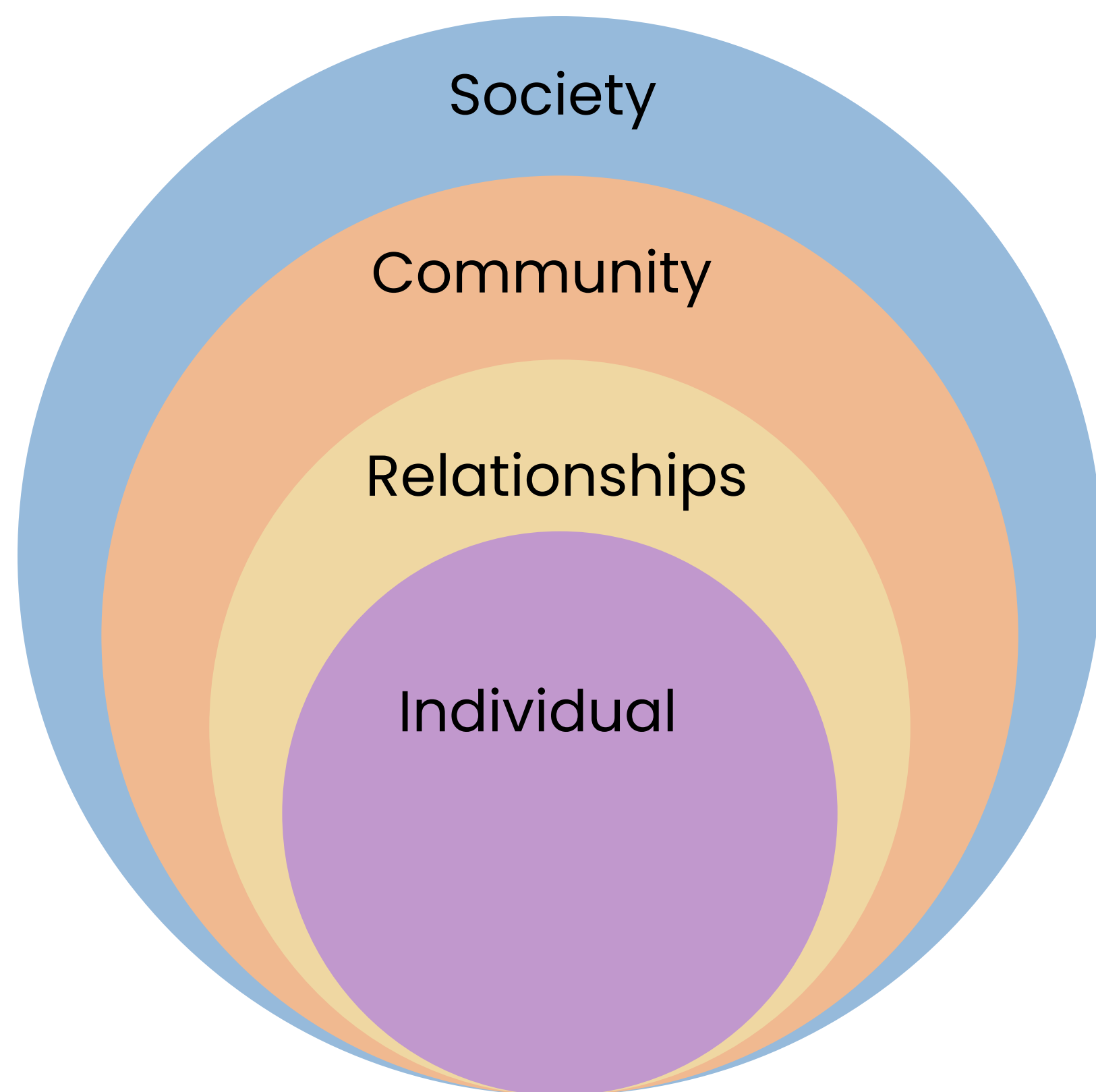
These different aspects can be viewed as the building blocks that make up an individual's health. Physical activity behaviours are influenced (and supported or discouraged) by a range of factors, not all of which are within an individual's control.

We will look to explore the themes which emerged during the research.



Placing this in the social ecological model

Individual change requires us to look at the context around them.



