

# **“Hay Sacks Anonymous”: Living in the Shadow of the Unidentified. Psychological Aspects of Physical Inactivity from a Phenomenological Perspective**

**Anni Bergman and Torsten Norlander**

Karlstad University, Sweden

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*The present qualitative study emanates from a phenomenological perspective and has the purpose of creating an understanding for what a so-called “hay sack” is as well as understanding the experiences of a hay sack. In this context a hay sack refers to a person with low physical activity. Eight hay sacks between 36-58 years of age were interviewed about their experiences. Karlsson’s (1995) EPP-method was used. The analysis resulted in 13 categories. A hay sack wants to, but is unable to engage in regular physical activity as a consequence of something unidentified, possibly a psychological barrier. Being a hay sack involves thoughts and feelings which are expressed in a variety of ways such as excuses and anxiety about future health. Key Words: Physical Inactivity, Hay Sack, Keep-fit Measures, Exercise, and Motivation*

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## **Background**

The human species, *Homo Sapiens*, has probably existed for approximately 200,000 years (Gärdenfors, 2000). Its predecessors, who diverged from the other apes, are the hominids who developed and adjusted to life on the savannahs in East Africa during a period approximately 5 to 8 million years ago. The following history is evolutionary history, but it is clear that human’s cognitive and intellectual abilities have developed significantly since then.

During the last 200 years, technical development has been rapid, leading to societies in which individuals increasingly no longer need to be involved in physical activities either at work or outside of work (Fletcher, 1983). Prior to the technical revolution physical activity was a natural part of human life, whereas today individuals need to plan for the inclusion of physical activities in their lives (Farquhar, 1987). This fact has had the following effect. Many individuals in technically advanced cultures are physically inactive resulting in poorer health for a large proportion of the population (McElroy, 2002).

Most researchers agree that regular physical exercise positively affects both the psychological and physical well-being. In addition, most research participants have reported a positive attitude toward physical activity and exercise at the same time as the total amount of exercisers is rather low (Bjurö & Wilhelmsen, 1975; Engström, 1979; Fjellström, 1976).

The proportion of physically inactive middle-aged men in Sweden is approximately 25-30 %, and for middle-aged women it is 10-15 % (Folkhälsoinstitutet,

1999). Among older individuals the proportions are about the same whereas the proportion for those between adolescence to middle-age is about 10-15 %. In this context, physical inactivity is defined as the absence of voluntary exercise, low daily physical activity involved in hobbies, no physical activity involved in travel to and from work, or at work. In addition to those who are inactive, there are also those who engage in some, but not sufficient, physical activity. The size of this group is dependent on the definition of sufficient physical activity for the maintenance of good health and the prevention of poor health. It is estimated that about 75 % of those above 30 years of age are either not sufficiently physically active or completely inactive (Folkhälsoinstitutet).

In order to increase well-being in the population, a number of health promotion projects have been initiated. These projects, however, have been plagued with a large number of “drop-outs” among the participants, a pattern also seen in relevant research (Cooper, 1970; Dishman, 1982; Dishman, Ickes, & Morgan, 1980; Folkhälsoinstitutet, 1999; Goodrick, Warren, Hartung, & Hoepfel, 1984; Martin & Dubbert, 1985; Norlander, Bergman, & Archer, 2002; Sachs & Buffone, 1984). The drop-out tendencies have been shown to constitute a substantial and complex problem, as they are difficult to get a grip on and to summarize since they involve so many aspects of physical activity. The reasons many project participants fail to go through regular physical activity may be physical, practical, and even psychological. When it comes to physical activity several of those who exercise have described difficulties such as a threshold that must be overcome, or the possible occurrence of some kind of psychological barrier. (Wedman & Wester-Wedman, 1983). Research has devoted minimal attention to these psychological aspects, which are important if we are to gain a greater understanding of the problems surrounding physical activity and reduce physical inactivity among the population.

Karlstad University and the surrounding commune have initiated a collaborative effort to activate physically inactive individuals. Several reports indicate health problems due to physical inactivity, and therefore local authorities approached the university for assistance. The Department of Psychology responded by launching the Hay Sack Program. The participants of the so-called Hay Sacks Anonymous group reported difficulties getting started with an exercise routine and difficulties maintaining it even when they want to continue. To better understand this increase in physical inactivity, we examined psychological aspects of physical inactivity with the use of a qualitative method, in order to learn what constitutes being such a hay sack, and what the experiences of hay sacks are according to them.

### **The Self of the Researchers**

Two researchers conducted this study. The research group consisted of a professor in psychology (Norlander) and a student in psychology (Bergman). Norlander was trained in an experimental paradigm, but has begun to conduct phenomenological studies within his area of interest (Friman, Nyberg, & Norlander, 2004; Norlander, Blom, & Archer, 2002; Norlander, Gård, Lindholm, & Archer, 2003; Pramling, Norlander, & Archer, 2001; Pramling, Norlander, & Archer, 2003). He has noted the value of broad approaches with different methods. Bergman recently completed her master's degree and is now engaged in the Swedish elder care organization. Bergman conducted all interviews, transcribed the material, and completed the analysis. Norlander followed and participated

in this process as her supervisor. None of the authors had any personal connections to the hay sack group even though Norlander made the initial suggestion to the city council to start the program.

### **Previous Research**

The literature on the psychological aspects of physical inactivity is not comprehensive. At first, there was only work done on the physical aspects, and primarily in the medical domain (Wester-Wedman, 1988). At that time, researchers focused on the physical/physiological effects of regular physical activity, but in the last two decades new questions have emerged, including those concerning the psychological aspects of physical activity.

An early study, with a focus on experiences connected to physical activity, concerns physically inactive individuals during the mid-seventies (Fjellström, 1976). Fjellström arranged for regular exercise for 40 inactive individuals and followed them for 8 months. Only 72 % completed the project and only a few continued doing regular exercise after the project ended. Fjellström concluded that it is not enough to exercise regularly during a year in order to experience an internally motivated need to exercise. Relatively few of the participants experienced an internal motivation, (i.e., the notion that exercise feels good and is relaxing). Initially, it is often external motivation, such as health reasons or getting in shape, that reinforces the activity. When external reinforcement is less than expected, motivation is reduced. Fjellström wrote that given that most participants experienced positive effects, it is surprising that so few of them continued on their own. One reason given was the absence of an inspiring instructor and companions.

