

Mind over muscle: Positive body image more effective than exercise in helping lose weight, quit smoking

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One in five women between the ages of 18 and 24 are smokers, and most say they keep lighting up for fear of gaining weight. But researchers at Temple University have found that when it comes to quitting, a little bit of dialogue and support can be more effective than an exercise plan in helping women not only keep off the weight, but also stay smoke-free.

"A lot of college--age women report smoking to keep their weight down and for body image reasons, and we think that by providing them with the tools to make them feel better about themselves, it alleviates some of those stressors," said Melissa Napolitano, a clinical psychologist at Temple's Center for [Obesity](#) Research and Education.

In a two-phased study, Napolitano and a team of researchers looked at the smoking habits and weight gain of women aged 18-24. The first phase collected data from focus groups who stated that stress, peer pressure and weight management were the main reasons why they smoked. Participants also felt that group-based programs that provide ongoing social support would be instrumental in helping them quit.

Those results laid the groundwork for the project's next phase, dubbed Fit to Quit, a small pilot study of 24 women who were randomly assigned to either a supervised group exercise program or body image group counseling sessions. All women were provided with a nicotine patch as well.

After eight weeks, the body image counseling group showed a rate of [smoking cessation](#) that was more than double that of the exercise group (18 percent vs. 8 percent). In addition, the body image group lost more than three times the weight of their [exercise](#) counterparts (3.3 pounds vs. less than a pound). These findings were presented this week at the Society for Behavioral Medicine's annual meeting.

"Smoking has psychological and psychosocial implications, especially for young women," said Napolitano, an associate professor of kinesiology and public health in the College of Health Professions. "We wanted to design a program that would not only address the physical addiction by providing a nicotine patch, but would also address those social and behavioral aspects as well."

Another aspect of the program relied on technology to reach their population of smokers. Text message and email were used to stay in contact with participants, more so than phone calls, because those were the preferred methods of communication among the young women in the study.

"A lot of times, we would try to call participants to remind them of different sessions, and they would respond back via text or e-mail, so we took that message and used avenues like text messaging and the Internet not just as a means of getting information out, but for support as well."

Napolitano says that the results derived from this study have laid the groundwork for larger future studies at Temple and nationwide that focus on smoking cessation in college age [women](#). The hope is to see if the results continue to hold true in studies with larger numbers of participants.

Temple's Student Health Services supported the Fit to Quit program, and Napolitano says it has the potential to be permanently offered as part of

the menu of health promotion services on campus.

"Our hope is to make programs like Fit to Quit sustainable on other college campuses, because we know that if we can give young people the tools they need to make better health decisions, it helps them not only improve their health but it also helps them do better academically."

Source: Temple University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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