From our open definition of health it was important to explore the context around people's lives. We adopted the social ecological framework in our analysis. We approached health as something that can be affected by the interactions between the individual and the: relationships, community, the physical, and socio-political environments around them.

Face to face ethnography allowed us to explore people's relationship with health and activity within the wider context of the social ecological model.

Our methodology

Ethnography

Face to face ethnography provided intimacy and highlighted the unconscious contexts that drive behaviour. It allowed us to observe the unspoken influences, barriers, habits and rituals that drive behaviour. We are not always conscious of what drives our choices or gets in the way of physical activity, ethnography allowed us to bridge the say-do gap and understand people's behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs in depth.

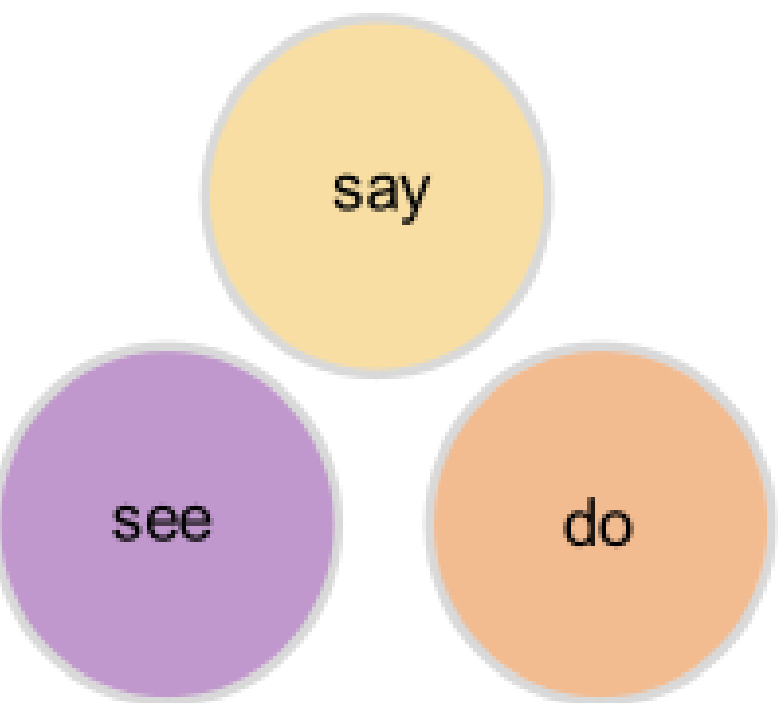
Participant observation

In order to capture the full lives of our participants we followed them with a camera for an entire day. The participants led the day, whilst our ethnographers asked and probed for further detail in the why's, and how's, of their lives. We joined them on everything from their day to day chores to their walks outside.