Wedman and Wester (1982) interpreted Fjellström's (1976) conclusions as suggesting that regular physical activity may only be possible if at the same time individuals got lots of encouragement. Wedman and Wester disagree, since in their own study of those who exercised regularly, feelings of discomfort and lack of encouragement did not keep these individuals from physical activity. In general they felt good about exercising and had no thoughts of quitting, and were, in fact, inclined to increase their exercise. Wedman and Wester proposed a hypothesis that a kind of "threshold of discomfort" must be passed before exercise becomes the kind of need characteristic of those who exercise regularly.

Brown, Ramirez, and Taub (1978) noted that beginners of physical exercise often experience feelings of discomfort initially, before the body has adjusted to the strain involved. This course, from negative to positive experiences, can be illustrated using Solomon's (1980) opponent-process theory of acquired motivation. The theory explains how needs are acquired via contrast effects between pleasure and discomfort, and the dynamics of this process. One of Solomon's main notions is that most acquired needs follow the same empirical principles as "inclinations" in general. With regard to acquired needs, three affective phenomena exist: affective contrast, affective tolerance, and affective abstinence. With these starting points, Solomon illustrates the affective dynamics.

According to Solomon's (1980) model, strong feelings of discomfort plague the beginner of physical exercise. These feelings increase at first and then decrease to an

asymptotic level. When the exercise ends, feelings of pleasure appear and increase, and then subside to base level. When the activity has been repeated a sufficient number of times, the affective pattern changes such that the feelings of discomfort are much reduced. These feelings may even become positive. However, the reverse is true for the after effect, (i.e., the feeling of pleasure increases more than before and then subsides).

According to Solomon's (1980) theory, then, strong feelings of discomfort are to be expected for the beginner of physical activity, and these feelings are reduced only through regular and frequent exercise. Feelings of pleasure will eventually increase. The formerly inactive person must thus expect a period of getting used to the activity, including feelings of discomfort. Another model that accounts for the reasons that some individuals successfully engage in regular physical activity while others constantly fail is "the health belief model," proposed by Hochbaum et al. in 1950 (as cited in Wester-Wedman, 1988). This model was subsequently expanded by Bandura (1997) as the "perceived efficacy model," which states that the learning experiences and the environment affect our behavior by giving the information needed for effective behavior. Health belief models have been used in health related studies (Rogers, 1981). According to "the health belief model" individuals strive to obtain good health by engaging in behaviors that increase the possibility of avoiding illness. The reasons for this might be: (a) perceived probability of contracting a particular illness or state, (b) perceived degree of serious consequences of the illness, (c) an evaluation of the potential benefit or effectiveness of the recommended health-related activity in preventing the illness, and (d) beliefs about potential psychological and other costs and barriers related to the recommended treatment.

In this model, individuals who believe they can affect their own health and illnesses are seen as having an "internal locus of control," while those who do not believe that they can affect their health through actions are seen as having an "external locus of control". In addition there are specific factors that function as triggers for action. They can be either external or internal, (e.g., the perception of a bodily state or the influence of other individuals). The "health belief model" has received support and is seen as useful for the explanation of why some individuals successfully engage in regular physical activity and others do not (Patterson, 1981; Slenker, Price, Roberts, & Jurs, 1984). However, it has been criticized for only dealing with the "avoidance of poor health" (Brown, 1981; Schmelling, 1982). Critics argue that the model should also include the improvement and maintenance of good health. In addition, they question the assumption that health-related behavior is fueled only by a desire to avoid illness.

Research geared towards an understanding of what makes individuals engage in regular physical activity frequently emanates from the psychology of motivation. Such theories are also useful in terms of an understanding of physical inactivity. Jung (1978) discussed reasons for the difficulty in changing individuals' habits and behaviors, and argued that cognitive factors are of central importance. An individual's motivation may be triggered by external rewards or "extrinsic motivation" in which there are indirect rewards such as weight loss or enhanced status for activity, or by internal rewards or "intrinsic motivation" in which the activity itself is rewarding. In order to successfully achieve a behavioral change, internal dissatisfaction with one's behavior is required.

A number of studies exist that are based on these assumptions (Deci, 1975; Fjellström, 1976; Glasser, 1976; Sachs & Buffone, 1984). One such study is Wester-

Wedman's (1988) dissertation on the establishment of regular exercise routines. Like Jung, Wester-Wedman found that motivation plays a major role in the performance of an action. Initially, the behavior is motivated by, for example, a weight reduction and functions as a means toward a particular goal. As exercising continues the individual has more experiences of exercise and its effects, and these experiences are incorporated into the motivational structure, and the initial expectations lessen in importance. The motivational structure changes from being externally to internally fueled: Thus the motivation to start exercising is different from the motivation to continue doing it.

Arborelius (1993) argued within self-determination theory that individuals have a need for self-determination. Internal motivation is necessary for behavioral change to occur when an individual decides to do something, making behavioral change possible. When a behavior is changed due to external control, the change only lasts as long as the external control is present.

Arborelius (1993) also identified five different stages individuals go through when changing a behavior such as physical inactivity. The first stage is that time before the individual considers a change, and thus there is no motivation to change. The second stage occurs when the individual considers making a change resulting in a conflict of habits. In the third stage, the individual expresses a desire to change and takes action. The fourth stage is characterized by maintenance of the changed behavior for a long period of time. The fifth stage refers to a relapse to the first stage, (i.e., the individual fails to maintain regular physical activity). According to Arborelius, these five stages show that the motivation shifts according to each stage. When working with motivational tasks it is important to consider the stages, since each different stage requires a different strategy. There are certain similarities to Apter's (1989) reversal theory such as the notion that individuals tend to seek relatively high and relatively low levels of felt arousal and at the same time tend to avoid intermediate levels.

There are many theories, but in spite of extensive research, we have to conclude that the hay sack phenomenon is not sufficiently analyzed, and the problem of a possible psychological barrier is not in a deeper sense understood.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Eight individuals participated in this qualitative study, 2 men and 6 women. The participants were between 36 and 58 years of age, all living and working in the Swedish county, Värmland, in professions involving work with children and adolescents. Through work they learned about the Hay Sack Anonymous project, and signed up voluntarily. The first 8 to sign up constituted the sample.

