Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: We all know that physical activity is good for us and necessary for a healthy lifestyle, so why do we let it falter? Dr. Sara Powell focuses on sport and exercise psychology in the Department of Kinesiology at Missouri State University. I'm Nicki Donnelson, and Powell is my guest on today's Missouri State Journal.

Sara Powell: How do we promote physical activity behaviors? How do we encourage folks to be physically active? What factors go into that? I do a lot of research with something called self-efficacy, which is somebody's feelings of confidence and competence with being able to complete a health behavior. A lot of the work that I do is psychological skills intervention, so helping people build their levels of self-confidence, build positive body image perceptions, set goals, work on stress management and time management, really all centered around building those physical activity behaviors. And actually, one of the studies that we're looking at right now, I'm collaborating with a couple of faculty in the kinesiology and also some students in our department, as well, looking at how our current situation, how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both stress levels and physical activity behaviors of both college students and adults.

Nicki Donnelson: Even outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals struggle with mental barriers to initiating and maintaining physical activity. Powell classifies the problems into three main categories: perceived lack of time, lack of motivation, and lack of confidence.

Sara Powell: When we talk about perceived lack of time, for some folks, if it's not something that's already on your schedule, you're probably not going to make the time for it. And so that's why I say perceived lack of time because, in essence, we probably all really do have the actual time to be physically active, whether that's 10, 15 minutes a day. It doesn't have to be hours and hours. It can be start with 10 to 15 minutes. Work your way up as you become more comfortable. But if it's not on a schedule or if we leave it for the end of the day when we're already have spent so much brainpower and time and energy doing other things, likelihood of it actually coming to fruition and really happening, probably not.

Lack of motivation. I think that one's a little trickier. Motivation is something that, just like any other muscle in your body, your mind is a muscle, too, and you have to really work to sustain that. And so that competence piece ties into that, as well. One of the things that I say for folks who are just starting out, if that program is not set up where it's going to be incrementally based on starting a little bit slowly and then gradually increasing the intensity and the frequency and all those sorts of things, folks aren't going to stick to it. Reason being it's not going to be enjoyable. You're going to be sore. It's going to be too difficult. You'll feel like you did something if you start out and then just kind of really go for it. But the likelihood of that longevity of maintaining that behavior is, it's just not, it's not going to happen.

Nicki Donnelson: Powell offers many suggestions for overcoming these barriers, things like implementing visual cues like setting out your workout clothes the night before, setting calendar reminders, monitoring progress on a device, or writing goals where you'll see them throughout the day. Accountability is a big part of physical activity. She suggests finding social support, whether in person or virtual, to help you keep up with others who want to achieve something similar. Choosing an activity you enjoy will help as you push toward your goal. Powell said that focusing on mindfulness, positivity, and being present are also helpful.

Sara Powell: I read a study recently that said that we speak to ourselves, or we have about 6,200 thoughts a day. About 70% of those are negative. And if you think about that, every time that you look in the mirror, every time that you tell yourself that you can't do something or you wish something was different or you wish you looked a certain way or you wish you had more time to do this or I should be doing this, and then if we were to actually externalize those and say them to someone else, we would sound like really, really terribly mean people. Right?

And so thinking about how do I show myself the love that I show other people, that's really important, and that's where that time that you set aside to be physically active is a time where you're showing yourself love. And if you're embracing that from a mental standpoint as well, knowing that in the beginning, it's going to be difficult, but once you kind of make that a habit, it's going to give you so much more return of investment. And so telling yourself that you want to be active, that you can do this, that you do have the ability to make these lasting changes and that you're going to see progress, it not only will help you improve your own health behaviors, but I think, in turn, it also helps you be more holistically well and more grateful towards other people outwardly as well.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Dr. Sara Powell. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at (417) 836-6397.