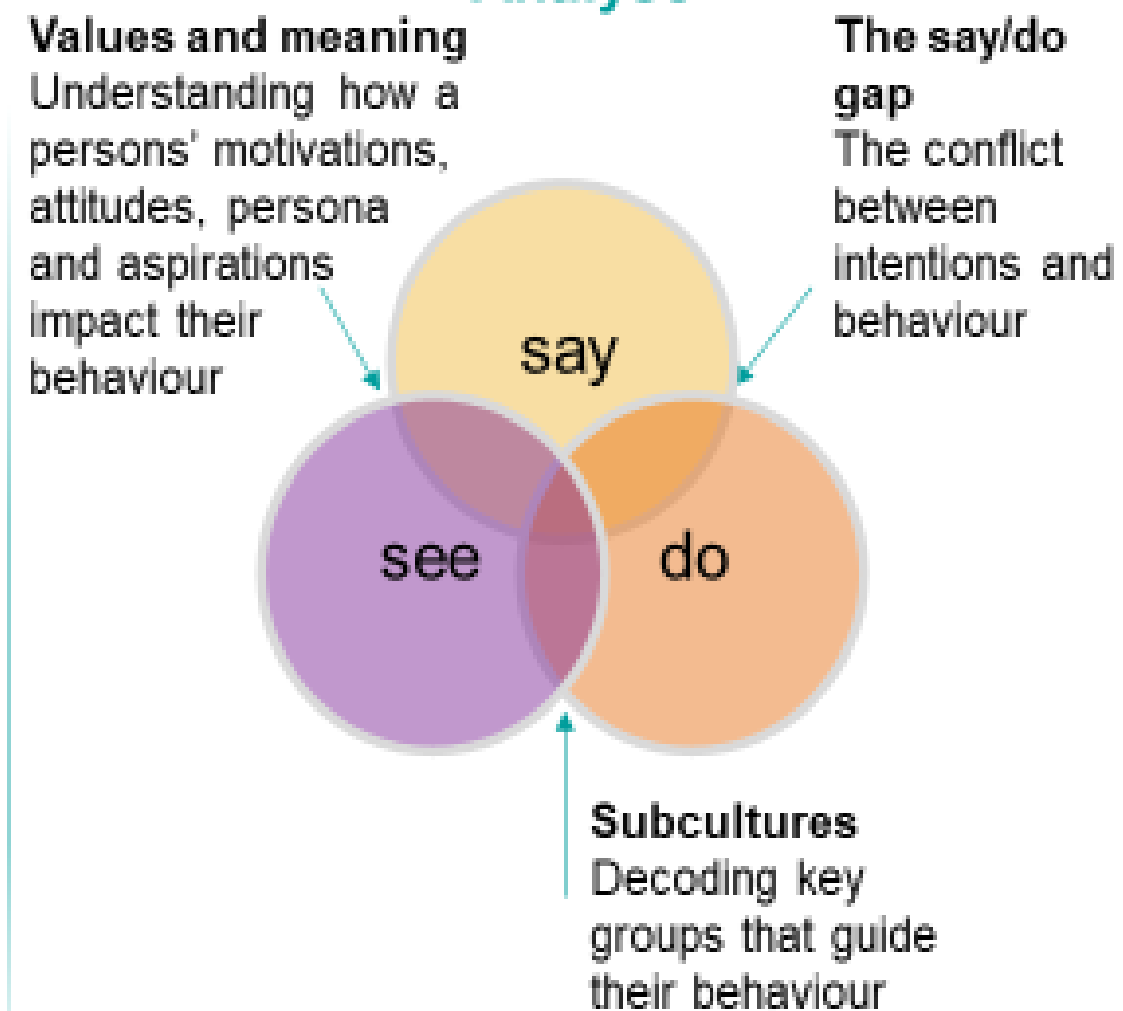
OUR METHOD IS BASED IN WHAT PEOPLE SAY, DO, AND SEE..

Collect



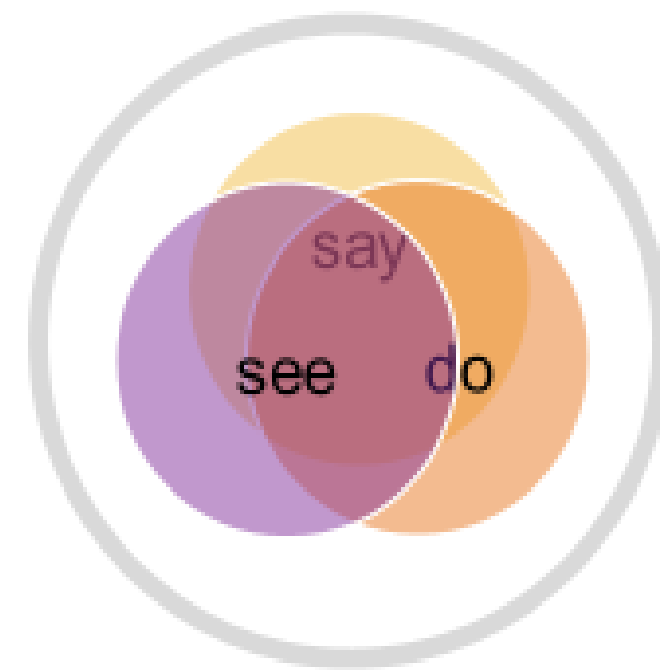
Face-to-face interactions over a full day to learn what people say, do and see

Analyse



Real insights comes from what happens between what people say, do, and see

Communicate



Insight is shared through great story-telling, emotional films, and making insights sticky

With the footage captured, we used our analysis to uncover the 'why' behind what people said, saw and did.