### **Design**

A phenomenological study was deemed appropriate for the purpose of the study (Kvale, 1997), mainly due to the fact it is the method both authors are experienced with. The reason why the authors had been interested in this method is the consideration that the method may facilitate efforts to study more deeply situated meaning units of which

the respondent is not always fully conscious (Karlsson, 1995). A further advantage with the method, according to the authors' experiences, is that the method, not by necessity, derives hierarchical and typographical structures.

### **Data Collection Method**

The data of the present study are based on in-depth interviews conducted with the use of an earlier constructed very open interview guide. This guide consisted of 10 possible questions: How do you experience yourself? What does it mean being a hay sack? What are you thinking on right now? What are your feelings and thoughts before/during/after physical exercise? What are your feelings and thoughts about physical inactivity? Which strategies do you have to improve your situation? What is needed for not considering yourself being physical inactive? How do you respond to other peoples opinions concerning your physical inactivity? What are your ideal exercise habits? Is there something you want to add? Typically the respondent only got a couple of the prepared questions, (i.e., the three first questions). The respondents had the freedom to express and expand themselves on the topic, which meant that they most often also spontaneously addressed, among other things, the other seven questions. The interviews were tape-recorded to facilitate analyses and to allow the interviewer to focus on the respondents and the answers given.

### **Procedure**

Data collection began after contact was made between the researchers and those responsible for the health promotion project. Telephone contact was then made with the volunteers to present the research project, and inquire about possible participation in the interview. They got the information that this was a research conducted by the Department of Psychology and that all information will be handed confidentially. They all received a description of the procedures with the interviews and also the information that the purpose was to learn more about the psychological mechanisms concerning the problem with physical inactivity. All those contacted were willing to participate. Time and place of the interview were jointly agreed upon, and interviews took between 40 and 60 minutes each. Five of the interviews took place at the respondents' place of work and the remaining three at the University. In all cases the interviews were conducted with only the interviewer (Bergman) and the participant present.

At the time of the initial contact, the participants were told that the interviews would be treated confidentially. When tape-recording was agreed upon, participants were assured that only the interviewer would listen to the material in order to make the participants feel secure and willing to talk about their thoughts.

### **Data Analyses**

All interviews were conducted before the transcription. This process provided a good picture of the material and a sense of the phenomenon studied from the perspective of the respondents. The Empirical Phenomenological Psychological Method (the EPP-method), devised by Karlsson (1995), was used for the analysis. This method strives to

discern meaning structures of a psychological phenomenon in order to examine *what* the phenomenon is and *how* it is expressed. The method is used to come to know and understand the inherent meaning of the phenomenon from the perspective of each individual. This process is achieved through the subjective descriptions that individuals provide about their experience of the phenomenon. Their thought reveals the structure and essence of thoughts about the phenomenon. Karlsson's EPP-method, which consists of a five-step analysis, was used.

### *Step 1*

The researcher read the material several times until a good view of it was achieved. This was done to obtain the level of understanding necessary for Step 2. It was done with an open mind and without the influence of a particular theoretical frame. Some previous knowledge of the phenomenon was inevitable, but that differs from testing a theory.

### *Step 2*

The material was divided into smaller parts, so-called meaning units (MU). This division did not follow any grammatical rules, but was done according to change of content. The text was divided where the researcher noticed a shift in meaning (e.g., "I find bike riding boring and then I ride my bike until I feel blood in my mouth," but "I have hopes that things will get better"). The meaning units do not constitute isolated elements, but each unit is part of the whole. Each unit was to be understood with the entire protocol in mind.

### *Step 3*

The actual analysis of the material was done through the use of eidetic induction through interpretation. This implies going from the specific fact to its psychological meaning. For example, the respondent might express herself/himself with emotionally covered language, which could be interpreted differently in a broader verbal context (e.g., "I strongly hate all people who regularly exercise"). The purpose of the eidetic analysis was to detect the implicit and explicit psychological meaning, which the respondent experienced and described. This implies that the meaning units were interpreted based on the specific facts which the respondent has given in order to obtain the psychological content behind each unit. Two different facts can have the same psychological meaning and the same fact can mean different things to different individuals. The researcher strives to illuminate the unexpressed parts of the interview, parts that are not conscious. The respondent's everyday language was also transformed into scientific language. This step was not to be bound by theory in order to assure a continued phenomenological stance.

#### Step 4

The transformed meaning units were organized into a “situated structure” in which both of the researchers detached from the structure of the subject and arranged the parts in a phenomenologically appropriate way. This work is detailed in the Results section, in the present investigation, where one may study how different MU’s are fused together in categories, subsequently summarized after each category heading. This was done through writing down all MU’s on separate slips of paper. Then both researchers individually tried to find natural categories for the different MU’s. After comparisons and discussions the researchers agreed upon the categories. It was important not to have previous assumptions about the end result. It was up to the researcher to decide how to organize the material and how to present the structure of the phenomenon (*what* it is) and its process (*how* it is). The categories were developed under processing wherein repeated consultations of the raw data continued in a hermeneutic manner.

#### Step 5

The material is now taken from its “situated structure” to a “general structure,” which will contain all narratives of the same phenomenon. For example categories might be fused into all-embracing themes (e.g., one theme might be categories concerning experiences before exercise, another theme might be categories concerned with experiences after exercise). This sometimes results in a presentation that is too abstract, with psychologically interesting discoveries being lost. Therefore a phenomenological study usually contains, as in the present study, many types of phenomena (i.e., “typological structures”). Concretely this implies that the empirical material, through abstract reflection, in the end was presented in several different categories. These categories emerged in the process and were explained and exemplified with quotes from the raw material.

### **Trustworthiness**

An effort to ensure trustworthiness began as soon as the study was undertaken. One way to achieve this was critically analyzing our assumptions regarding the phenomenon under study (Kvale, 1997). This was done before the interviews were conducted in order to become aware of the researchers’ pre-knowledge. Both researchers reflected on their thoughts on the topic and also discussed with each other the necessity not to be restricted to those presumptions. For example, the authors had different expectations concerning the willingness of the respondents to share their experiences. This precaution facilitated an open attitude. The continued data analysis was also done in this way.

