

UK Wellness Issues From a U.S. Graduate's Point of View

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United Kingdom



In August, 2012, London, England hosted the Summer Olympics and Paralympics. Sebastian Coe led the bidding team, successfully winning with the motto: "Inspire a Generation." The games were a success, the country buzzed, and London delivered a spectacular event.

Today, the United Kingdom (UK) continues to work with the words and sentiment from Sebastian Coe during the bid and in the opening and closing ceremony speeches. "Inspire a Generation." Now Team Great Britain Olympians work with schools, government, and charities on health initiatives to promote increasing physical activity, encouraging healthy eating, trying new sports, reducing obesity (child and adult), and reducing sick days.

Physical activity in children and adults needs to be addressed, as obesity is on the rise. I was born and raised in the Midwest region of the United States. Having lived in the United Kingdom for the past two decades, I have witnessed increasing obesity rates trend gradually across the Atlantic from the United States and reach the United Kingdom. Why do I think there is an issue? The population moves less. More convenience food is available. People claim a lack of time makes convenience more important. "Eating on the run," or picking up a ready-made meal is more prevalent. Technology has changed our way of life. This means children play football on a computer rather than a field. It is a technological world and United States is known as the "Super power," so they are always first in receive/take on these innovations. Let's look at it as a reminder: Atari, Sega, Nintendo, Game Boy, Game Boy Pocket, Wii, Xbox360, Dsi, now iPhone, iPad . . . what

next? The thing is, the perceived rise of crime through the years has caused children to feel safer indoors rather than playing in the parks and streets when I was young. Children are seemingly getting addicted to these technologies, stopping children playing for real. Food for thought? We need to take responsibility of our own children and our life and make good choices and have awareness.

When I was growing up in the United States, there were many choices for everything, now there is even more and this is happening in the United Kingdom. The United States, for instance, has how many flavors, brands. and varieties of potato chips (known as crisps in the United Kingdom). Some of the many flavors are: Dill Pickle, Sour Cream, Ranch, Sundried Tomato, Salt, Maple Bacon, Honey BBQ, Honey Mustard, Ketchup, Sweet Southern BBQ, Paprika, BBQ Ham, Chicken & Waffles, Cinnamon & Sugar, White Chocolate Peppermint, Pumpkin Pie Spice, Taco, Cheddar Beer, and Pepper. Brands of chips include Frito Lay, Dutch, Sunshine, Tim's, Ruffle's, Pringles, Wavy Lays, Kettle, Baked Lays, Private Label, Herr's, Doritos, Brannigans, Cape Cod, and Ritz. Then there are the varieties of chips such as rippled, wavy, slim chips, ribbed, hoops, pellets, long straw, and more. To sum up, the U.S. brand Pringles makes a lot of different flavors alone. There are many unusual flavors to buy so now when I go home the one snack aisle is actually three long aisles.

One must ask themselves just how much choice do we need and this only a bag of potato chips. The same goes for many other products in the United States. When shopping, my eyes go a little bit wild looking at all the choices. The United Kingdom is getting more like this and, of course, it is marketing and innovation of the brands but do we really need this much choice? Another point is the portion sizes. Portion sizes are much larger in the United States than in the United Kingdom.

So, what is the United Kingdom doing to address obesity, lack of physical exercise, and a sedentary lifestyle? It goes back to August 2014, "inspire a generation," which delivered a message not only to children but to adults as well.

In U.K. schools, the promotion of a variety of sports for children has increased since the Olympics. Many schools have different offerings from companies that run cricket, football (soccer in the United States), street dance, hockey, and more – they can sign up and pay for these usually before or after school. In the United States, it is naturally part of the school curriculum and I have to say they do it well. Physical activity and sport are part of the school curriculum and you only get a similar set of options within private education in the United Kingdom and one can pay up to £5,000 per term (@\$8,000 and 3 terms per year).

The use of a celebrity -- for example, twice gold medalist Mo Farah -- and others on advertisements for healthy eating is a good way to encourage kids to make better choices. There has been a ban on advertising fast food and junk products during children's TV shows. I can say the likes of some U.S. Olympians have been used in United States to promote healthy eating/exercise but the advertisements (and there are many, especially during children's programs in the United States) have often promoted unhealthy choices such as sugary cereal. It still amazes me when I return every year and it is getting worse. Sadly, I have seen many children drinking sports drinks such as Gatorade and sugary drinks such as Coca-Cola (in the United States more readily).

In U.K. supermarkets and restaurants there is a better awareness of calories. Traffic light systems are used (Green – good, Amber – OK, Red – avoid) and even fast food chains show calorie content to make people more aware. Popular chains such as Pizza Express have the low-fat healthier options with smaller pizzas and salads. This is clearer now so

better choices are available when eating out. The United States does this, but it goes back to portion sizes which are still much larger than in the United Kingdom.

U.K. companies are signing up for a government sponsored initiative called the Responsibility Deal. They publicly pledge they will put into place their choice of health initiatives. Some examples of pledges are physical activity in the work place, active travel, staff health checks and employee engagement. The buzz words are wellbeing and employee engagement in the United Kingdom. Having graduated in the United States from Health Promotion/Wellness, employee health and wellness has been important for many decades in the United States, as health insurance can cost a company if they have unhealthy employees.

In the United Kingdom, charities initiatives such as "Walk to Work" and "Know Your Numbers" are popular for getting corporations and the community involved, aware, and more active--more often. Hopefully over time, this will filter to their families and children. There is still a long way to go, but providing the materials for everyone in the United Kingdom is moving in the right direction. At the end of the day the choice is yours. Everyone knows life is about choices. I will leave you to decide.

Chris Andrews is the MD of Personal Touch Fitness (PTF) in the United Kingdom. Chris prides herself in her passion, enthusiasm and expertise in providing fitness services in the corporate environment which is extended through the company values, ethos and to the employees. With almost 20 years of experience, many leading PTF, she has learned what works and what doesn't. Her energy drives her tireless quest to improve her clients' health and fitness. Chris has given PTF clients the confidence to harness her skills to lead Facilities and Service Provider workshops as well as formulate and promote client Wellbeing Strategies. She is asked to write and be interviewed for different magazines in the UK & Ireland. Chris is also well connected back to her university (University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point) of which she is grateful for the Dean and Professors for supporting the work she does.