

Mental barriers hamper obese women's efforts to get exercise

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For arachnophobes, it's difficult to kill a spider as it scurries across the floor. Those who are scared to fly might not ever set foot on a plane. While nothing physically stops people with these aversions, a mental barrier can keep them from the task at hand.

The same could be said for obese women when it comes to physical activity, according to research presented at the Obesity Society's Annual Meeting on Oct. 5.

Researchers from the Center for Obesity Research and Education and the department of kinesiology at Temple University found that obese women face a significant number of barriers when it comes to exercise, more so than their normal weight counterparts.

"This is the first time we've been able to systematically look at what stops obese women from getting the activity they need," said Melissa Napolitano, associate professor of kinesiology and clinical psychologist at the Center for Obesity Research and Education at Temple University.

Napolitano and her team surveyed data collected from 278 women, both normal weight and obese, enrolled in a yearlong physical activity encouragement study. At baseline, and at a 3- and 12-month follow up, all participants were administered a questionnaire to determine what factors kept them from getting exercise, including:

-- Feeling self-conscious;

- Not wanting to fail;
- Fearing injury;
- Perceived poor health
- Having minor aches or pains
- Feeling too overweight to exercise.

At all time points, obese women reported greater barriers to being active than normal weight women. For obese women, barriers they identified at the beginning of the study predicted how much or how little they would be exercising at the 12 month follow-up.

"These might sound like excuses to some people, but for those who have these aversions, they're real problems," said Napolitano.

She theorizes that tailoring programs to maneuver around these barriers is the key to curbing some of that aversion and improving adherence to a weight loss goal. She cites the popular Curves® gyms as a step in the right direction, because they offer a comforting, welcoming environment for women to exercise in.

"There is an underlying attitude about weight loss, that it's easy if you just eat less and exercise more," she said. "But if losing weight were easy, we wouldn't have the obesity epidemic we have today."

Source: Temple University

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