Further, trustworthiness was taken into consideration by using a procedure for phenomenological analyses (Norlander et al., 2002; Norlander et al., 2003; Pramling et al., 2001; Pramling et al., 2003). The procedure involved first choosing two independent raters, a man and a woman, who had no special psychological or research training. Then we chose 10 categories randomly and assigned five randomly selected MU’s to each category. In this way, 50 MU’s were obtained, which two independent raters then

assigned to the 10 categories. The raters were instructed to distribute each of the 50 MU's to categories which they thought were fitting. One of the raters arrived at an 80 % agreement and the other at 78 %, yielding an overall agreement of 79 %.

Member-checking was done after the categories had emerged. Four of the respondents were randomly selected and contacted by phone and were told about the categories, (i.e., the interviewer read each category abstract and also gave some examples from each category). The chosen respondents said they believed the categories matched their own views of what they wanted to communicate during the interview.

The trustworthiness of the results of a qualitative study is closely related to the researcher's ability to produce an appropriate protocol, (i.e., capturing the interviewee's true experience) (Karlsson, 1995). So-called objective facts, independent of the interviewee, do not exist according to phenomenology (Karlsson). Therefore, in this study, the interviewee's experience was the correct fact. Validity, then, is dependent on whether the researcher was able to communicate the results. Our presentation of the results is structured so that each section is headed by a category and followed by quotes from the raw data that exemplify the meaning of the categorical heading.

## **Results**

The analyses of the material yielded 573 Meaning Units from which 13 categories emerged. Each such category illustrates a certain perspective of the study phenomenon. The whole can be understood when all categories are considered. As it turned out categories were fairly representative of all opinions addressed by the respondents. The dashes inside parentheses indicate deleted passages not relevant for the MU, such as coughing, laughter, and sighing. The slashes in the below paragraphs indicate shift between different MU's.

### **Psychological Barrier (103 Meaning Units)**

Despite a strong desire to get started with regular exercise, there was something unidentified preventing it. The situation remains unchanged with added frustration.

Examples: "I feel bad, I have gained weight since I don't exercise and it bothers me and I stay home eating for comfort, perhaps some cheese and crackers (---)It becomes a vicious cycle(---)No, I am going to get started, but it doesn't happen. Yesterday I was ironing and my sister called, what are you doing? I am ironing and I am angry. Yes, why? Because now I probably need to start dieting and I don't exercise. I was so frustrated and discussed with myself, this has to end. So I am really aware, but that's it, thinking is easy but you have acted too." / "Sometimes I get dressed and ready to go, gone to the door, no go back in, sat down, I didn't have the energy to go out (---) What prevents me I don't know, I can't explain it because I don't know why (---) I get frustrated every time I don't manage to go out, it is awful, if I was determined, and it doesn't happen, I am too lazy just don't have the energy to get out of this inactivity." / "It is some kind of barrier you have to get through and decide it doesn't matter how I mentally or decide, say I am going to continue, so it doesn't work anyway. I don't know what to do to get over it (---) some barrier somewhere." / "I can get started with some things sometimes, (---) then I decide to continue with this but I never succeed, it just dissipates, everything."

### **Individual Experience (11 Meaning Units)**

Regardless of the view of others, the individual feels inactive. The emphasis is on the individual experience of being a hay sack.

Examples: "It (the physical inactivity of the respondent) I don't think others think about this but when we talk about it they say, but you always used to do it, then I say they don't understand that I don't have the energy, yes but you always did so well, yea I say, I have, but not anymore." / "He (R:s friend) has tried to get me going that we could go bike riding or jogging, he probably thinks I am lazy, inactive, and I am." / "I don't know if people around me think I am physically inactive, I don't know, I am, I mean I do a lot, I do a lot and get around, (---)but that is something different, (---) than exercising." / "I don't think others see it like that, because they can see that I am always with them doing things." / "They probably think I am never at home, because I am always doing something, but I probably don't, but they probably think so."

### **Boost to Self-Esteem (16 Meaning Units)**

Clearly there are many physically inactive individuals in our society, (i.e., individuals with great a deal of inactivity but who do not do anything about it). Thus, one is not alone in being a hay sack and this fact is a boost to one's self esteem.

Examples: "I think individuals in general are pretty lazy, I think so. (---) There must be those who are more of a hay sack than I am, that must be the case, must be." / "I look at most of my male friends, they are pretty immobile." / "There are many of us who feel that way, so I don't feel, I can talk about this with others, that you don't have the energy." / "I don't feel less active than a lot of others, I don't feel that way." / "That feeling that you really need more although it doesn't happen, I think most individuals feel that way." / "Something amazing about this getting started project, (---) but very few individuals participate, ought to be lots of individuals."

### **Positive or Negative Experience with Positive Effects (67 Meaning Units)**

The experience of physical activity itself can be both positive and negative, often depending on, perhaps the type of exercise. Irrespective of the direction of the experience, its effects are always positive.

Examples: "You feel really good when you have done some exercise, even if you are exhausted like you are, really tired, you know, after a session of spinning, for example, you feel so very good afterwards. You do even if all you do is go for a walk, in the woods or whatever, it is like well-being. (---) both physically and psychologically, I think, you feel you have done something, you feel good about yourself. You feel good when you get home and take a shower." / "I have not passed that difficult phase so many times, when it is fun to run and the endorphins flush your body and feel high." / "Afterwards is the best when you are in the sauna or the shower. I feel like now I have done a session and it was fun and you sit there and discuss life in general and yea, you feel good about yourself." / "I don't think there is anything negative and it isn't difficult, no it is just plain fun." / "I think it is boring to exercise. (---) I have nothing against

walking if I am going some place, but walking for pleasure, I don't like." / "It feels good, but I can't say I am enjoying nature, you know. (---) now only that much time left, now I am here, now I am almost home. (---)When I walk through the garage I think, now I am done, yes!"

### **Excuses (27 Meaning Units)**

Excuses and reasons for not exercising are used to avoid the situation of physical activity despite an awareness of the thought process and the internal manipulation.