We analysed:

- What they said, i.e. their intentions and beliefs
- What they saw, i.e. their positionality within broader context
- What we observed, and;
- What they did, i.e. their behaviour

After considering what our participants said, did and saw we combined our ethnographer's observations to consider the similarities and differences between our participants; how they thought about health and physical activity and to identify their barriers and opportunities.

Meet our participants



**Andy 30,
London**

Andy lives by himself and was recently made redundant from his events planning job.

He is currently looking to manage his weight, having gained some during



**Usman 26,
London**

Zero-hour contract worker Usman is recovering from the mental and physical toll of the pandemic.

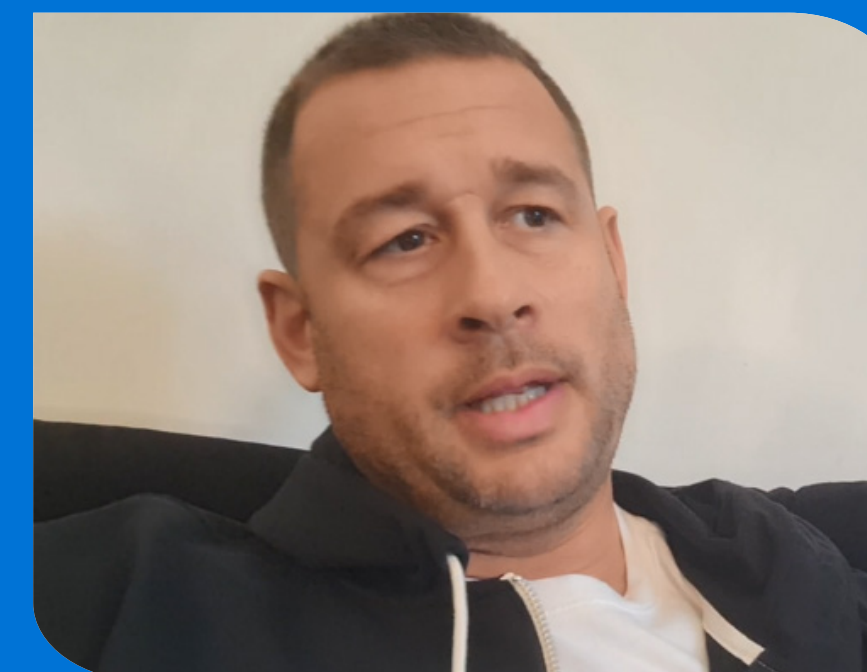
He lives in his childhood home with his parents and four siblings.



**Margaret 65,
Manchester**

Retiree Margaret received a diabetes diagnosis during the pandemic and is working on maintaining her health.

She lives with her partner of 40 years Tom.



**Stuart 42,
Hertfordshire**

Firefighter Stuart is recovering from a back injury from an on the job accident at the start of 2021.

He lives with his three young children and his partner.



**Aleesha 44,
London**

Self employed fitness instructor Aleesha has worked in the industry for 20 years and is working on diversifying her offering.

She lives with her two young children and partner.

Data was collected by Ipsos, 2022



Our relationship with space

Covid-19 and space



The pandemic shrank our worlds, making local spaces more important

Our relationship with the space around us has changed after two years of pandemic measures, such as limitations on how we use the outdoors.

This has shrunk our worlds to our immediate local area. We have observed more emphasis being placed on the spaces around us.

Andy told us:

"I want my home environment to be my relaxing environment so it was hard to mix the two. My home became everything all at once, my working environment, my relaxing environment and my working out environment and it just didn't help mentally"



Data was collected by Ipsos, 2022

The importance of space

Our experience of space depends on our relationship with it

Space is not always straightforward and can be complicated by our relationship with it. How we talk, interact, and interpret space can impact our health and wellbeing.

We found that people take advantage of what they feel is available to them.



Space is social

Space takes on an identity of its own – creating new meaning

We found that public and community spaces can have many different meanings and this varies from person to person.

How they thought about space was dependent on a variety of factors. Is the space welcoming? Is it positively experienced? Can we afford to use the space? Does it foster engagement? Ultimately, what does the space communicate to us?

All of the above determined how they felt about a space and how they used it.



