

IL BENESSERE CORPOREO ATTRAVERSO L'ATTIVITÀ FISICA E SPORTIVA AI TEMPI DEL COVID

BODY WELL-BEING THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORTS IN THE DAYS OF SARS-COV-2

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of sport and physical activity in a period of emergency. Italy, and all the world, has recently faced the arduous battle against the spread of a new coronavirus: SARS-CoV-2. This unexpected pandemic dramatically upended all areas of life, leading to a profound change in priorities, both in the medical as well as the social-economic field; and sports and physical activity are no exception.

Lo scopo di questo articolo è indagare il ruolo dello sport e dell'attività fisica in un periodo di emergenza. L'Italia, e tutto il mondo, ha recentemente affrontato l'ardua battaglia contro la diffusione di un nuovo coronavirus: SARS-CoV-2. Questa inaspettata pandemia ha sconvolto drammaticamente tutti gli ambiti della vita, portando a un profondo cambiamento delle priorità, sia in campo medico che in campo socio-economico; e lo sport e l'attività fisica non fanno eccezione.

Keywords

Wellbeing, Sport, Health promotion, Covid
Benessere, Sport, Promozione della salute, Covid

Introduction

We are experiencing an exceptional period. Nevertheless, it offered the opportunity to reconsider many aspects of our daily life. We are in contact for the first time with a global, viral phenomenon that forcefully changed our habits. Moreover, its transmission seems to be independent of our healthy lifestyle. Historically, the primary weapons useful to fight against chronic diseases essentially involved our behaviors and habits. While facing this pandemic, we feel that we lost track of our state of health. So far, the epidemiological data divided the causes of death into those from COVID-19 infection and those that are not. Therefore, SARS-CoV-2 is a higher risk factor for those suffering from other comorbidities. Mortality caused by COVID-19 is significantly higher among those suffering from other comorbidities compared to the general population. In this perspective, physical inactivity we have been forced due to imposed restrictions and physical distances needs a reflection. Although governments' restrictive measures are fundamental to the containment of the virus spread and must be respected, the imposed physical inactivity and its consequent sedentariness dramatically increase the risk factors of chronic diseases already present in our country.

1. The concept of well-being and the importance of physical activity

Recently, the approach of health promotion played a critical role in social and health services and education. Health promotion is particularly crucial in establishing both the individual and the community's health balance, being the latter severely influenced by the pandemic (Mittelmark, 2016).

The expression "health promotion" refers to the approach aimed to "allow people to establish and control factors influencing their health status". Different approaches are useful to achieve this goal, including an educational method, the main flywheel can rotate the wheel representative of all other areas. The flywheel, stemmed from the image of the Nautilus and depicted in the symbol of the Ottawa Charter, represents one of the critical points of this strategy: hypothesize environments and situations leading people to acquire healthy lifestyle to care environmental sustainability." until a few decades ago, in the medical and social landscape, health was mainly defined as the absence of disease. This idea led to models and strategies of intervention aimed to prevent any risk of disease and solve any disease-related complications in order to add as many years as possible to people's lives. However, since the middle of the last century, people have started to think about health differently. In fact, the famous definition of the World Health Organization (Catford, 2007), identifying health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not only the mere absence of disease or infirmity" dates back to the late 1940s.

Since the WHO definition of 1948, the psychological and social, and finally the spiritual role, has been explored and analyzed. Even more, in recent years, a fundamental paradigm shift has been developed, ferrying from a model of pathogenic type to one of healthy type. What is important to note is the need to transit through educational work to support people and communities to strengthen their control over what determines their health. From the perspective of pedagogical analysis, we could say that the promotion of health is built around the training of the subject and his ability to govern the complexity of his relations with the community and the environment in which he/she is inserted. Starting from here, a culture of prevention and health education has been developed. It mainly focuses on people's planning and the possibility of defining well-being objectives even from extremely disadvantaged situations.

Moreover, this new approach to health education highlights and improves resources in a quality of life-oriented manner (Zannini, 2004). Indeed, due to COVID-19, we explored a very uncomfortable situation in terms of general well-being and quality of life (Bas et al, 2020). However, this new idea of prevention improves the attitudes aimed to achieve healthy lifestyles (personal and simultaneously in dialogue with the surrounding environment) (Garista et al., 2015) and explores lifelong learning challenges.

The concept of balance, today more than ever, symbolically refers to the psychosocial bal-

ance as well as to the psychophysical one, emphasizing the possibility of connecting the various dimensions of the person and her/his environment. The aim is to build a general state of well-being while recalling the need to develop tightrope walking skills to continually re-establish a balance in their life path. According to Antonovsky (1996), the leading theorist of health, health coincides with the continuous search for a balance between a state of complete well-being and a state of complete malaise, which can often oscillate during a life cycle. Therefore the construction of a healthy status keeps searching for a balance. Lindström and Eriksson defined this balance as “a matter of learning” and contextualized in the various fields of action of health promotion (Lindström, 2011). More specifically, health becomes a lifelong learning experience that leads to confront oneself, one’s history with life events. Just as in life-long and life-wide learning, you do not learn a health behavior once and for all, putting into practice a predefined healthy behavior or, as stated elsewhere, “correct” (for example, do at least 30 minutes a day of motor activity).