Examples: "I think a lot about physical activity, then I do something else, I bake them away (thoughts), that's what I do, you got to do something, I don't just sit here, then I do something else (---) I have to bake bread tomorrow and I have to do this and that, but going, I can do that some other day, I will have time." / "You must lose weight and you think about that and you have to eat right as well, and, no there is a good show on TV tonight, wonder if it starts soon, no I don't have time." / "Unconsciously you probably do (think about physical inactivity) not like I think about it, but I am sure it is there, it nags, all those times I have thought of excuses not to, that is what I do." / "Then you think, well I have so much to do anyway and then you are supposed to include this (physical exercise) and you know, if you think further you know you have the time, plenty of time, because it is a better kind of time, but then you don't." / "Here (the sense of being physically inactive) it is probably suppression. You probably don't think it through, but you do when you read or talk with someone who does this kind of thing. (---) When you choose to think about it, you continue to think those thoughts." / "Darn if I don't have the energy, get my act together and get the bicycle, it really isn't hard. But then you think you are in a hurry in the morning and it takes longer to ride a bike and you always find excuses. Maybe I have to go to the store on the way and it is easier if I take the car. (---) At the same time I know all those who ride their bike they make it work, but it is mental, I can't do it, so then I find an excuse to take the car instead."

### **Cognitive Strategies (14 Meaning Units)**

It is easier to achieve physical activity if the thoughts about exercise are modified in different ways including tricking one's self by using certain cognitive strategies.

Examples: "It is a lot about what I decide when I get home from work. I have a garage for the car and the car is there every night. If I put the car in the garage, then I have decided that I am not going out again today. If I put it in the parking lot, then you can say I must get out. And if I have to go out to move the car to the garage I might as well go the gym. Yes, it is like that, I have a little conversation with myself on the way home. Yes, I will put the car in the garage or in the parking lot." / "Then I try with carrots, I do a lot of bribing. (---)It is a bit like when I get home I get to finish this whole book, so we will see what happens. So I do things like this, I do..." / "But I think I have been good this spring also, it is nice to feel good about yourself." / "Given that I have active kids, I have tried to do something when they are doing their sports, so then I go for a walk or something like that, little things." / "Here at work you are pretty active, here you can't be a hay sack, but we have to be active and I ride my bike to work every day. (-

--) I have an elevator at home but I never ride the elevator, (---) so I climb the stairs, (---) that's no problem, I do it happily."

### **Risk of Exaggeration (46 Meaning Units)**

Tendencies to exaggerate the physical activity may exceed one's ability resulting in boredom, exhaustion, and fear of injuries, which in turn result in a relapse into physical inactivity.

Examples: "I could almost go over the edge, too much, because I get so focused on it so I don't do anything else." / "I find bike riding boring and then I ride my bike until I feel blood in my mouth." / "I can't do it in moderation. That's why I have been on my way to hurting myself because I give it everything I have, until I can't do it anymore." / "Then after the ligament injury I went to the gym and got tired of that, but I have always had difficulty doing things in moderation. (---) It becomes too much, I gave it all and then got tired of it of course because you do when you can't do things in moderation." / "The orthopedic surgeon who fixed it in the emergency room asked me what I had done. He said: did you play indoor hockey? No I said, I played badminton. Ha, you should consider giving that up. We talk about the Achilles heel and now you really have one, and I think about what he said." / "I feel like when I get going, I usually get some injury. If I decide to do this five times a week, I feel I wonder if this is good for me."

### **Worry About the Future (61 Meaning Units)**

Reminders about the decay of the body in terms of a lack of energy and weight problems create fear and worry about future physical problems caused by physical inactivity. This worry is enhanced by not knowing how best to treat the body.

Examples: "My biggest drive I think is, it is perhaps negative, I don't know, but living longer. (---) you want to be around for a while but with my pace God knows how long I will live." / "I feel like I am getting lazy and stiff, hurting muscles and tendons, so I realize I have to keep more active." / "I don't feel good if I don't exercise, it gets more and more aversive and I get fatter and fatter." / "I am worried about not being as agile as I used to. (---) it is a terrible scenario to be immobile, not being able to move." / "I want to feel healthier, lose weight, I need to. I am fairly old too so not much time should pass before I do something, then I get scared. I feel I need to take care of myself." / "There are so many, you know you hear about many, it the heart and all kinds of things and the liver and it is like I said, hips and the neck and head aches and all that, you hear so much and you think, no, there is so much and if it helps, perhaps I need to do something."

### **Faith (37 Meaning Units)**

Being part of a project like Hay Sacks Anonymous created feelings of security and faith that one will get out of the physical inactivity, stop being alone, and cared for in a controlled and positive way.

Examples: "I hope I will get some help." / "It is always easier if someone else tells you, then it goes away. But I have hopes that things will get better, but I don't know when the lid will come off and I guess that is what I have my expectations about, this

project, that I will be spurred.” / “A control station that will make me feel really dumb if I misbehave. (---) if it is a test of what shape you are in or several and it turns out that at the first test you are in worse shape, I would feel awful.” / “(---) think it will be much too, that they leave me there, then I will continue the way I always did. I must get help otherwise it is worthless.” / “Just this idea, how I actually feel, that someone, they take, I don’t know, maybe give you a test and things like that. Then perhaps they will weigh me and measure me and touch me and perhaps draw blood and a blood count, (---) I want to know where I stand, I don’t know what it is called, maybe a health profile.”

### **Serious Event (13 Meaning Units)**

A traumatic event can redirect one’s energy and focus. At such times, physical activity is not a priority and the individual can easily make the case for not engaging in physical activity.

Examples: “All my strength disappeared or whatever, there was so much else, my energy was used up on so many things, thoughts.” / “It was during fall, it was tough, so it was like I didn’t have the time. Like you hit a rut and couldn’t get out of it, it could be, because we didn’t have time, well we did, but there were so many other things that took our time and filled our thoughts.” / “I go dancing sometimes, I do. But it has been a long time now, so it has been tough, as of half a year. I had a woman friend who died of cancer in February too, so it has been extra tough.” / “Because it was a major loss, well it was a grieving process you could say I went through in 96, so then my body was half a body. Inside I felt 23 and outside I was 98 years old.”

### **Daily Duties (40 Meaning Units)**

Many things require one’s attention in daily life, which leads to expectations from others at work or in the family. Physical activity can be an additional stress factor and the cause of a guilty conscience.