Case study on relationship to space

Based in the rural northwest, Margaret and her husband Tom were enjoying their retired life when the pandemic struck.

An active member of her community Margaret volunteers with a local historical home and gardens. She is also highly involved with local activism, most recently protesting the loss of green space to industry.

She has a strong relationship to the outdoor space and utilising it for her active and healthy lifestyle. Taking long walks, socialising with others from her walking club and generally engaging with the space around her.

We observed how Margaret's positive relationship with her community and ample use of green spaces supported her during the pandemic and as a result helped her to manage her new type 2 diabetes diagnosis.



We value different things

We take advantage of what we feel is accessible to us

Our relationship with the space around us and how we use it is also determined by our priorities.

While Margaret protested the industry development in her area, Usman values the increased developments and the commercial improvements he is seeing in his local area. For example, Usman was pleased with the new restaurants and shops coming to his local area.

Ultimately, these differing values impacts both how they view spaces and how they use (or do not use) them.



Influences and motivations

Influences and motivations

The pandemic shrank our worlds, making the people around us more important

Covid-19 not only shrank our physical world, but it has also shrank our social world. The people left in our network have a greater influence over us and us on them.

We observed different sub-cultures that were formed as part of our participants' intimate social worlds. These cultures can encourage or discourage active behaviours.

Firefighter Stuart instilled an active-life culture for his family by investing in outdoor gear and encouraging activities such as biking and tennis.

Stuart told us:

"We realised we didn't take the kids to the park enough, we didn't do enough out of the house. We would sit indoors, we'd watch Netflix and eat dinner on the sofa. So we thought 'right, we do too much of that, lets not slip into that as a habit'"



External motivation

Sometimes we need support from the people around us

Motivations behind health and activity sit on a spectrum between intrinsic and extrinsic drivers.

Intrinsic motivation refers to the inherent satisfaction from and the enjoyment of being active.

Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviour that is driven by external rewards or satisfaction, such as from the people around us.

We observed this in Margaret and her partner Tom's relationship. Where Margaret intrinsically motivated herself to maintain her health, Tom was extrinsically motivated by Margaret.

Our observations suggest that people are more likely to sustain sport and physical activity longer-term if they have high levels of intrinsic motivation.



Margaret told us:

"This is exactly the age where you have to up your game because when you don't that is when your health problems will kick in"



Case study on motivation

Andy is 30 and lives in London. His activity levels tend to fluctuate. Over the pandemic he struggled to remain active and is now trying to get back on track.

Activity is not something that is embedded into Andy's family culture, nor is it embedded into his own life. This lack of motivation from his immediate network makes remaining active all the more difficult for Andy.

Instead he looks to other sources for motivation such as his friends, social media, and even a fitness watch. His fitness watch also helps to hold him accountable and remain consistent.

We observed Andy looking for motivation whilst also taking on the role as motivator for his mum, sister, and girlfriend. He is looking to be motivated and to motivate.

Andy told us:

"I've tried to motivate my brother and mother to be active and to make better food choices but they don't follow it properly. There is only so much talking you can do. At the end of the day they see my weight fluctuate and they know how important it is for me is to have a healthy physique and a good healthy life in general"



Disruption and resilience

Disruption and Covid-19

When obstacles get in the way, activity falls to the way side

The pandemic and the accompanied restrictions had an effect on all our participants – they all saw the toll of Covid-19 on their social, mental, financial or physical health.

We observed the importance of each element of health being balanced: if one is affected, there are knock on effects.

The impacts of disruption on people's relationship with physical activity and health varies. It is dependent on peoples' situation and whether or not there are established habits and routines around physical activity in place.



Habit and routine

For healthy practices to stick it needs to become a habit

Routines and habits differ, and this distinction is especially important when it comes to exercise and active lifestyles.

- Although they can be consistent, **routines** require conscious effort and can easily be disrupted.
- **Habits** are formed when certain behaviours and practices are repeated over and over, until it is unconscious.

Once a healthy or active practice becomes a habit, it is more likely to become a main feature of a person's life for a longer period.

Disruption and no routines

Those who do not have set habits and routines experience disruption more

We observed how disruption can have a far reaching and detrimental impact on all elements of health, especially for people who do not already have a habit formed around physical activity.

