Sitting Is the New Smoking!

There I was—sitting (along with many others)—at a meeting. The speaker, Mal O’Connor, Vice President at CFAR, provided a stretch break and used the words that appear in the title. Talk about having an impact! I wanted to jump out of my seat and stretch and march in place.

For years, smokers complained that they were treated as second-class citizens. Their numbers diminished. Now we are on a campaign to increase activity because so many people are overweight. Will this catchy phrase work? I fear not. Let me explain.

We are regimented from grade school to sit in our seats (preferably to sit STILL in our seats). So, sometimes when people want to have walking meetings, they are thought to be different. Imagine what they would think if we had standing room only CE events!

I have no idea how often in a day each of us could stand instead of sit. However, I can think of several scenarios where standing would be thought odd or maybe even disrespectful. For example, how many funerals have you attended where people stood throughout the ceremony? Or what about a religious ceremony such as a church service or wedding? And think what would happen if you went to a theater (live or otherwise) and stood!

In addition, few signs are posted near offices that prohibit our sitting. “No loitering” may be a posted message, but I guess one could loiter sitting down as readily as standing up. Is the absence of park benches the same message as “Smoking Prohibited”?

You can see that the impact probably will not be as great as the smoking campaigns. However, after we are attentive to the idea that sitting also has negative health consequences, maybe we will pay more attention to whether we are sitting or standing.

Maybe a few courageous leaders will tell groups to stand if they feel like it, to walk in place during a meeting, or to march around a room. It is probably too costly for most major businesses to replace their traditional style desks with the new stand/sit desks, but maybe we could salvage the old over-the-bed tables so that they become a desk alternative. That way we would have options throughout the day to sit or to stand.

Maybe we should ask speakers what physical movement activities they have built into their presentations to assure that some physical activity (other than squirming in a chair) occurs during a presentation. Maybe we should give out pedometers instead of one more pen, pad, and bag to conference goers. Maybe if we believe that learning is important, we will encourage some activity that stimulates circulation that increases blood flow to the brain to help us retain new information.

If we commit to the idea that sitting is potentially as bad for our health as smoking (or tobacco products in general) is, we would grasp this concept to enhance learning and to demonstrate currency of knowledge simply by the way we implemented a presentation.

For some reason, this editorial has taken longer than normal to write. It is in part due to the fact that I have been out of my desk chair at least a dozen times. Although I had other things to do that required my leaving my desk, I think writing about sitting while sitting seems incongruous! (Are you now standing while reading this editorial?) Standing, like sitting, may be contagious. If one of us does it, others may follow!

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