Examples: “It almost feels like I could decrease my working hours just to be able to do more things, you see.” / “Now I am into, I want to start playing golf. But then I want my partner to come along, otherwise I feel I am away even more and then I feel guilty, so that doesn’t work.” / “(---) you want to do so much, you want to feel as good as possible, so all day it is a puzzle to fit all the pieces.” / “It takes so much time when you are single. The kids were two and six at the time of the divorce and now they are getting older and can do more on their own and that’s where I see the time. It is just getting the week to work, it is home work with the kids and, as I said, the house and things like that.” / “I have two kids who do sports, so I feel there is a lot of driving. They play soccer now and indoor hockey in the winter so there is a lot to watch.” / “Imagine having ten more hours per day, but I don’t know if that would help, maybe it doesn’t.”

### **Hope (61 Meaning Units)**

Physical activity is not seen as something unattainable, but given the right type of activity it is possible to get out of the phase of inactivity. Previous physical activity is evidence that it is not impossible to get started with exercise.

Examples: “I am in pretty good basic shape anyway, I don’t know if I am reaping the benefits of having been an active sportsman for a long time that I am in pretty good shape.” / “I want to do it (exercise) because I always have. I am used to being active.” / “I now have managed to find a balance at work, I have and so now my free time is next.” / “I am curious and if I find, could just find something that suits me, I think I will participate.” / “I don’t feel like running like a mad man on the jogging trails that is not for me, it is not. That’s not what I want. I want something even, something that suits my age, my weight, and everything.” / “I have tried a lot, I have, but one thing I have not tried is working out, I haven’t done that, or spinning. (---) I would like to try both spinning and working out and pole walking, I never tried that.”

### **Need for Regularity (73 Meaning Units)**

Physical activity decided on ahead of time (i.e., regular exercise) facilitates getting beyond the psychological barrier. This is most easily done with the help of others or through a structure or a planned agenda.

Examples: “I think it helps if you are a group but it is also a pressure having a group and that you have to be some place, and it pushes you in a different way. It doesn’t have to be a group, one person is enough, one person who decides, we are going for a walk, so you don’t have to be a group.” / “(---) when I was doing spinning (---), then I had made an appointment, signed up, you had to do that in advance (---), then it was fixed, then you have to call and cancel, then you are pushed a bit more.” / “(---) I would prefer: Monday I will do this, Tuesday that, Wednesday that, Thursday that and Friday that, even if it is only a walk.” / “(---) I could easily go home and make a schedule with easy things to do each day. But I have done that so many times, so I feel, no, it is so stupid, you should be able to do this without those check marks...” / “I would like to achieve some regularity, a person needs that (---), that I have specific times to do this, because then it is difficult, the times have been set up, then it is more difficult to find an excuse.” / “I depend on having something that structured each day and with friends and acquaintances to get me out., (---)then it would be a bunch who decide on a few activities certain days of the week, then you do it, and stick to it, that would work, you know. That would turn my situation around, I am sure of it.”

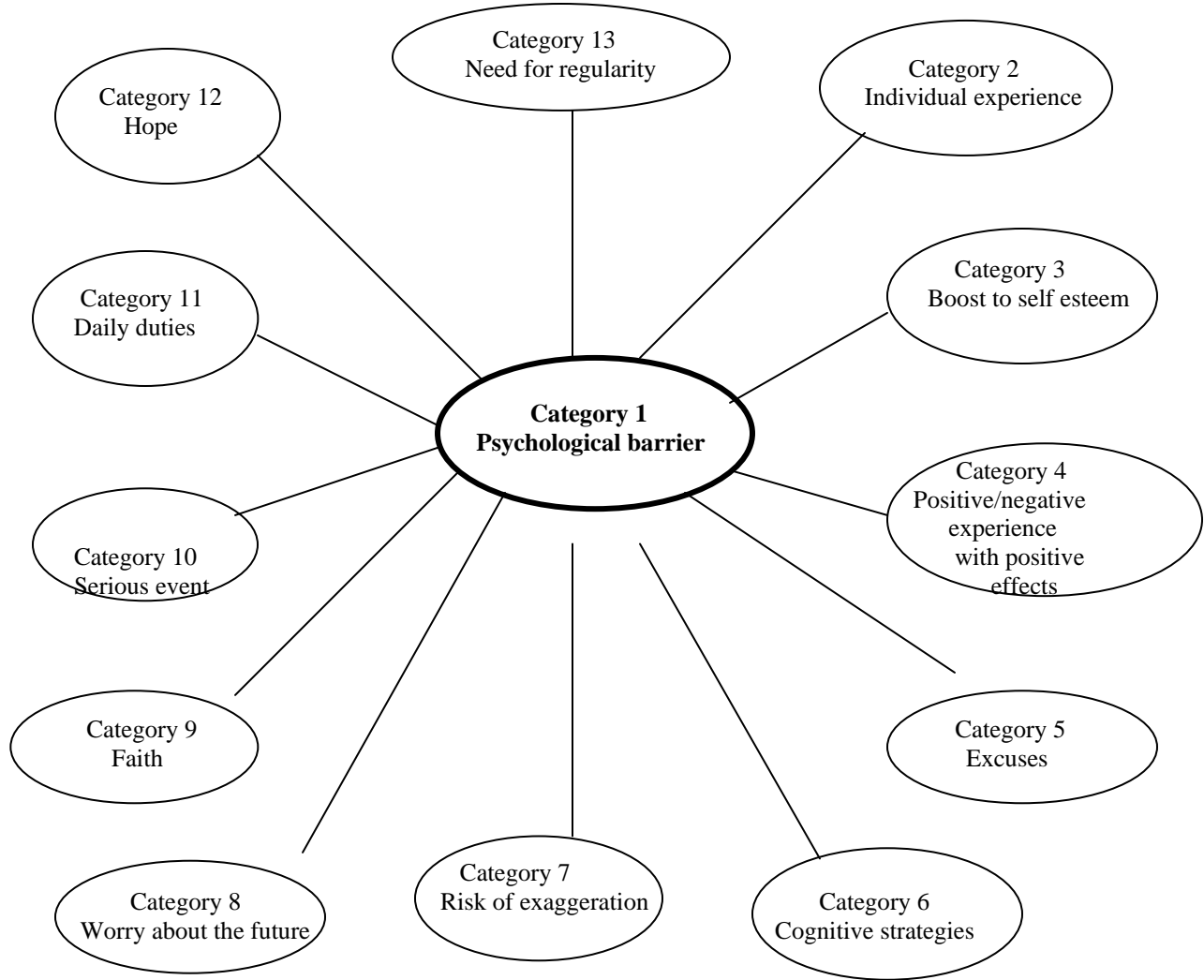
Four Meaning Units could not be categorized either due to lack of clarity in the process of transcription or the participants’ lack of contribution to the illumination of the phenomenon. Thus, they are not part of the categories above.