For example, the impact of Covid-19 on Usman's mental health meant he was prioritising managing that over anything else. This had a knock on effect on his financial and physical health because he was unable to work and lost his sense of routine and stability.



Andy told us

“Pre pandemic I was very active, going to work, commuting, going to friends, going out weekends and weekdays. It limited the impact of my bad food choices but once the pandemic came and I became less active it made me realise just how much the activity makes a difference”



Resilience

We need to be able to bounce back from disruption

Resilience refers to how we cope with and overcome problems. This is related to how we think and our ability to remain positive in the face of adversity.

The ability to bounce back from disruption to our activities and health is vital for us to be able to remain active in the long run.

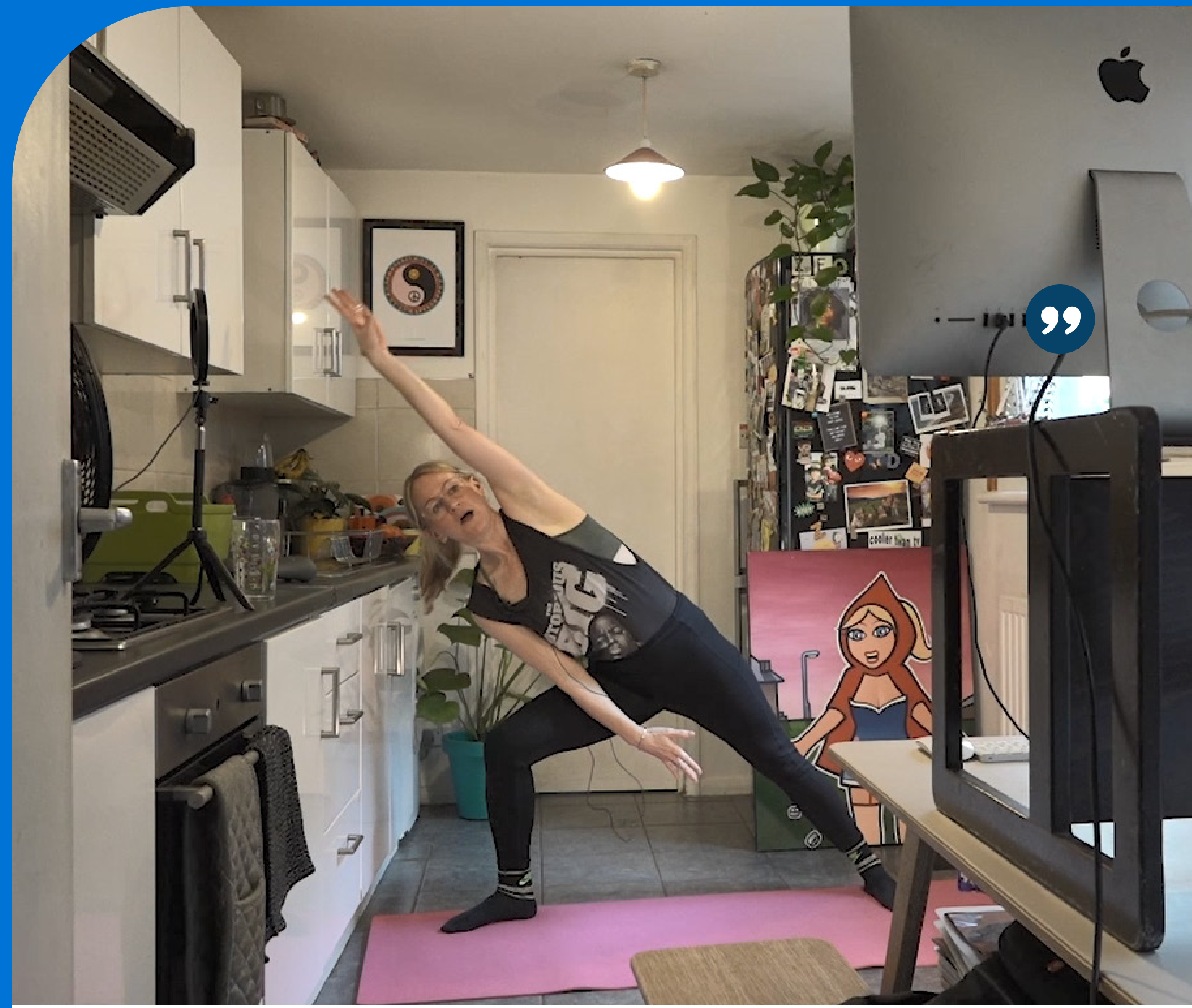
Aleesha faced significant set backs in the last two years with Covid-19 restricting her business and affecting her financial health. We observed how remaining consistently active and robust in her offering despite the disruptions has meant her business has been able to adapt. For example, she ventured into virtual and now hybrid classes as well as upskilling to becoming a Personal Trainer.

