

The Role of Psychological Flexibility in Physical Activity

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INTRODUCTION

Psychological flexibility (PF) predicts many health outcomes (Ong et al., 2024) but relatively little research has examined links to physical exercise—a key determinant of physical and emotional well-being (Penedo & Dahn, 2005). While some studies have shown associations between PF and/or exposure to ACT and physical exercise (Kangasniemi et al., 2014), none of the studies looked at the subcomponents of PF: openness to experience (willingness to have difficult thoughts/feelings), behavioral awareness (present-moment noticing of internal states), and valued action (engagement in value-guided behavior). Understanding which component drives exercise behavior could refine ACT-based interventions for college students.

METHODS

Participants: First-year students ($N = 215$) at five Jesuit universities across the United States.

Measures: Godin Leisure-Time Exercise Questionnaire (Godin & Shephard, 1997) measured physical activity. PF, including its three sub-domains, was measured by the Comprehensive Assessment of ACT Processes (CompACT-15; Hsu et al., 2023).

Data Analysis: Multiple regression with PF as the predictor (three sub-domains were entered simultaneously) and weekly leisure-time physical activity as the outcome.

RESULTS

Together, the three PF domains predicted greater weekly exercise, $R^2 = .052$, $F(3, 211) = 3.87$, $p = .010$. Behavioral awareness was the only unique predictor ($\beta = .18$, $p = .017$), while openness to experience ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .792$) and valued action ($\beta = .11$, $p = .123$) did not independently predict exercise when all three were entered simultaneously.

DISCUSSION

Behavioral awareness, described as the ability to observe one's internal experience, was the only unique predictor of physical activity, and may be an especially important domain of PF during the transition to college. These findings suggest that college students who can tune into bodily cues, such as noticing restlessness, fatigue, or shifts in mood, may be better equipped to be more physically active, rather than staying inactive when they don't feel motivated. ACT-based skills that build this awareness could help students form and keep healthy exercise habits. It is also possible that practicing more physical activity can improve one's behavioral awareness given the bidirectionality of this relationship. Future research should test whether ACT-based interventions that specifically target mindful body awareness (e.g., body scan) are more effective at increasing exercise than broader PF interventions.

Behavioral awareness (i.e., noticing your thoughts and feelings in the present moment) was the **only** part of psychological flexibility that uniquely predicted **how physically active** first-year college students were.