## **Discussion**

The results of the study suggest that the experience of being a hay sack is very complex. The phenomenon cannot be described in a simple and unified way, as shown by the categories. The fairly small number of categories, however, suggests that certain main features characterize the experience of physical inactivity in the hay sack. These features constitute pieces of the puzzle, which when put together provide a clearer picture of the phenomenon. Each piece must be seen in relation to all the other ones in order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon. In the present study, the most comprehensive category was the one which described a psychological barrier. Also, interesting enough, in all

other categories the respondents in some way related to the psychological barrier. Those relationships are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The categories and their assembling around the psychological barrier.



### **This is What Constitutes a Hay Sack**

The starting point for what constitutes a hay sack in this study may be seen in Category 2 (Individual Experience), where the experience of being a hay sack is described as an individual's feeling and thought. Only the individual can say whether he/she is satisfied with his/her level of physical activity. A person who is perceived as physically active could therefore be a hay sack if the person views him/herself that way. Therefore other individuals' perceptions are secondary. The individual must be the starting point for further understanding. Viewed in this way, it is not a good idea to define a hay sack the way the Health Institute defines a physically inactive person (Folkhälsoinstitutet, 1999), since being a hay sack is something internal. The hay sack is,

however, physically inactive. Some hay sacks are typically inactive, others less so, but the hay sacks in the present study have an individual sense of physical inactivity.

Through a further study of Category 1 (Psychological Barrier), the hay sack problem emerges and contributes to an understanding of what it is. The physically inactive individual does not feel happy with the situation and wants to get out of the inactivity, but despite this desire fails to do so. This phenomenon is characteristic of the hay sack in this study and also of central importance to this study. The hay sack wants to, but cannot, achieve regular physical activity. This dominates his/her life situation. With this perspective it is simpler to understand the “drop-out” tendencies discussed above (Cooper, 1970; Dishman, 1982; Dishman et al., 1980; Folkhälsoinstitutet, 1999; Goodrick et al., 1984; Martin & Dubbert, 1985; Norlander et al., 2002; Sachs & Buffone, 1984). The participants most likely want to complete the projects they began, but they are unable to, despite their desire.

Thus, according to Category 1, the hay sack wants to engage in regular exercise but fails. Despite the failures and relapses into physical inactivity, the physically inactive individuals continue their efforts to achieve their goal. This is consistent with the reversal theory (Apter, 1989), which states that individuals tend to seek relatively high and relatively low levels of felt arousal and at the same time tend to avoid intermediate levels. As seen in Category 12 (Hope), the hay sack has strong hopes of getting out of his/her inactivity. The hay sack is convinced that it is only a temporary phase of inactivity. From this perspective it would seem as if it would not be difficult to take the next step toward physical activity, but the problem remains; the hay sack wants to, but cannot.

### **The Nature of Being a Hay Sack**

According to Category 1 (Psychological Barrier), the experience of being a hay sack creates frustration due to the conflict between wanting to exercise but not being able to psychologically. The hay sack in the present study feels there is something unidentified, a psychological barrier, preventing him/her from doing it. In several studies, participants reported strong feelings of discomfort in connection with exercise (Brown et al., 1978; Fjellström, 1976). Such feelings lessen significantly once exercise has proceeded for a while (Brown et al.; Wedman & Wester, 1982). In accordance with Solomon's (1980) “opponent-process theory of acquired motivation,” strong feelings of discomfort exist in the beginner, but with regular exercise these feelings will be replaced by feelings of pleasure. Thus, a period of acclimatization is needed and should be anticipated.

Solomon's (1980) theory (i.e., opponent-process theory of acquired motivation), applied to the hay sacks in the current study can provide additional understanding of the experiences of the participants. The resistance against exercise interpreted according to Solomon, constitutes feelings of discomfort which can be overcome with persistence. Nevertheless that is the problem that seems to plague the hay sack, to successfully break away from his/her situation of inactivity. Perhaps, however, knowledge of what the hay sack experiences can be of help. According to Category 3 (Boost to Self-Esteem), the hay sack has a need not to be alone in his/her inactivity, and relevant theories (Folkhälsoinstitutet, 1999) support the notion that many individuals have similar experiences. In addition, perhaps the knowledge that the feelings of discomfort can be

overcome can help the hay sack in his/her attempts to get out of his/her inactivity. This knowledge can at least function as a kind of initial external motivation for a behavioral change, as Wester-Wedman's (1988) theory suggests.

It is interesting to note, as suggested by Category 4 (Positive or Negative with Positive Effects), that not all hay sacks experience feelings of discomfort when exercising. This fact points to the notion that the phenomenon cannot fully be understood from the perspective of Solomon's (1980) theory. The results lead to new questions, especially regarding the resistance associated with physical activity, in light of the fact that it can also be fun and pleasurable. According to Solomon, then, such a person has also attained the stage where exercise is rewarding in itself. In other words, resistance actually should not exist, since the behavior is internally motivated (Wester-Wedman, 1988).

According to Category 13 (Need for Regularity), the hay sack has a need for regularity in order to succeed with exercise. To achieve this regularity it is necessary to plan the activity in advance, with the aid of a schedule, for example, or other individuals. It is through regular physical activity the physically inactive person can achieve a behavioral change.

According to Category 1 (Psychological Barrier), the hay sack wants to exercise and can thus be seen as being motivated to change his/her behavior. Despite this motivation, the hay sack fails to change his/her behavioral pattern. Jung's theory of internal and external motivation can aid in a better understanding of this phenomenon. Jung (1978) argued that "intrinsic motivation" is necessary, (i.e., that a certain behavior has motivational properties in itself in order for a constant change of a non-desirable behavior to take place). According to Category 8 (Worry about the Future), the hay sack is motivated to exercise by external factors such as weight reduction and this is evidence of external motivation. The exercise itself is not sufficient. Therefore, it is difficult for the hay sack to effect constant change. Once again, however, note that some hay sacks do find exercise to be fun and rewarding. These individuals thus appear to be internally motivated.