Instead, the sense of health promotion and its genesis refers to the “the possibility of becoming aware of one’s own experiences and histories, such as the *raison d’être* of being able to put into practice behavior related to, for example, sport, nutrition or the relationship with the environment, and to live it as a lifestyle: a way of being and feeling vital in the world (Garista, 2009). These assumptions are the mainstem of the idea that physical activity and sport are devices and tools to achieve a state of psychophysical balance. According to the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization (WHO), physical activity is “any effort exerted by the skeletal, muscular system that results in a higher energy consumption than in rest conditions.” At the same time, sedentariness means spending many hours of the day sitting. In this period, we are surely forced to greater physical inactivity due to the forced modification of our habits. Promote physical activity in these conditions of distancing and social restrictions is not free of handicaps, and the lack of effectiveness (if not damage) of “do it yourself” must push caution. Nevertheless, exercises training remains a combination of several elements: trainers have to consider many factors such as age, sex, weight, and other anthropometric features, joint mobility, the intensity of exercise, the spaces, tools and time available, any previous pathologies, possible undiagnosed pathologies, coordination, and skills.

Moreover, the trainer’s supervision is essential. The goal of a healthy physical activity is a delicate psychophysical balance made of cognition, physicality, and emotion. There is nobody without a mind and a mind without a body. It is necessary to consider the influence of the psychological, especially emotional, correlates of this period. The prevailing emotions are fear and anxiety. They can change the sleep/wake cycle as well as eating habits. Anxiety can cause eating sweeter and caloric foods. The abuse of alcohol, drugs, and psychoactive substances can also increase. Boredom and constriction have similar effects. Anger caused by compulsion, forced cohabitation might lead to substitute and compensatory behavior. Therefore, the constant execution of simple behaviors takes into account all the factors and aspects analyzed and tries to mitigate all the problems identified in the interest of safeguarding our psychophysical balance (Demetrio 2001).

2. Sport as an educational device in times of pandemic

In a pandemic time, without sports, physical health and mental health are continually being put to the test: the immune system has fewer defenses; sedentary lifestyle-related disorders and pathologies arise, which can also become chronic.

Not to mention the impacts of the absence of sport on mental health. These can exacerbate the stress or anxiety that many will experience in the face of isolation from normal social life, economic concerns, difficulties to be faced and the idea of getting sick or the virus hitting a family member. An apprehensive state, the one caused by the state of emergency, which often finds beneficial outlet in a swim, a run, in a spinning lesson, now denied (Martínková, 2011). To suffer from this cloistered condition without sport dictated by the pandemic are mainly young people, who usually find in activities outside the home a form of sociality and sharing between peers.