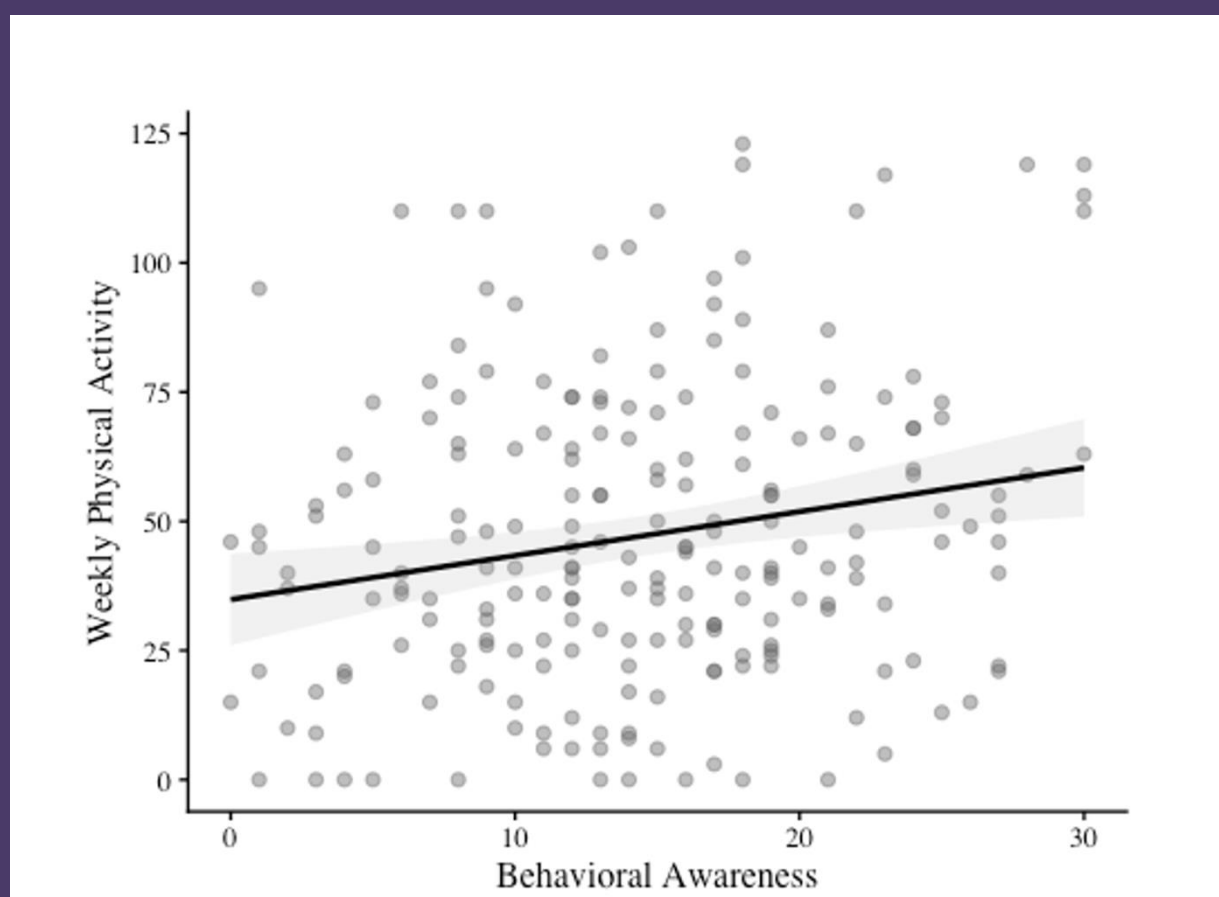


Figure 1
Scatterplot of Behavioral Awareness and Weekly Physical Activity

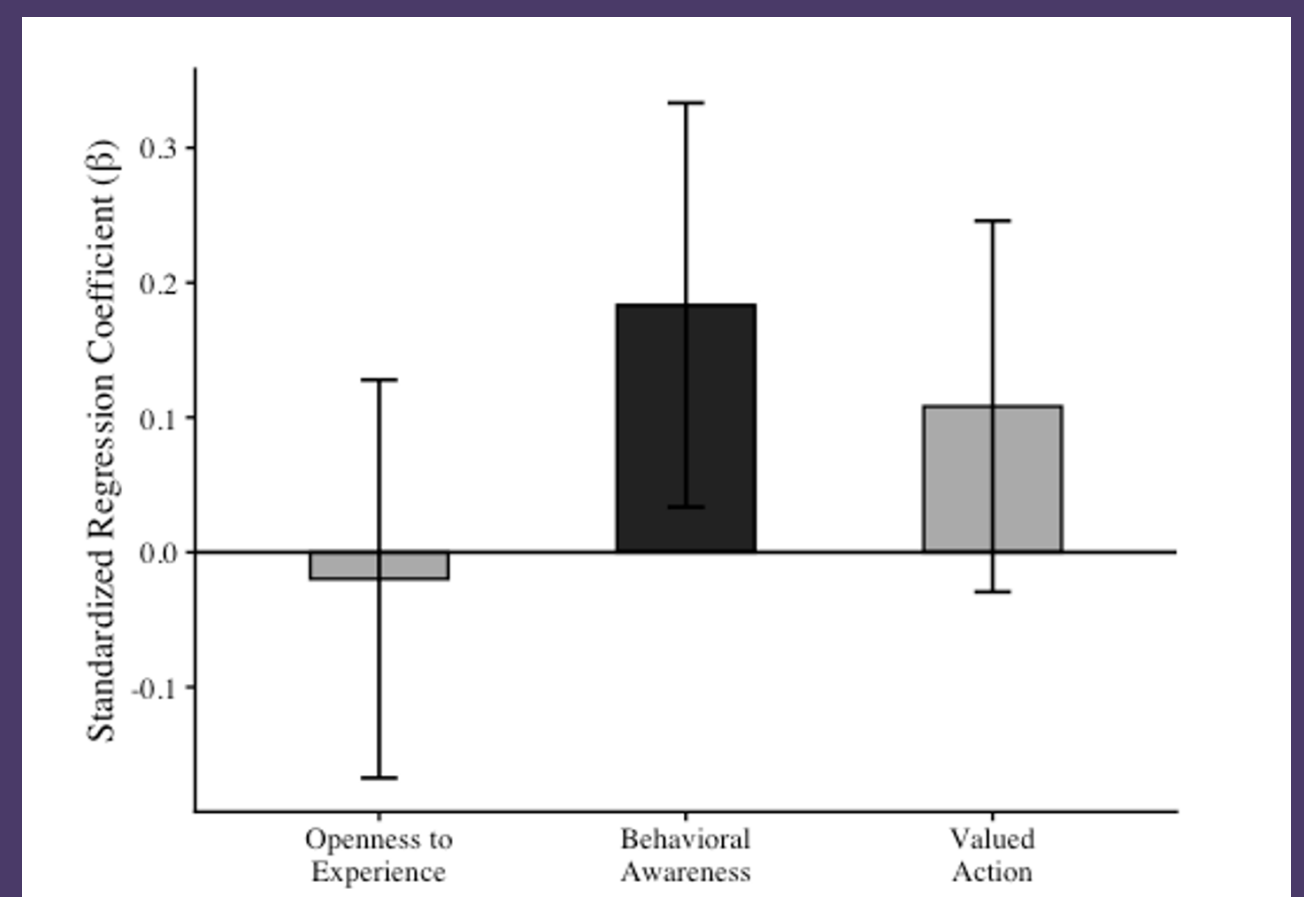


Figure 2
Standardized Regression Coefficients for the PF Sub-Domains Predicting Weekly Physical Activity

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics ($N = 215$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Physical activity	47.12	29.19
Openness to experience	9.71	6.21
Behavioral awareness	14.42	6.98
Valued action	22.72	4.08

Table 2
Correlations and Regression Coefficients

PF sub-domain	<i>r</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Openness to experience	.08	-.02	.792
Behavioral awareness	.20**	.18*	.017
Valued action	.15*	.11	.123

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

To access the abstract and references, scan this QR code!



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