Internal Motivation

Once a habit around activity has been formed, motivations behind it tend to shift from external to internal ones.

We have observed how getting personal satisfaction and fulfilment from being active can help when dealing with disruption. Being able to fall back on habits – when faced with disruption – rather than letting it get in the way of being active demonstrates the importance of establishing a habit.

Resilience stems from habits and internal motivation.



Case study on habits

Stuart told us:

“Things that are on your mind, or a busy life, can all be positively impacted by exercise. If I’ve had an argument with my partner, I’ll go for a run”



Stuart is 42 and lives in Hertfordshire with his partner and two young children. He works as a firefighter and is currently recovering from a workplace injury.

We observed just how embedded exercise is in Stuart’s life. Despite his injury limiting what he could do at the gym and his usual routine, he still found a way to exercise and remain active. Stuart picked up running and now regularly runs 5-10km a few times a week.

Stuart had formed a habit around an active lifestyle and with that his motivations behind activity had become intrinsic. By finding fulfilment in exercise and activity Stuart remained active despite such a large disruption to his usual routine and physical health.

Resetting moments

Disruption can prompt change

Even when sport and physical activity is not embedded into our lives – and we are not as resilient to disruption as others – disruption can be the trigger we need for us to ‘reset’ or change our behaviours.

We observed various resetting moments that stems from disruption. Covid-19 negatively impacted Usman’s mental health. During the peak of the pandemic and his anxiety, Usman had to take a break from working. However, his poor mental health was also what prompted the realisation that he needed to get back to normality and a routine. From the disruption of Covid-19 Usman is now more mindful in his approach to his health.

Usman told us:

“Covid-19 affected me a lot, I thought I had Long-Covid. I didn’t work for seven eight months. Now I’m trying to do what I did before [Covid-19], like have a set routine and try enjoy life again”



