

ACTIVATING AURORA: The Cost of Convenience

By Ron Weese

I introduce my freshmen students on the first day of class in the Seneca Fitness and Health Promotion Program with a challenge that if they want to make a lot of money all they have to do is figure out a way to take effort out of everyone's lives.

This, of course, sounds heretical to these eager minds as they embark on careers that teach others how to engage in healthy physical activity. They look at me in a confused state and then look at colleagues to see if they also think I am 'off my rocker.' (Remember, I am an older adult and not to be considered wise unless proven so).

I tell them this to dramatize the difficult task ahead of them.

They will surely learn about how to create active people, but the real challenge is to convince people why they should be active when our 'culture' seems to value taking effort out of our lives.

Look at what labour-saving devices have done for us. Around the house, washing machines, dishwashers and vacuums have saved the drudgery of those tasks. Outdoors, we have riding lawn mowers and mechanical trimmers instead of push-mowers and garden shears (remember them?).

Our automobiles are the preferred mode of transportation over walking and biking for even the shortest trip. My car even helps me reduce the effort of winding down a window with a push button and that push button needs only a slight touch for the window to go up and down automatically, saving me the effort of holding it down. Whew!

To get your coffee, you can sit in your car, saving you the hundred or so steps to and from the counter. And just look at the 'rolling dance' that occurs in the shopping malls as people cruise around the parking lot trying to save 10 steps and get closer to the entrance.

Let's face it, if you want to be a success, give people a way to take effort out of their lives and they will buy it.

The science is clear on this 'cost of convenience.'

The scientific literature is replete with evidence that a daily energy expenditure has been significantly removed from our lives. (Lanningham-Foster, Nysse and Levine, Obesity Res.) This daily loss of effort results in a caloric imbalance that, over time, increases our fat-weight unless it is off-set by a reduction of caloric intake (another topic).

Consider it though. If you expend just 100 calories less each day by labour-saving, the loss of calories over a month is 3,000 calories. Calculating that there are approximately 3,500 calories in a pound of stored fat, it is easy to see that labour-saving devices and practices can have an insidious and progressive weight-gain effect.

The true cost of this convenience is staggering, as the sick-care system spends increasing amounts on obesity and related disorders. Much of this is preventable because we can easily put back a little effort each day in our lives.

I'm not telling you to throw out the vacuum and use a broom, nor haul the clothes to the stream and pound the dirt out of them. But can't we just add some steps? Can't we walk to the store instead of ride? Can't the kids walk three blocks to school this fall? Can't we park deeper into the parking lot and enjoy a five-minute walk to where you work or shop? Can't we take the kids for a walk on the trails or a bike ride? Can't we put some effort back into our lives and enjoy that?

These activities, if done in a habitual way, will put back the effort lost from labour-saving. Those hundred calories daily expended will reverse the labour-saving effect and that will result in a healthier you.