Wester-Wedman's (1988) theory regarding the beginner can perhaps aid us in our understanding of the hay sack problem. We think that the newly acquired exercise behavior is externally motivated, a notion supported by Category 8. With time this picture changes to one of internal motivation. The hay sack is not yet at this stage. Thus, external motivation is sufficient for the initiation of exercise, but persistence is necessary for internal motivation to ensue. What remains unclear, then, is why a hay sack who *does* find exercise rewarding, does not engage in it.

An additional aspect of the importance of motivation for behavioral change is the ability to decide for oneself (Arborelius, 1993). Self-determination implies an internal motivation. According to Category 11 (Daily Duties), the hay sack perceives he/she has many demands making it difficult to design his/her exercise habits, and in the extension preventing internal motivation to become realized.

Several additional features emerged from Categories 5 (Excuses) and 6 (Cognitive Strategies): the physically inactive person constantly comes up with excuses not to exercise, despite an awareness of how to deal with the problem. This fact indicates how complex the phenomenon is. He/she may use cognitive strategies to master the problem but relapses into inactivity.

An additional aspect of the hay sack phenomenon is the hay sack's view of his/her own health. According to Category 7 (Risk of Exaggeration), the hay sack sees a risk of exertion as a potential consequence of too much exercise and therefore avoids it. According to Category 8 (Worry about the Future), however, the hay sack expresses a clear fear of future ill health as the result of physical inactivity. Thus, a clear contradiction emerges: Physical activity can lead to injuries or poor health, and physical inactivity can lead to ill health. Categories 7 (Risk of Exaggeration) and 8 (Worry About the Future) can be understood from the perspective of "the health belief model," according to which an individual strives to achieve good health by engaging in behavior that increases the probability that illness is avoided. There is a conflict involved in that the hay sack does not know which behavior to choose to avoid illness, benefits, and barriers, according to the health belief model. The hay sack sees illness as the result of both alternatives; he exhibits a state of "external locus of control" instead of the more desirable "internal locus of control." This confusion may lead to a state of paralysis and the hay sack does nothing about it. According to Category 9 (Faith), the hay sack feels relieved when he encounters a project for physical activity. The hay sack can then rely on others for behavioral guidance. He/she does not have to rely upon his/her own self-determination, but is encouraged and supported in his/her initiatives. The ensuing sense of security helps solve the conflict between the two alternatives.

Arborelius' (1993) five stages of behavioral change shed light on the hay sack problem. Physically inactive individuals are in the second stage. In order to get to the next stage, concrete action is called for and maintenance of exercise for the fourth stage. According to the model, the fourth stage is the ultimate stage. The challenge is to remain at this stage and not go to the fifth stage which implies a relapse. The hay sack is at the second stage, and if he/she proceeds to stages 3 and 4 he/she eventually goes to stage 5, as well. Even though this process according to reversal theory (Apter, 1989) should not be regarded as a sign of failure, the individual seems to perceive it as a failure. It is not difficult to see that this journey is exhausting, and that staying at stage 2 is more peaceful.

It is clear from the present results that regularity of exercise is required for constant change to occur. In this context, Jung (1978) emphasizes the importance of internal motivation. Wester-Wedman (1988) elaborates on Jung's theory by highlighting the initial importance of external motivation prior to internal motivation. The theories discussed in this paper explain how behavioral change is achieved, but our results suggest that the problem is more complex. The hay sack knows that there are no short cuts to regular physical activity and is aware of his/her own thoughts and feelings. Yet the problem remains. No matter how much the hay sack desires change, it doesn't work. The problem is complex, indeed.

At the final stage of this study, a clear structure emerged around the categories obtained, which takes the understanding of the hay sack phenomenon a step further. At the center of the experience of being a hay sack lies Category 1 (Psychological Barrier), something unidentified that prevents the hay sack from an active life. This unidentified feature constitutes the enigma of the hay sack and is always present. In this light, all the categories shed light on Category 1, and Category 1 illuminates all the other categories. The unidentified feature has been partly identified. There is probably a psychological barrier involved. The next step is to find out why it exists in the hopes of helping hay sacks overcome the barrier(s).

## Why the Hay Sack Phenomenon Exists

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to gain an understanding of a phenomenon, not to explain why it exists (Karlsson, 1995). Questions such as what and how are answered, not why. Thus, the present study focused on *what* a hay sack is and *what is it like* being one. The next step is to examine why the phenomenon exists. As discussed in the introduction, physiologically man still exists on the savannahs with a body adjusted to that environment (Folkhälsoinstitutet, 1999). A possible speculation might be that a human resists when physical activity is forced upon him/her, and that this tendency is genetically determined. This notion should be examined in future studies.

A limitation in the present study might be that interviews were done only before respondents participated in the investigation. It would also been of interest to compare initial interviews with follow-up interviews after the termination of the program, which should be an assignment for future studies. In the present study we detected the possible existence of a psychological barrier, a notion which should be further investigated and elaborated in some type of new theoretical framework.

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### Author Note

Anni Bergman was born 1978 in the little Swedish rural town of Skara where she also completed the high school in 1997. Next year she worked at the local library. After that she attended for one year the university college in Skövde and then moved further to Karlstad and Karlstad University studying management- and organization theories as well as psychology. In 2004 she completed her Masters degree in psychology and is now engaged in the Swedish elder care organization. Her spare time interests are training and physical activity such as spinning and skiing, but also more leaned back activities such as reading, painting or just sit down talking with an old friend.

Torsten Norlander was born in 1950 in Göteborg, an industrial centre with a big harbor. After finishing high school he attended the program for psychologists but decided later that he preferred to be a teacher. Thus he was examined a teacher for Folkhögskola which is something like a preparatory college. In 1997 he was employed as a senior lecturer at Karlstad University and three years later become Associate Professor and appointed as Professor in 2004. He is now also the Dean of the Department of Psychology at the university. His research has been in the fields of the impact of alcohol in psychological processes. Another research interest is the psychology of sports, achievement and performance. A further interest is stress and stress management and how restricted environmental stimulation techniques (e. g., flotation tank) may be used in stress therapy.

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Correspondence should be addressed to: Dr. Torsten Norlander, Karlstad University, SE-651 88 Karlstad, e-mail: Torsten.Norlander@kau.se

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