

Study Finds Negative Self-Image Stops Men and Women From Exercising Long-Term

April 6 2010, by Kristin Hodges

(PhysOrg.com) -- Individuals trying to become consistent exercisers might be deterred by a negative self-image, according to a Kansas State University study.

Elizabeth Fallon, K-State assistant professor of kinesiology, is conducting a series of studies to better understand how emotional barriers like a negative body image prevent individuals from having an active lifestyle. Her project stems from an undergraduate student's research findings that a low body image ultimately makes someone less successful at being physically active.

"We know how to get people to become active, but the problem is few people are able to maintain their [physical activity](#)," she said. "We often see people enroll in a new program to initiate physical activity, and when the program ends they go back to baseline levels. Then they enroll in another new program. We're spending a lot of time with the same people, so we really need to find the keys to physical activity maintenance."

Fallon teaches a course at K-State on body image, eating disorders and obesity. After taking her class in spring 2008, Bryce Burton -- a May 2009 K-State graduate in kinesiology from Lyons -- decided to study the effects of people's body image on their long-term adherence to physical activity.

Burton used data of regular exercisers that Fallon collected in the

southeastern United States when she was a graduate student at the University of Florida. In Fallon's survey, participants had selected their body image based on a measure of extremely unsatisfied to extremely satisfied. For Burton's study, he used the data as well as constructs in the transtheoretical model, which is a systematic way to describe or predict health behavior.

"Theories provide a very efficient way to change a particular behavior," Fallon said. "The advantage of this theory being systematic is that it gives very specific mental and behavioral things for interventionists to act on."

According to the transtheoretical model, Fallon said people are categorized based on the amount of time they have continued being physically active. An individual who has been exercising for fewer than six months is in the action stage, and after six months the individual is in the maintenance stage. An individual continuing exercise for five years is in the termination stage, which means that there is little chance of relapse into baseline levels of physical activity.

Fallon said recommendations for physical activity include 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on five or more days a week or 20 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity three days a week.

"Long-term adherence is meeting one of these guidelines every week for more than six months," she said. "The problem is that most people drop out of physical activity programs before six months."

Burton's findings showed that for both men and women, a low body image resulted in less success in physical activity attempts. For example, confidence to be physically active is a powerful predictor of engaging in physical activity. Compared to people with high body image, those with low body image have less confidence to be physically active.

"I didn't think body image would matter for the men, because generally speaking our culture is more focused on modifying women's bodies in some way," Fallon said. "But we found that low body image may deter men from physical activity, too."

Fallon's research interests include the level of physical activity in women and underserved populations. She said when it comes to all health behaviors, such as going to wellness exams and wearing a seat belt, women are higher than men on their readiness to change - except for physical activity.

Much of her research shows that women use more mental and behavioral strategies for physical activity, such as believing in the benefits of physical activity.

"Even though they're using more of these processes, national levels of physical activity are actually lower for women compared to men," she said. "I think that's where body image comes in, because it is typically more of an issue for women."

Burton's study was the first to find that body image interacts with other well-known factors that influence physical activity, Fallon said. She will conduct a follow-up survey this summer with Paige Johnson, a freshman in [kinesiology](#) and a 2006 graduate of Thunderbird High School in Phoenix. This study will use a different and more detailed measure of [body image](#) and will sample from a wider geographical region. If these findings are replicated, the next step will be to implement physical activity interventions that aim to improve physical activity and self-image simultaneously.

Burton's study was presented at the Society of Behavioral Medicine annual meeting in April 2009.

Provided by Kansas State University

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