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## Mindful Exercise

By CHRISTOPHER SHEA

Simply by telling 44 hotel maids that what they did each day involved some serious exercise, the Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer and Alia J. Crum, a student, were apparently able to lower the women's blood pressure, shave pounds off their bodies and improve their body-fat and "waist to hip" ratios. Self-awareness, it seems, was the women's elliptical trainer.

At the start of the study, Langer and Crum quizzed 84 maids at seven carefully matched hotels about how much exercise they got. Fully a third of the women said they got no exercise at all, while two-thirds said they did not work out regularly. Langer and Crum took several measures of the women's basic fitness levels, which indicated that they, indeed, had the poor health of basically sedentary people. Then just over half the women were told an unfamiliar truth: cleaning 15 rooms daily — pushing recalcitrant vacuum cleaners, scrubbing tubs, pulling sheets — constitutes more than enough activity to meet the surgeon general's recommendation of a half-hour of physical activity daily. The researchers even provided specifics: 15 minutes of scrubbing burns 60 calories, 15 minutes of vacuuming burns 50. The basic message and the details were then posted in the maids' lounges in the hotels where the 44 women worked, to serve as reminders, while a control group was left in the dark.

A month later, Langer and Crum checked back with the women to find, as they reported in the February issue of *Psychological Science*, remarkable results. The average study-group maid had lost 2 pounds, while her systolic blood pressure had dropped by 10 points; by all measures the 44 women "were significantly healthier." Yet there were no reported changes in behavior, only in mind-set, with the vast majority of the women now considering themselves regular exercisers. Langer sees the study as a lesson in the importance of mindfulness, long a subject of her research, and which need not involve Buddhism or meditation, she stresses. "It's about noticing new things; it's about engagement," she says.

But for the study's white-collar readers, a corollary to its results might be dispiriting: Made freshly aware — mindful — of just how sedentary their work lives are in contrast to a housekeeper's, might they not suffer a corresponding decline in health?

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