

Exercise goals: Mid-life women should work out to improve well-being, not only to lose weight

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Mid-life working women are more committed and more likely to plan exercise into their daily lives if they know it will make them feel better immediately, a new study from the University of Michigan shows.

When the goal is to improve well-being and reduce stress--not necessarily to lose weight or prevent an illness—they tend to stick to their routines better, the study says.

"These findings suggest that the typical way that most women approach exercising may be undermining their participation in it," said Michelle Segar, a women's motivation and behavior researcher at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

The longitudinal study sampled healthy women who were between 40 and 60 years old and worked full time. Researchers collected data on women living in the Midwest at three intervals, including one-month and one-year periods. The subjects answered questions about how much they exercised, what their exercise goals were, and how committed they were to achieving these goals.

Segar says the findings challenge how society thinks about exercise.

"It's counterintuitive," she said. "Instead of prescribing exercise to

prevent disease, healthcare providers who emphasize physical activity as a means to enhance women's quality of life might better facilitate long-term participation among healthy women, making disease prevention more likely."

Although regular physical activity helps prevent cardiovascular disease, the leading killer of women, most mid-life women do not exercise enough. Considering this, understanding which types of exercise goals motivate women to exercise, and which ones don't, can offer clues to developing better primary prevention strategies.

"We wanted our research to be practical for women and their physicians to easily understand and use," Segar said.

"Unfortunately, the standard approach to exercise taken in our culture has mainly taught Americans to consider exercise as a type of medicine to prevent disease and lose weight," Segar said. "It turns exercise into something they should do rather than something they want to do, something that undermines and harms motivation and participation."

The researchers also revealed another trend: women who exercised to lose weight reported exercising less than those who worked out to maintain their weight.

"Because research shows that exercise is effective for maintaining weight but less so for losing weight, we think that women who exercise to lose weight may not see results. They get discouraged and may quit working out," Segar said.

So how can this research be used to help a woman exercise more? Segar says healthy women will embrace exercising if it nurtures them, not depletes them.

Women are more likely to be hooked on exercise and make it a priority if their reason for doing it is to enhance their day rather than prevent an illness that they may never get.

"With life enhancement as her goal, a woman is more likely to choose physical activities she enjoys doing, making it much more likely that she will stay motivated and remain physically active," Segar said.

Segar collaborated on the paper with Jacquelynne Eccles, an IRWG senior research scientist, and Caroline Richardson, assistant professor in the Department of Family Medicine. The study appears in the current issue of Women's Health Issues.

Provided by University of Michigan

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