As I boarded the train from New Street to Five Oaks, it dawned on me that I was a prime example of the inactivity epidemic facing this country. My meeting with Tahir Parvaz, a Run Activator with Sport Birmingham, was only a 30-minute walk from the station, yet I had taken the easy option and hopped on to the train. How ironic that my meeting was with an individual who was responsible for getting more people active and keeping them active.

Conversely, Tahir himself was the epitome of behaviour change. Some years ago, Tahir had recognised a need to change his lifestyle, to become more active, lose weight, and reverse the effects of sedentary behaviour.

Fast-forward to the present day, and Tahir is fit, healthy and happy. Encouraged by others to take up running, and play football and squash, he is now responsible for communicating those very same messages to inactive communities across Birmingham. The backstory doesn’t end there though. In order to look after his critically ill father, Tahir quit his job in the pharmaceutical industry and became a full-time carer for six months. As his father’s health improved, Tahir decided to go back to work. A vacancy appeared with the Birmingham Wellbeing Service to become a Run Activator, and following encouragement from his family, Tahir successfully applied for the job. A few months on, and Tahir is now a full-time Run Activator for Sport Birmingham.

Since September, Tahir has been working with a group of women from an Asian background, encouraging them to take up physical activity and specifically move them from ‘Couch to 5K’. The project has targeted 16 women, ranging from a grandmother of 55 to a 17-year-old college student. All were inactive, all had the same reservations about physical activity, and all needed to be persuaded to take the challenge on.

Through Tahir’s attendance at the ‘ Behaviour Change Tactics’ workshop, he knew that it would take more than a quick fix to change the attitudes and behaviours of this group, and that small ‘nudges’ would be required if he was to be successful. Tahir decided he needed to understand the motivations and barriers for Muslim women first so he approached a number of schools in the Winson Green area of Birmingham and made connections with mothers of children attending schools there.
‘Building trust was the key,’ says Tahir. ‘I had grown up in the area and had family connections. This helped as I was seen as a son of the community.’ That proved to be Tahir’s way in, his nudge, his little nugget. Once he had established a relationship with the women, Tahir was able to break down some of the perceived barriers to physical activity, and provide an environment where the women would feel safe and comfortable. Other than a sensible pair of trainers, there was no restriction on clothing, and in matter of weeks, a focus running group had been established.

Tahir’s Top Tip –
Build the Trust and Respect of the Group

So the first steps had been taken, and throughout the autumn of 2016, Tahir organised three weekly sessions. Starting at 9.15am, the sessions fitted around the lifestyles of the women involved. As many of them were in the primary carer role, this allowed them to drop their children off at school before the group met.
Tahir says: ‘When I visited the schools, it was important for me to understand what times suited the women who would be involved in the sessions. All of the group are mums so a slot after the morning drop-off was the best option. Personal skills have been more important than technical coaching skills. I have kept the sessions informal, fun and friendly. I even offered to look after the group’s valuables while we were on the run.’ It is an approach adopted by many run activators around the country. The ability to keep the runner engaged has been key to the activator role, to use the runner’s own motivation as the foundation for the session, and remove any barriers that might stop future participation.

Tahir’s Top Tip – Keep It Personal

Tahir’s Top Tip – Interact with Your Participants Using Social Media

Tahir goes on to explain how the use of social media has benefited the interaction between the group. ‘I’ve started a WhatsApp group. It’s one way of me staying in touch with the group between sessions, but it also allows the women to interact with each other. Quite often, I read about extra runs that the women have organised between themselves.’
The nine-week programme has now come to its conclusion, and the evidence of sustainability on the WhatsApp group has been hugely encouraging to Tahir, who is now looking to set up similar groups across Birmingham. ‘There is no doubt the group wanted me to stay on, but that wasn’t possible. Nevertheless, all of them have signed up to do a Parkrun as part of International Women’s Day on 12 March so I’m confident that they are motivated to continue even without my involvement.’

Moreover, the behaviour change principles are now being adopted by the running group. A number of them have influenced others to take part, and on the back of the success of the first group, a second running group has now been formed. As Tahir mentions, ‘The best advert for the programme has been the women themselves. Our long-term aim is to get the original group to become run activators themselves and spread the word. These women have formed a physical activity habit, and hopefully, they can motivate others to do the same.’

Tahir’s story doesn’t end there though. He has used behaviour change tactics to motivate a group of disillusioned runners. Aimed at a younger group of Asian runners, Tahir has re-motivated them to sign up to a half-marathon training programme through a combination of soft skills, variety, goal setting and technical expertise. Tahir says: ‘I thought the behaviour change tactics would only work with the inactive, but I have been able to transfer some of my knowledge when working with other runners.’

Proof again that behaviour change tactics are flexible and can work throughout the participant pathway and across different domains, and meet the aspirations and motivations of each individual taking part. Tahir is a great example of an activator who has embraced the principles of behaviour change and effectively put them into action.

As for me, I’ll give myself an extra half hour before the next meeting so I can walk to the venue.

Pete Ezard, Relationship Manager for Sports Coach UK