Life context and situations

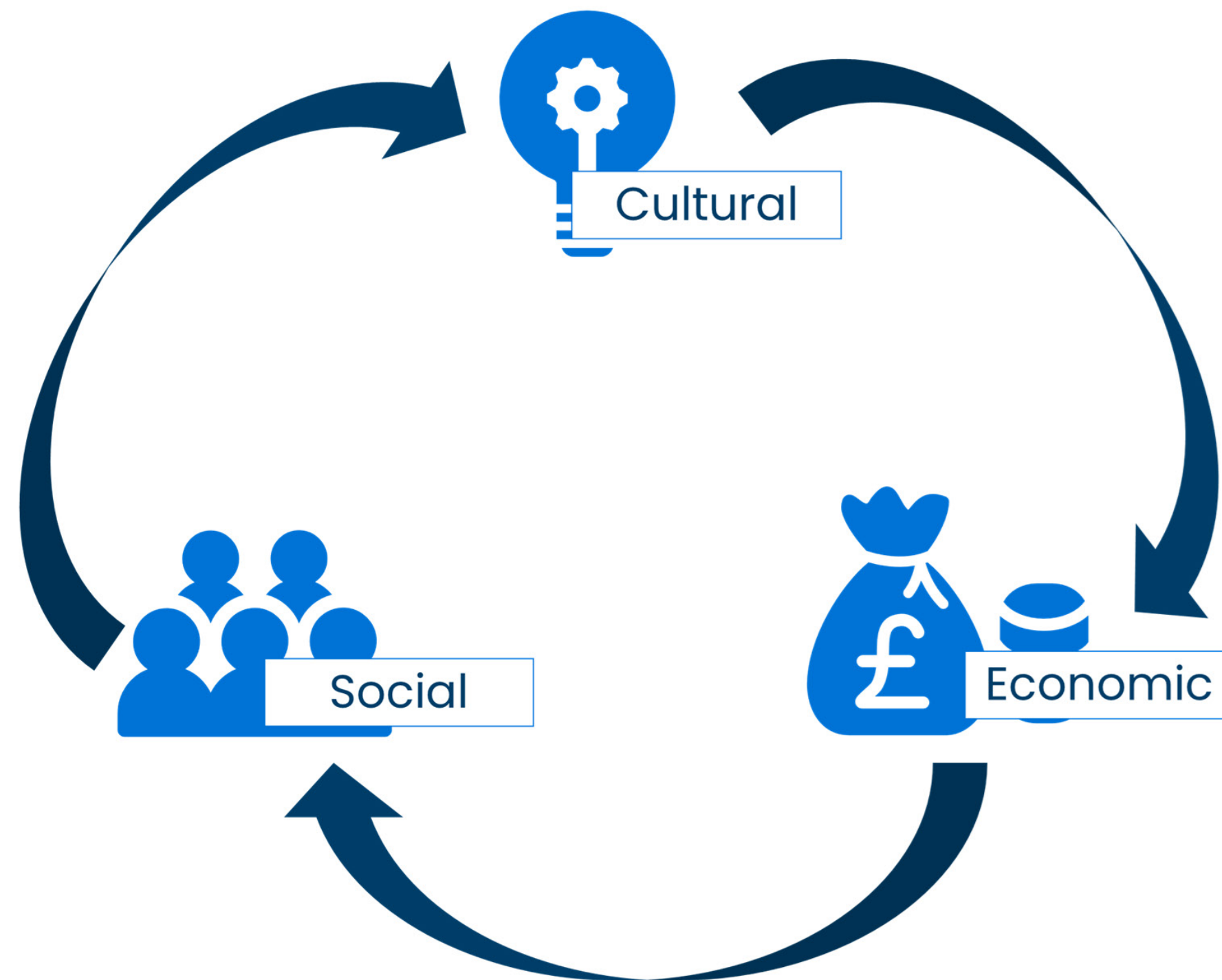
The causes of barriers

Structural barriers are formed when we lack capital

Having economic, social, and cultural capital is key for building or maintaining health.

- Economic capital refers to our access to material resources, i.e. how much money we have
- Social capital refers to our network, i.e. who we know
- Cultural capital refers to our possession of knowledge, i.e. what we know

It is easier to maintain our overall health when we access to money, knowledge, and community resources.



Case study on social capital

We observed the long term impact of Covid-19 on Usman's mental and physical wellbeing.

Usman's struggle to navigate the NHS for mental health support (cultural capital) meant he was unable to receive the treatment he needed.

Instead he relied on his religion and family (social capital) to rebuild himself and his health.

Usman's inability to work his multiple Zero Hour contracts during this time led to further financial struggles. While he is now recovering and working, without steady hours he finds it hard to create a routine for his activities.



Case study on cultural capital

Aleesha is a 44 year old fitness instructor living in London with her young family.

Looking at Aleesha's work situation through the three capitals, it is easy to identify how she relies on her social and cultural capital to compensate for her lack of economic capital.

The precarious nature of her work was exacerbated during the pandemic with lockdown removing her main source of income – face to face classes. However, her client base (who are also her friends) supported her during the pandemic by attending her classes and using her services.

Aleesha's friend network is comprised of people in professional industries, such as PR and marketing, who are able to lend their cultural capital by helping her to build up her brand and social media presence. We observed just how vital it is to have a strong social network.

It is a continuous journey

People can be prompted to reset anytime

Our relationship with activity is a complicated one. For our participants their relationship with activity is not linear with many twists and turns.

For some it is a continuous journey and it may take more than one resetting moment to get back on track.

Over the last two years, Andy, Usman, Margaret, Aleesha and Stuart's activity levels fluctuated. Habits were created and broken and their access to the three capitals became more apparent.

We saw this with Andy's activity levels fluctuating. This yo-yoing routine is an example of activity that has not yet become a habit. It is also an example of Andy's perseverance and reminder that we can re-





**For more information and
to watch the accompanying
films go to
sportengland.org/covid19research**