Sport is also an excellent antidote against pandemic stress or Pandemic Fatigue, as the WHO has called it, and to combat the so-called post-Covid cognitive fog that squats subjects healed from the virus for an even prolonged time. Sports activity, never as in this period, can and must be interpreted in a pedagogical way as a metaphor: the exercise of discipline forms commitment and contributes dynamically to structure the personality, projecting it towards a continuous transformation, a catharsis. Sports education in application and psycho-physical effort, respect for the rules, leads to a kind of ascetics: this is aimed at revealing its limits to overcome them, through an intensification of dedication and training (Malavasi, 2007). Education can be defined as the journey that the subject educates, individual, group or community, accomplishes with the help of the educator or educators, towards a must be, an end that is considered valid for man and for humanity. In this perspective there may be different paths of this itinerary, capable of accompanying the individual or a group for a stretch of existence or for the whole existence: art, work, research, nature, disease and pain, friendship and affections and sport. It is precisely to the latter that there is a unanimous tendency to confer a particular pedagogical value, considering it an “essential component of our society”, capable of transmitting “all the fundamental rules of social life” and bearer of fundamental educational values such as “tolerance, team spirit, loyalty”. Perhaps, however, it is forgotten that sport has not accompanied the whole history of man at all, since for centuries there is no trace of it: the fall of the Greek civilization, that carried in his blood athletic agonism, alongside the heated debate also in the philosophical field, unified by the background of worship that was the basis of both, coincided “with the decline of sport as a public activity held in honor and the games invented in the Middle Ages were all in all elitist episodes and local forms. Only towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the next, progress and civilization led to an anthropological transformation that aimed, ideally, to revive the Hellenic model. In fact, the most direct impetus for the development of modern sport has come from politics and industry, the two most characteristic expressions of modernity, of which sport, as it is understood today, is a consequence: without the pressures of nationalism and economic profit, perhaps modern sport would never have arisen (Dorsch, 2016). An expression of modernity, therefore, it undoubtedly also expresses its counter tendency in that it gives rise to primordial, physical, manifestly archaic standards of behaviour, releasing elementary energies. When a century ago the first doubts about the absolute positivity of the evolution of human civilization became apparent, there was a reversal of the hierarchy of values set by rationalization with the consequent rise of the game as a form of compensation (playing, wasting time, escaping profitability), as a de-routinizing activity as an outlet for the innate need to assert itself (Vannatta, 2008). Yet, even if sport seems to solve problems, it itself is not without problems, and it is cultivating dangerous and irrepressible trends in itself that pollute its value: everyday life, excessive spectacularisation, violence, doping. In addition to the risk of subsoting, or even contributing to idolatry and commodification of the body: the justified goal of achieving physical well-being, a possible destination thanks to sport, risks placing good physical condition as an end rather than as a tool for a more global health of the whole person. The chimera of eternal youth reduces physical form as a mere condition to enjoy the offers of the consumer society. On the basis of these assumptions, we ask ourselves a few questions. Is it justified to consider sport educational itinerary and even privileged educational itinerary? In this exceptional period, can sport be regarded as a valuable tool for improving the quality of life? To answer these questions, it is necessary to introduce a premise concerning the concept of corporeity. Sport enhances the body, an aspect that does not necessarily mean its materialistic flattening. It does, however, require its proper location and therefore its right “use” for the purposes of the education of the personal self and of the Community. In the past, especially by Christians, a criticism was made of corporeity to cope with two philosophical tendencies of the time: the apolline isolation of the spirit towards the body and that of the dionysian body towards the spirit. The body is not an object, but a subject, a person. Man is not a fragment of “corporeity”, inhabited for a moment by a spiritual spark. He is first and foremost a spirit, a unique and free person and it is through the body that his spirit opens up to a journey in matter and history (De Mennato, 2006). The

soul does not come to inhabit a pre-existing house, it “inthese” its “corporeity” starting from matter. Thus the human body becomes the outwardization of the soul. From this point of view, we must read the emblematic expression of sport, which is gestures. In every gesture there is the relationship with the world, the way to see it, to feel it, the legacy, education, the environment, the psychological constitution. Crossing existence and flesh aside, gestures create that unity that we call “body” that has gestures, but it is those gestures that give birth to a body from the immobility of the flesh (Cunti, 211). Gestures are not a representation, but it is life itself in what is unrepresentable with the word: it is no coincidence that children are educated by gestures rather than words, because they are incapable of deploying around them that volume, that multiple-sized environment, that space-producing experience that we recognize in every gesture. The education of the body implies favoring that the body is able to show and ignite the spirit. But when is sport able to ignite the spirit? When is it capable of giving those who practice it mastery of themselves, of their acts? The answers to these questions must take account of the current emergency today. The outbreak of the Covid-19, the pandemic has drastically changed the lifestyles of millions of people (Peçanha et al, 2020). Just think of the absence of sport and physical activity, which is negatively affecting fitness and mental health. The closure of gyms, soccer fields, swimming pools, parks, dance and fitness centers, is preventing many from engaging in the usual sports or physical, individual or group activities, outside their homes. The consequences, according to a United Nations paper last May 2020, are different: you tend to be less physically active, sleep becomes irregular, you do not follow acorrect and balanced diet. Sport today has the task of turning on the spirit and giving the subjects self-mastery, in view of the restrictions with which we have been living for a long time.

Conclusions

In this period of uncertainty, in which individual freedom and self-expression are often put to the test for the superior preservation of the common good, we must protect a way of life that helps us to remain resilient (Mantegazza, 2003): able to adapt without collapsing, remaining firm in ourselves. Sport is a great help to maintain our health not only physical, but also and above all, psychological. Already in the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic we were able to observe, how “sport” has become a lifesaver to cling to for millions of Italians who, despite their confinement, with daily regularity and with the passion of those who love, have continued to train online, through apps, on their terrace, with their family reunited, etc... A shared support system, but also private, each with himself and with his own specific discipline, but also with the others of his own gym, team, in a group network that proudly did not want to untie the knots of his jersey. It is indisputable that those who have managed to maintain the practice of physical activity constantly have had more resources, and ultimately, more health to deal with the most difficult moments of this pandemic (Demetrio, 2001). The virus continues to hit hard at the level of disease and deaths, but also economically and psychologically. Sport thus becomes a fundamental key to health promotion, to face with the highest degree of resilience the difficult phase that will still be characterized by closures, isolation, digital and media overexposure and therefore at a high level of stress.

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